

of human life is Divine grace. No matter how much richness and subtlety an author commands in drawing his human characters nor with what breadth he sets the stage, if God is not the beginning and end of the story, its meaning is lost. The meaning in this story is never lost.

Yet, *The Betrothed* is not merely another good Catholic story. God is always in His place, but He is not *Deus ex machina*. Nothing of the endlessly varied story of human motivation, nothing of the reaches of human understanding and emotion is lost to the telling of the tale. It is, in fact, almost certainly because of this keen appreciation of the workings of mind and heart that Manzoni's book, thoroughly Catholic, was widely welcomed and finally everywhere exalted, only in spite of its spiritual content, by a European literary milieu dominated by minds openly suspicious and avowedly hostile to the Faith and the Church of Rome. Praise from enemies carries weight. So, a Catholic picking up this book can promise himself the deep satisfaction of a work combining faith with artistry beyond the common degree.

The translation is complete and flows easily. While the translator admits, as all translators do, that "the cadence, the subtlety, the terseness, of the original prose" cannot be reproduced, for those who cannot read the original this is an excellent alternative.

M.M.S.

The Ascent To Truth. By Thomas Merton. New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951. pp. 342. \$3.50.

A brother Dominican a few years ago offered a lift to a young college boy out in Ohio. As they rode along, the Oberlin undergraduate began talking religion. He was the son of a Protestant minister. Yet he was enthusiastic about Catholicism. What caused it? Thomas Merton did; the Thomas Merton whose *The Seven Storey Mountain* was then being passed from one student to another at Oberlin, and no doubt at many another American school. Father Merton has his foot in the door of the house of America's heart. It is good then to see another book flow from his talented pen.

Father Merton knows his customers and so he is an aggressive salesman. He points out the need of our country, given as it is to a belief in action for its own sake, to action that has no worthwhile object since those acting are without faith. Their lack of faith he reduces to their crass ignorance. He then offers his medicine which consists in a turning to God, a turning to

Him and a contemplation of Him here as a prelude to the complete enjoyment of Him hereafter.

In the Trappist's own words his "only task has been to give a clear and concrete idea of the prelude to mysticism and to lay down a few fundamental principles without which infused contemplation cannot be thoroughly understood." In pursuit of this task Father Merton relies on the writings of St. John of the Cross. He indicates that St. John used as the basic structure for his doctrine the first six questions of the *Prima-Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas, which prove beyond doubt that God alone is our true beatitude. Showing amazing erudition in such matters, Father Merton also freely uses St. Teresa of Avila, St. Bernard, St. Gregory of Nyssa and Blessed John Ruysbroeck; not to mention Tauler, Suarez, and John of St. Thomas. A mere listing of such names will give the initiated reader some idea of the depths Father Merton explores. He has gone beyond the depth of the average American reader. He is like a salesman who is so carried away by the excellence of his product as to forget the capacities of his customer. The average American will be disappointed with this book. It is beyond his ken.

By way of proving that these matters are difficult, it should be indicated that Father Merton himself seems to have made an error in one instance. He says in his fourth chapter: "The natural mode of converse between spiritual beings is by the direct communication of ideas. The Devil, being a spirit, can so act upon the souls of men." This is contrary to the first article of the one hundred eleventh question of the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa*, wherein St. Thomas says: "The human intellect, however, cannot grasp the universal truth itself unveiled; because its nature requires it to understand by turning to phantasms. . . . So the angels propose the intelligible truth to men under the similitudes of sensible things . . ."

The matter then is difficult and only a limited audience will benefit by reading it. However, for that limited audience it may prove a Godsend. It points out the leading authorities on this difficult matter of contemplation. It clears up many of the difficulties those on the threshold of contemplation may face. Most important of all, it makes abundantly clear that true mysticism is reasonable, and reasonable according to the mind of the Catholic Church.

The Ascent To Truth may help some to build a house of prayer within themselves. If it does, Father Merton will be satisfied;

satisfied that he has drawn some away from childish, futile house-building on the sands of this world; for he is sure that "unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it" (Ps. 126, 1).
V.M.R.

Fifty Years of the American Novel: A Christian Appraisal. Edited by Harold C. Gardiner, S.J. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951. pp. xii, 304. \$3.00.

There has been a desperate need for an anthology of this kind for some time. Father Gardiner has done us a very great service by editing the present work as have the well-known contributors whose names are sufficient guarantee of the book's excellence.

Father Gardiner himself has written an admirable introductory essay on the point of a Christian appraisal, setting the motif and pattern for the studies which follow. The competent Jesuit critic points out that all literature is *essentially* religious. This is a bold statement; but, in the opinion of this reviewer, an incontestable one in view of Father Gardiner's closely knit, logical reasoning. He goes on to point out that the Christian critic is the best critic, since his basic preconceptions are the most sound. In particular, the Christian critic has a profound insight into the nature of tragedy in that he can view with appreciative sympathy "the tragic stature or at least the tragic potentialities latent in man" (p. 11).

Included in the volume are analyses of Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, Ellen Glasgow, Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, John Phillips Marquand, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, John Steinbeck, and James T. Farrell. Robert C. Healey, and Nicholas Joost have written the concluding essays on *Novelists of the War* and *Robert Penn Warren and New Directions in the Novel* respectively.

It would be impossible, of course, in this limited space to proffer a critique of all the essays here contained. Each reviewer will find certain ones to his own liking; and he will, no doubt, find others to which he will take exception. All the contributors, however, have presented strong arguments in favor of their theses, and, for the most part, these arguments are given clearly and with considerable insight. The present reviewer found Father John S. Kennedy's essay on John Steinbeck, Anne Freemantle's on Edith Wharton, and Frank O'Malley's on James T. Farrell the most rewarding. Father Kennedy demonstrates with telling force