

liturgical tradition, combined with an old-fashioned scientific positivism. No names are mentioned, but some will occur to those who are familiar with Anglican trends. John Keble's *Tract 89* is commended, on the "mystical sense" of Scripture. We are reminded of the works of A.G. Hebert, whose name is misprinted (page 109). But above all it is the "great work" of Cardinal Henri de Lubac on patristic and medieval exegesis which this chapter highlights. It certainly demonstrates the idiocy of supposing that nobody understood the Bible before Luther came on the scene. But even a reader who agrees with nearly everything so far may stumble in the course of this chapter. With all the will in the world can the "mystical sense" be widely recaptured today? Even those who have listened to a daily ration of patristic literature for many years breathe with relief when they get back among their modern books. This reader at least has to confess that he found little joy or instruction in the only extended example of how allegorical exegesis opens up the theological significance of a biblical text—how the baptism of Jesus was expounded from Origen to Jeremy Taylor.

The dichotomy between critical reason and historical imagination certainly has to be recognised and transcended. The final chapter refers us back to Von Hügel's "great work", *The Mystical Element of Religion* (1908) and, further back still, to Newman's University Sermons (1826 to 1843) and the "Tamworth Reading Room" letter in *The Times* (1841). Thus we are brought back to Oxford, and to the first years of the Oxford Movement. At one level, *Discerning the Mystery* is a tract, in an honourable tradition: it seeks to restore theology in Oxford to its Catholic responsibilities. Apart from the intra-Anglican polemics, always somewhat elusive to the outsider, the book is a marvellous catalogue of important and often neglected books with which any student of Catholic theology would be familiar (but few are). But theological self-questioning is never very interesting unless the questioning has analogues in neighbouring disciplines. That allegorical exegesis has much to offer us today may remain doubtful. But of one thing there is no doubt—this book cuts right to the core of the problems that we have inherited from the Enlightenment. The recent history of theology is a case study in the recent history of our culture. This book is an important contribution to a difficult and perhaps undecidable argument.

FERGUS KERR OP

LANGUAGE, SENSE AND NONSENSE, by G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker. *Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1984. Pp. xiii + 397. £22.50.*

What are the principles an implicit grasp of which comprises an understanding of our language? This question, and related ones, seem important to many modern philosophers, some of whom place 'meaning' at the top of their agenda, and some of whom aim at a systematic theory of meaning. Names to conjure with here are Davidson, Dummett, Carnap and Tarski. You might also add Frege and Wittgenstein. These writers, at various stages in their careers, have placed on the philosophical table a set of problems which have occupied a whole generation of their colleagues.

The authors of this book deplore all this, which they take to be the product of radical misconceptions. Their main argument moves on two connected levels. Part of it deals with theses seen to be advanced as part of a single philosophical enterprise. The verdict passed on these is unfavourable. The conclusion then is that the enterprise itself is confused and misguided. Backer and Hacker also suggest that advocates of the enterprise have sometimes been inspired by the work of others the true nature of which has been misunderstood or misapplied. The book therefore has a third level of argument, for it also maintains that historical or exegetical insights can help one to see why many modern philosophers have been led astray and when the rot set in.

What exactly is the rot supposed to be? It seems to consist of a collection of theories such as 'Language is a calculus of rules for the use of symbols' or 'The fact that a speaker of a language can understand sentences he has never heard before calls out

for explanation'. According to Baker and Hacker these theories and others comprise a 'modern conception of language' which is just a non-starter. They therefore conclude that 'Philosophy of language, as commonly conceived, has no coherent subject-matter, and its artefacts are uniformly nonsensical. There is no such thing as a theory of meaning for a language, and hence there is no such thing as a significant contribution to such an enterprise' (p. 387).

But is all this correct? One thing is certainly clear. This is that Baker and Hacker show very well how easy it is to read philosophers as saying what seems greatly to go against ways in which we normally speak. They show very well how philosophers can easily seem to be talking nonsense. They have effectively exposed the peculiar character of much philosophical discourse.

Yet the peculiar character of philosophical discourse can spring from at least two things. Philosophers can seem to talk nonsense because they are thinking nonsense. But they can also seem to talk nonsense because they are dealing with difficult or unusual problems in unusual language likely to perplex others. According to Baker and Hacker, the authors they criticise are guilty of the first practice. But a more plausible theory is that many of these authors are largely only guilty of the second, which is no great objection to them.

Consider for example, some of the things which Baker and Hacker say about the (admittedly odd-sounding) view that common to a set of different sentences can be a sense to be referred to as a matter of descriptive content. Several writers have held this view. According to them, there is descriptive content (sense) common to sentences like 'Shut the door', 'The door is shut', 'Would that the door were shut', and 'Is the door shut?'. This content is to be distinguished from the 'force' of the sentence, i.e. what it is in each that allows us to identify them respectively, as an imperative, an assertion, an optative, and a question. But Baker and Hacker will have none of this. They insist that the whole notion of descriptive content is a farrago of nonsense, and they do so in attacking all sense/force distinctions, which they take to be a major part of the edifice they wish to destroy.

