

opportunity to secure a respectful hearing for our views. On the whole Catholics are held in high esteem in the Labour Party; they are not discriminated against, as may be seen from the number who are Labour M.P.s and Labour councillors. They secure a hearing for their views, as may be realised from the energetic action of non-Catholic Labour M.P.s in tackling the schools question and in securing agreement from the late Labour Government to support an amending bill to give some relief, an agreement later incorporated in Labour's election pledges in November 1951.

We have a great opportunity to play the part of moral advisor to the Labour movement that the nonconformists played in the 1800s. It depends on our energy and our willingness to sacrifice our time and leisure if we seize this opportunity. If we fail we cannot complain if in the future Labour is dominated by the doctrinaire marxists.

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## THE UNIQUE QUALITY OF MANZONI'S NOVEL

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**M** FRANÇOIS MAURIAC has left us in no doubt that in his view a work of art and a work of spiritual edification are two quite different things, rarely if ever combined within the pages of one book. The artist must conform to truth, that perception of truth which is peculiar to himself, and M. Mauriac implies that this truth will not, generally speaking, be edifying. In the ultimate analysis he has made the aesthetic truth which the artist must express dependent on the spiritual condition of the author, in so far as the spiritual elevation of the work is concerned. It is a matter, he has said, of purifying the source, the source from which the creatures of the imagination spring, if the artist is to produce work which testifies to the enduring strength of the spirit. Only a saint could write a novel free from taint, a novel in which sinfulness was not a dominant characteristic, provided of course that he possessed the necessary artistic genius, but the writing of works of fiction does not appear as a form of activity consonant with saintliness. The novelist, then, who is cursed with the gift of artistic creation, must go on perpetuating

his sinfulness with all the aesthetic skill at his command until he has spiritually progressed to the point where he would cease to write novels. Such, if we are to believe M. Mauriac, would seem to be the unfortunate predicament in which the Christian writer finds himself, unfortunate, that is, if he does not achieve the saintliness that would end his artistic career.

It may be that M. Mauriac has somewhere expressed his opinion of the most famous of Italian novels, now nearly a century and a quarter old, *I Promessi Sposi*, but I have not come across it and I should be interested to know how he viewed that work. Certainly, he could hardly class it with the pious works of fiction which fail to conform to any notion of truth, those works illustrative of 'une hérésie de naïserie',<sup>1</sup> for which he has such a whole-hearted and understandable contempt. Manzoni's long historical novel contrasts strangely and strikingly, not only with the novels of M. Mauriac himself, but with the work of all the well-known avowedly Catholic writers with which we have become familiar in the twentieth century, with the work of Fogazzaro and of Claudel, with that of Bernanos and of Mr Graham Greene. We have become accustomed to the paradoxical situation, the skilful contortions by which the sinner is brought willy-nilly within an ever more flexible scheme of salvation, while theological concepts strain and creak to the utmost. Mr Graham Greene has introduced to us the priest of rare insight and exquisite tact who explains to the bereaved and wronged penitent in the last pages how the mercy of God is infinite and his ways of working unfathomable, so that to the author's power of persuasion in the narrative is added a kind of ecclesiastical sanction, and the suicide emerges, if not as a commendable hero, at least as a man for whom we feel the strongest compassion and who is far more human and likeable than orthodox but unspectacular followers of the Church's commandments. In such a situation there is nothing that shocks our sense of probability, but in all Mr Greene's work the pattern is roughly the same; the emphasis never shifts. It is to the homicidal gangster, the clerical dipsomaniac, the unfaithful husband who despairs in his sin, that the principal rôles fall, so that it is the exception that appears to be the rule, and common humanity is lost sight of among so many outstanding sinners whose undoubted redemption is so artfully contrived.

