

of this sort, both at Spode House and in London, and, now that the preliminary work of definition has been attempted, it will be possible to pass on to particular questions. The special value of such a gathering would seem simply to lie in the opportunities it gives for meeting, the give-and-take of being together in the context of a religious house and its life, so that the 'problems' of the writer, as those of any other man, are seen in their true proportion. Certainly it appeared possible to be both serious and happy, and the unity of participation in the daily Mass was most generously reflected in all else that was said and done.

THE WRITER AS CREATOR¹

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THOU waterest the hills from thy high dwelling: the earth shall be filled with the fruit of thy works': St Thomas took this verse from Psalm 103 as the text of his inaugural lecture as Master in Theology at Paris, for, he says, it is ordained from eternity by the king and lord of the heavens that the gifts of his providence should come to his lowest creatures through the mediation of those that are higher, and so teachers and doctors are as mountains watered from on high by divine wisdom that they may pass on that wisdom to those they teach.

What is true of the theologian is true in a different way of every creative writer: he too is a mediator, he communicates a vision. But in what sense is he a creator? My concern here is to suggest questions rather than the answers to them: and here at once two different types of problem suggest themselves. The writer creates *with* words, but he also creates *words*. I am not thinking of the invention of neologisms: words are like living things, they grow, change, decay, die; and the fact that great Christian words can thus decay and die presents us with one of our most pressing problems. Some words become sterilized by over-familiarity,

1. The text of the opening lecture of the Blackfriars Conference at Spode House, July 2-5, 1954.

become labels empty of real meaning: do we stop to think what we really mean when we speak of grace or redemption? Some of the great Christian words have lost their virility, like 'meekness' and 'mildness'. Some have changed their meaning, tragically: as 'charity' has lost all the grandeur and immensity of *caritas* and become a question of kindness or almsgiving, and 'devotion' has ceased to mean an attitude of will and become a matter of feeling. We Catholics in this country have suffered, too, from a tradition of bad translation which has debased our Catholic idiom: it is just not true that *suavissimo* and *castissimo* mean 'most sweet' and 'most chaste'; and the use of the word 'annunciation' obscures the fact that what we are celebrating is the most important announcement ever made to man; there is indeed a word 'visitation', but it means some catastrophic occurrence, earthquake, famine, plague, or, in ecclesiastical circles, the descent of a high authority, for purposes of inspection, upon a parish or religious community; we have the ineptitude of the 'descent from the cross' which is exactly what it was not, and the final imbecility of the 'invention of the true cross'. We have all the infelicities—'vessel of singular devotion' and so forth—which mar the beauty of the litany of our Lady; we have all the horrors which meet us at every turn in our 'devotions'. 'May her sweet name be lisped by little ones', we are to say: it is worth spending a moment analysing the phrase. Why should it be taken for granted that all little ones lisp? Some do, and it is a misfortune, an act of God; but some are happily free. But the prayer goes further than that: it prays that the little ones *may* lisp. And yet it does not pray that they may lisp in general, but only in relation to one name—and that is a name which just cannot in fact be lisped for there is no 's' in it.

The need then is obvious: a reform, a cleansing, but at the same time a constant renewal, a craftsmanship in the making and using of words which will really be vehicles of meaning as well as sound and beautiful in themselves. To this we must return later; let us for the moment go on to the second group of problems, the making *with* words.

Here we must first distinguish between the quite different ways in which words are used by the theologian or philosopher, the mystic, and the poet, playwright, novelist.

The theologian may be writing, perhaps in Latin, for other theologians: he will then, probably, be using an established tech-

tical vocabulary and his concern will be not with new words but with new ideas or relations between ideas. But he may be writing for laymen; and then his concern must be for a new presentation of ideas, for the communicating of old or eternal truths in contemporary language: he must labour to free himself from ecclesiastical clichés, from labels, from the dead leaves of theological language.

The mystic can only be brought in here with an apology: he is above all laws of language, for he is trying to express the Inexpressible, not mediately like the theologian, but immediately: he is trying to communicate the divine, and the tension from which all creative endeavour springs is in his case a divine tension. But the fact of immediate importance for us here, a fact which M. Maritain has made us see so clearly, is that the mystic is using language in a way quite different to that of the theologian. What damage has been done by reading the mystics as though they were writing theology! Think for a moment of what they say about hating all creatures. . . . They are in effect only repeating the words of our Lord, 'Unless a man hate . . .'; but it needs a theologian to explain rationally what is there expressed intuitively: it needs a St Thomas to quote our Lord's words and then to add, 'i.e. in so far as they lead us from God'—and to go on to explain in what way creatures can be said to lead us from God.

The first cardinal mistake is to confuse mysticism with theology; the second is to suppose that the one can do without the other. Christianity has its poetry and its prose; and both are essential. As in the moral life you must have the virtues but you must also have the Spirit that bloweth whither it listeth, you must have Aristotle but also you must have the Magdalen with her precious ointment or Francis throwing off his clothes; so also in literature the two things are complementary: you must have the creeds, the definitions, the theological formulations, the code of laws, but you must also have the Living Flame that these things may be truly infused with life. In the last resort it is of little use to know about God unless also one learns to know God.