Well, perhaps they are right. But what are their arguments against descriptive content? There are four. First, not all sentences are descriptions, given what we ordinarily mean by 'description'. Imperatives, for instance, are not descriptions (pp. 81–84). Second, if 'description' is said to bear 'a special philosophical sense' by those who have no notion of descriptive content, then nothing is gained by talk about descriptive content since that now only amounts to an 'arbitrary decision' not to call anything a sentence which one does not also call a description (pp. 84–85). Third, talk about descriptive content forces us to introduce new words to do the work of old ones (vis. 'describe' and 'description') since we 'still need to distinguish what we ordinarily call "describing" from the various speech-activities with which it is contrasted' (p. 85). Fourth, descriptive content cannot be identified with a symbol but must be what is expressed by symbols, while truth-conditional semantics is 'standardly built' on the thesis that sentences are what have the properties of being true or false (pp. 86–87).

Yet these are not good arguments. Writers who would talk about descriptive content common to the sentences mentioned above may well seem to speak strangely (which great philosopher has not?), but they can quite readily be taken as saying that the sentences only make sense in the light of a proposition which can be stated and which is operated on by the force indicators of the sentences. With respect to the sentences in question, this can be taken to be 'The door is shut'. 'Shut the door' asks that someone should bring it about that the door is shut. 'The door is shut' asserts that the door is shut. 'Would that the door were shut' expresses the desire that 'The door is shut' should be or should have been true. 'Is the door shut?' queries the truth of 'The door is shut'. There are doubtless problems here, but there is also something basically straightforward. It is irrelevant to object that we would not ordinarily call 'Shut the door' a description, that we should not just insist that all sentences are descriptions, or

that we now need to find a new word to talk about descriptions as opposed, say, to questions. Advocates of descriptive content do not have to say that all sentences are descriptions, if that offends. And they can perfectly well distinguish between descriptions and questions without inventing new words. As for the problem about symbols and what is expressed by them, it is just false that anyone committed to a notion of descriptive content is also committed to regarding truth as a property of sentences (at least in some absolute sense). Many would say that it is *propositions* that are strictly speaking true or false. Baker and Hacker are here just blurring the issue and refusing to acknowledge what there is to be acknowledged. They are presenting what purports to be *reductio ad absurdum*, but by sleight of hand they are diverting attention from a matter which ought to be dealt with quite differently.

And this, it seems to me is characteristic of their approach in many parts of the book. The result is a vigorous, lively, and often very funny piece of polemic which contains many good things of which I have said nothing. But it is not, I think quite clearly the cure-all its authors would have us believe. Nevertheless, it is evidently a book which will be much read and discussed.

BRIAN DAVIES OP

THE GOSPEL IN ART BY THE PEASANTS OF SOLENTINAME *Gill and Macmillan, Dublin. £5.95 1984*

Solentiname is an archipelago of thirty-eight islands in Lake Nicaragua, inhabited by fishermen, farmers and craftsmen. Since 1966 it has also been a Christian commune, founded by the Marxist priest and poet, Ernesto Cardenal. When the Pope visited Central America he ordered Cardenal to keep out of politics but Cardenal is still the Minister of Culture in the Marxist Sandinista government. He is a radical. He is a radical Christian, devoted to the gospels, impatient of the established Church with its conservatism and its priestly caste. He is a political radical because, he says, the gospels oblige him to be one.

This book is a collection of reflections on the gospels by the peasants who joined Solentiname in the 60s and 70s and by their beloved leader Cardenal, known affectionately as Ernesto. The reflections are short, simple, passionate and always about the poor. There are visual reflections by the peasant artists of Solintiname, wonderfully sumptuous and evocative paintings which are like naïf Gauguins with political undertones. The crowd in the Psalm Sunday carry banners proclaiming "Long Live Jesus the Liberator" and "Down with Somoza", then dictator of Nicaragua. Herod's massacre of the innocents is carried out, with ghastly savagery, by Somoza's National Guard. It is the National Guard who drag Jesus to Calvary through the jungle. Jesus is a peasant like the people of Nicaragua, who watch him in helpless misery, one of them beneath a notice stating baldly "Jesus comunista".

It is easy to see why Somoza destroyed Solentiname. In 1977 his men descended on the islands, burning the commune and the peasants' homes, killing and raping the people, destroying the library and turning the Church into a military barracks. It is easy to see why the peasants took arms. They had lived in repression for fifty years. For the first time in fifty years the gospel meant something to them; the Church was their Church, not the religious department of the establishment, and when Somoza attacked it they fought back. They joined the Sandinista revolutionary army, which overthrew Somoza in 1979 and set up the present Sandinista Marxist government. They rebuilt Soltiname. Cardenal became Minister of Culture.

The book is uncomfortable for an affluent western reader. It sees western life as not just complacent and unreal but guilty. It is universally and accusingly political, or as the peasants at Solentiname would say, Christian. The world consists of the rich and the poor, the guilty and the innocent, the people of power and the people of God. The reflections all date from the Somoza years and there are none concerning the