1 François Mauriac: *Le Roman* (Paris: L'Artisan du Livre, 1928), p. 80.

The other writers I have mentioned do not present any more complete a picture and their main concern seems to be to portray special cases, to reveal the underside of things and show saintliness where we do not expect it, evil where it was not apparent. Bernanos has made us familiar with the dual conception of saintliness and excessive human inadequacy, so that we gain from his work the impression that the one can hardly exist without the other. The saintly priest, we notice, is always a hopeless bungler who is a sore trial to his superiors and a source of scandal to many of his parishioners. However, Bernanos stands apart from his contemporaries, a Christian warrior inspired by a sort of apocalyptic vision, and his highly individual work, violent and intense, is free from ambiguities and complexities, though not from spectacular paradoxes. Fogazzaro and Claudel share strong religious feeling and conviction with an equally strong propensity towards the romantic idealisation of passion, so that in their work love of God and love of woman appear in a somewhat dubious relationship. Both have created mystical lovers against whom may be brought the charge of spiritual adultery, and the exaltation of passion appears as one of the mainstays of their work. Finally, M. François Mauriac in works of gripping intensity has plunged us into an atmosphere of brooding sensuality, a world of sweaty desiring bodies and scheming vulpine minds, a world as one-sided as that created by Flaubert in *Madame Bovary* and more relentlessly evil.

In contrast with what we may call the twentieth-century school of salvation through sin, *I Promessi Sposi* stands out as a work extraordinarily balanced, wonderfully human, full of sound common sense, and marvellously complete. What perhaps is most admirable in this work, apart from the psychological penetration and descriptive realism, is the careful balance that is maintained between vice, virtue and mediocrity. However conventional the mould in which the story is cast, it nevertheless reflects life in all its main and unchanging aspects. This tale set in the State of Milan in the early seventeenth century, written in the early nineteenth century, encloses a truth which transcends that expressed in any of the partial presentations from the hand of later writers, most of whom seem to be too exclusively preoccupied, not to say fascinated, by the problem of evil. Human mediocrity is the stuff of Manzoni's story, that preponderant part of humanity which does not

aspire very high or fall very low: humble folk, *la povera gente*, who merely wish to live a quiet and reasonably enjoyable life, doing good in a limited sort of way to those around, working and founding a family. The hero and heroine belong to this category: simple ignorant folk who are the victims of the more powerful and the more cunning. But the figure which engraves itself most clearly on our mind is that of a man belonging to that vast mass of people who condone evil, not from desire, but from lack of courage. The parish priest, Don Abbondio, finds himself with a spiritual charge greatly superior to his capacity, and it is through his weakness that the misfortunes of the hero and heroine arise. It is with gentle irony and a sympathetic understanding, yet without indulgence, that Manzoni explores this priest's fear-stricken mind. Don Abbondio is not a figure of fun, but the creation of an accomplished psychologist and a stern moralist pointing inexorably to the havoc wrought by the unintentional and unconscious accomplices of evil. Throughout the many pages of *I Promessi Sposi*, from one end to the other of this large fresco of living humanity, comprising a vast number of social groups and the most various temperaments, there is apparent the deep humanity of the author, which combines an understanding of human weakness with a gentle insistence on the nobler qualities to which man may attain.

Though Manzoni's story takes a full account of human mediocrity and is set among people incapable, for one reason or another, of doing either much harm or much good, the author, to complete his picture, has set up on either side of this mass of largely ineffectual but not despicable individuals the arrayed forces of good and of evil. On either side he has paired his champions. To the *prepotente* Don Rodrigo corresponds the Capuchin Fra Cristoforo, though in the combat the friar has the worst of it. To the unnamed tyrant, *l'innominato*, who is the scourge of the neighbourhood, corresponds the saintly archbishop of Milan; and here it is the archbishop who triumphs, though not by any conscious efforts of his own. The conversion of this tyrant has provoked criticism, but Manzoni is careful to prepare his ground in advance, though today one can only read the account of the interview between him and the archbishop with a feeling of discomfort. In addition to these major protagonists on either side there is the host of minor assistants, conscious and unconscious, willing and

unwilling. There is, for instance, the Monza nun, the nun *malgré elle*, who is in the same category as Don Abbondio, though her furtherance of the cause of evil is less passive. The author is at pains to show how the frustration and resentment that motivate her actions have arisen, and we see that she is really one of the victims and that a large share of responsibility for her behaviour lies with her father and also with the social system to which he unthinkingly conforms.