The poet is like the mystic in that he is concerned with intuition, not with ratiocination; but his vision (unless he is mystic also) is with a human vision, not a divine. And here we come upon a special difficulty. The poet (playwright, novelist, etc.) is concerned to communicate a vision, not a doctrine; yet he can incarnate a

doctrine, and in any case he communicates not just a vision but an influence. In other words, the realm of art cannot be wholly separated from the realm of morals. The artist as such (as M. Maritain again has shown us) has no rules but the rules of his art, the aesthetic integrity of his work; but he is also a man, a morally responsible being: he must think of the moral—if you will, the sociological—influence of his work. The same is true, at least in certain circumstances, of the critic. If he speaks as a literary critic, an art critic, he has no business to concern himself with anything but the aesthetic value of what he is appraising. If he attacks a novelist for his theology the novelist has a perfect right to reply that he is not writing theology, he is painting a picture of reality, of human reality, as it is. As a literary critic you can say if you wish that the behaviour of the priest in *The Power and the Glory* is not psychologically plausible—in other words, that this is not a painting of human reality; you have no right to say that it is theologically unsound. On the other hand you have the Church's strong determination to protect her 'little ones' (lispering or otherwise): and so at once you have a criticism which is not aesthetic but moral: will this book, this poem, this picture, this film 'lead us from God'? And here we come to a problem of particular difficulty.

Take the criticism of films. You will find Catholic committees condemning a film on the grounds of danger to faith or morals, though aesthetically it is a good or even a great film; and praising a film for its moral tone, though aesthetically it is revolting. Is this, even morally speaking, sound? It may be said that moralists are concerned only with moral values: but is the condemning of sound aesthetic standards and the inculcation of bad ones a thing separable from moral values? (For where the subject-matter is religious, aesthetic sense becomes inextricably mixed up with theological sense: compare the effects, theological effects, of *The Bells of St Mary's* and *Island of Sinners*.)

But the thing is more complicated than that. The aesthetic judgment is absolute: this art-work is in itself good or bad. The moral judgment on the other hand is likely to be relative. This film is dangerous—but to whom? Anything *can* be dangerous; meat to X, poison to Y. In the film world this principle has been recognized by the classification of films—'adults only' and so forth; in the realm of literature the same is not true. A corres-

pondent wrote recently in great indignation about a book which would cause the gravest harm to adolescents because of the open—the ‘ultra-modern’—way in which it dealt with the erotic life of its hero. It is interesting that this frankness should be regarded as ultra-modern: the book in question had in it nothing to compare, from the point of view of frankness, with the earliest novel which has come down to us, the *Satyricon*. What is ultra-modern is the assumption that adolescents are uncontrolled or uncontrollable in their reading, and that therefore the writer, and the artist in general, must temper his winds, his *afflatus*, to these lambs. Let us be quite clear: if this is the conclusion we ought to reach, as Catholics, then we must be logical about it and have the courage of our convictions, and advocate the destruction of the great bulk of the world’s art and literature, ancient and modern. To allow a danger, to impose an unimaginable impoverishment: which is the greater evil?

The fact is that we live in a world of fear; and this fear has infected our Catholic life to the extent of becoming almost the main driving force behind our practical and prudential judgments. ‘This *may* do harm to someone; therefore it must not be allowed.’ We forget two things: we forget that anything at all, even the Bible, *may* be an occasion of sin to someone; we also forget to ask the correlative question: will this do good to someone? The whole world has learnt from the Sixtine ceiling to live more deeply: would you cover it with a coat of whitewash because it may do harm to some?

And yet it remains true that in a real conflict between art and prudence it is prudence which must have the last word. The artist as such is concerned only with the aesthetic integrity of his work; as man he is concerned with eternal life, and with the effect of his work on other people in terms of that eternal life. If you could say of any given work that it must certainly do moral harm wherever it goes, what would be the responsibility of the artist as man? Would he have to suppress the work? or to tamper with it, with its integrity? These are questions which have to be hammered out²; let us for the moment simply note, what is so often forgotten, that it is not a question just of the artist’s responsibility, but of that of the man who looks at the film or the picture or reads

2. I have put forward my own suggestions in *The Water and the Fire*, when dealing with the problem of ‘The Catholic novelist’.

the book. Precisely because the thing is so relative, it is for us individually, at the receiving end of the transaction, to make our own prudential judgments: we cannot simply foist all the responsibility on to the artist.

Let us return to the first problem: the creation not with words but of words. Do we sufficiently realize the extent to which we Catholics speak a language which to the non-Catholic is gibberish? Terms which are familiar enough to us—perhaps too familiar—and which therefore we take for granted are to them quite meaningless. How then can we hope to communicate what it is our duty to communicate? We must find new terms, a new vehicle, for the old, the eternal realities. The theologian must find new terms in contemporary idiom with which to reclothe his technicalities. And the 'profane' writer? In so far as he concerns himself with Catholic concepts he must renew their vesture just as he must revitalize all the words he uses. Perhaps we reflect too seldom on the fact that the word 'tradition' means not a receiving but a handing on. It is a receiving, yes, but then a handing on with additions, with added nuances, overtones. Again and again the Word must be made flesh in living tissues of language: so it is that not only mystic and theologian but poet and novelist also can co-operate with God in the work of revelation and redemption. The mystic tries to communicate his own immediate experience of God; the theologian tries to make sure that his reasoning about God is valid, and that his findings are really communicated, through a living language; what of the poet and novelist? Just as the theologian, who has the knowledge, must learn how to express it—why are students not *taught* the craft of writing in seminaries and houses of studies?—so these others, who have the craft, must learn the Reality which the poem or the story will at least imply, if they would have art and prudence, like peace and justice, to embrace. It is a long-term policy, the forming of a background, but none the less important for that. The man who lives with God may still write something which will be harmful for somebody—but it will not be his fault, for the thing will be good, morally speaking, in itself. So he will be fulfilling the vision of St Thomas—and it is his highest glory and responsibility: he will be of those who are 'watered from on high by divine wisdom that they may pass on that wisdom to those they teach'.