It is one of the fine features of *I Promessi Sposi* that the interdependence of the human race is demonstrated in the adventures that it describes. Human solidarity in evil and in good is one of its main themes. The ramifications of evil, the contributory causes which are largely unconscious, so that responsibility is shared over a wide and mostly unknown area, are admirably displayed, and the influence of good, the power of a saintly life and the incalculable force of prayer, are finely insinuated. We do not know what Fra Cristoforo may have achieved in the quiet of his cell at Rimini, but we see how the innocence and purity of Lucia provide, as it were, a final blow to the evil life of the unnamed tyrant, so that he comes into the saintly presence of the archbishop prepared for the full effect of words which derive, not from intellectual theory, but from a life of sacrifice and devotion.

It cannot be said that Manzoni glosses over the problem of evil or that he portrays it as less rampant than it is. Neither does he offer any facile solution. He is as aware as M. Mauriac that human beings, for the most part, change very little in the course of their lives, and that self-interest is the mainspring of most activity. He has chosen as the setting of his novel a period in history when violence was rife and barbarity far from infrequent. The cruelty of the crowds during the bread riot in Milan, their fickleness and fundamental stupidity, the havoc wrought by passing soldiers, the wanton damage to homes and crops, increased by local opportunists, but above all the blind terror of the survivors of the plague, a terror which finds expression in the most barbarous behaviour so that no one is safe from the fear of the others, are a sufficient indication that Manzoni was well aware of the depths to which men may sink. The scenes of horror during the plague, the conduct of the *monatti*, are gruesome enough and sufficiently indicative of depravity in human nature to satisfy those most ardently obsessed by the existence of evil. But Manzoni

does not omit to give us another aspect of the scene: the devotion and self-sacrifice of a number of Capuchins who looked after the thousands of dying in the *lazzaretto* at the cost of their own lives.

The personality of the archbishop of Milan reveals the idea that holiness is not necessarily incompatible with dignity of bearing and efficiency of administration. Federigo Borromeo may be presented in a somewhat simplified manner. We are not shown him from the inside, as it were, but as he is only an accessory character in the story, that simplification is not only permissible but indeed inevitable, if the novel were not to become so long as to be completely unmanageable. The achievement of Bernanos in the creation of the characters of Abbé Donissan<sup>2</sup> and of the *curé* of Ambricourt<sup>3</sup> is remarkable, and I am the last to wish to detract from such *tours de force*, but it is well to be reminded that holiness does not have to lie hidden behind a human incapacity, to be perpetually tortured, to be the prey of spectacular diabolical assaults. There is serenity as well as anguish, and a concern for human appearances is perhaps not incompatible with saintliness. Manzoni draws attention, for instance, not only to the fact that Federigo Borromeo wore his clothes till they were threadbare, but also to the fact that he was always scrupulously clean, in an age when such cleanliness was most exceptional.

A remarkable omission from *I Promessi Sposi* is any dwelling on sensual desire. It is indeed hinted that the Monza nun was guilty of irregularities in her conduct, but the author deems it sufficient to let the matter rest in such vague terms and the novel does not suffer aesthetically from this discretion on his part. In the love of Renzo and Lucia there is no trace of the romantic idealisation of passion. In hardship and prolonged separation these two lovers remain faithful to one another, and the love which each bears the other conforms to the Christian conception without any false note being struck in the psychological verisimilitude of the portrayal. Passion is never exalted and a sense of proportion never lost. In due course, after the marriage of Renzo and Lucia, a child is born: so far is Manzoni from adhering to the romantic practice of regarding love as an effervescence of feeling which must not be trammelled by such realist preoccupations as babies. Lucia is not a beautiful heroine, and the author insists on the disappointment of

<sup>2</sup> In *Sous le Soleil de Satan*.

<sup>3</sup> In *Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne*.

Renzo's associates in Bergamo when they eventually see his wife; she turns out to be an ordinary undistinguished peasant girl. If we remember that Manzoni published his novel in 1827, this absence of idyllic qualities is truly remarkable. Impossibly heroic renunciations are also deliberately excluded. Lucia's vow of virginity to our Lady, made at the height of her suffering, is annulled by Fra Cristoforo, who understands that more good will be done by the marriage of Lucia and Renzo than by her struggle against her own inclination and by the despair of the poor thwarted man.

Thus, a work which is inspired by a strong religious conviction maintains a balance which today appears as remarkable. The fact that religious faith and common sense are not two irreconcilable things emerges clearly from this great novel. The author has made sharp distinctions between good and evil and has made no attempt to confuse one with the other. Human nature is revealed in all its ordinary weakness, as well as in its depravity and in its supernatural heroism. The author indulges in no spectacular athletics. A twentieth-century writer of the school I have mentioned, a Graham Greene, perhaps, might have been tempted to show that the unnamed tyrant was really a man who merited our compassion and he would have been 'redeemed' without any conversion. That this tyrant was of stronger calibre than the mass of humanity Manzoni has clearly shown, and after his conversion he is as strong a force in the interest of good as he was before in the interest of evil, but Manzoni does not for that reason show ordinary humanity as of no account or contemptible. It is for the sheep, as it were, that his strongest compassion is reserved, and this, surely, is a sign of his own strength. Other writers, a Fogazzaro or a Claudel, might have been tempted to maintain Lucia's vow of virginity so that the novel ended in renunciation, but Manzoni is aware that his Lucia and Renzo reflect people who are not strong enough for such heroism and he does not force them into an impossible situation.

Today, amid the complexities to which we have become accustomed, the simplicity of Manzoni may be impossible to achieve. The moral issues with which we are concerned in the twentieth century may not appear so forthright as they do in this story of seventeenth-century Milan, seen in the retrospect of two hundred years. Moreover, the twentieth-century novelist no doubt rightly feels that what has already been done needs no

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further exemplification. He must either explore new areas or investigate from a new angle ground that has already been covered. Undoubtedly, the framework of *I Promessi Sposi* is outmoded. It is highly conventional, with its bad rich tyrants and poor oppressed humble folk, its innocent persecuted heroine, its nun who has taken forced vows, and the sonorous conversion of the main villain of the piece. However, by taking a setting so much earlier in time, Manzoni has succeeded in making his story reasonably convincing and the realism of his detail and the acuity of his psychological observation cause the conventional framework to pass into the background, perceptible but not obtrusive. Whatever the minor weaknesses that may be discerned in the fabric of this novel, it does bear witness to a high degree of truth. The idea that the mediocre are as much a part of redeemable humanity as the outstanding criminal and the platitude that the world is made up of all sorts of people, good, bad and indifferent, have occasionally to be brought to our attention to counter-balance those works which exploit but one small fraction of humanity, which falsely appears as representative, owing to the emphasis which it receives. *I Promessi Sposi* fulfils this purpose as, I think, no other work of similar scope does. Manzoni has attained a satisfactory aesthetic effect without reliance on any paradox or spectacular convolution, and there, it seems to me, lies his greatness. This novel of his, written by a Christian on a Christian theme, which may briefly be resumed in the trite phrase that trust in God makes misfortune more endurable, seems to be a unique achievement in the literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

#### NOTICE

'Some Contemporary Moral Questions' is the title of a series of articles that will begin in the March issue of BLACKFRIARS. The series will be introduced by the Bishop of Lancaster, who writes on 'The Natural Law'. The same number will contain Fr Victor White's second broadcast talk on 'The Dying God', 'St Thomas Today' by Fr Paul Foster, O.P., and 'St Thomas on Play' by Donald Nicholl.