

OF TRUTH AND TINSEL

Marcellus M. Coskren, O.P.

HERE ARE two famous characters who make their appearance every year during this holiest of seasons: Santa Claus and Ebenezer Scrooge. Sometimes there is difficulty in deciding which one is more beloved. For what Santa Claus does for the children, Scrooge does for a great number of adults. We do not mean that Scrooge brings toys or gifts, as Santa does, or at least, not the same kind of toys. Scrooge's gift to the reading public, aside from that famous ejaculation, "Bah, humbug!" is two-fold: a sort of warm satisfaction on the part of the reader that he himself is not as bad as Bob Cratchet's employer, and a vague reassurance, wrapped in the mist of sentimentality, that the Christmas spirit can envelope anybody.

Perhaps one who opposes the kind of "carol" Mr. Dickens has sung should be condemned as a modern iconoclast. The thing has become embedded in tradition. But the risk must be taken, for the spirit that breathes throughout this work is as chilling as the icy blasts which blow in the land where it was written. It is undeniable that *A Christmas Carol* never would have been written, if Christ had not been born in Bethlehem of Juda. But this greatest of birthdays is not the cause of Dickens' work; it is a remote occasion. Every effect, in some way, bears the mark of its cause; the stamp of Bethlehem was never impressed upon *A Christmas Carol*.

To say that this story reflects the substitution of the accidental for what is essential to the Christmas spirit would be a superficial observation; the offense goes much deeper than this. What has really happened is that the splendor of the Incarnation has been dimmed, indeed, totally darkened. The coming of the God-Man touched everything human in such a way that man no longer could take the same view of himself as he had taken previous to this greatest of events. But man has always found it difficult to look beyond himself. He

knows that after Christ, humanity acquired an undreamed of nobility. Yet he often thinks he can accept the transformation without committing himself to the Transformer. This is what has happened in *A Christmas Carol*. The change that takes place in Scrooge has nothing to do with the coming of the Savior and has a great deal to do with a vague sort of social justice which is the panacea for the evil in the world. Scrooge's acquisition of nobility finds expression in the purchase of a goose for Cratchet's table. This is an odd nobility, indeed.

The example of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is extreme, but it helps us to see that we are very prone to accept as Christian something which does not deserve the name. Because we see expressed in the tale a certain similarity to the effects Christmas actually produces, we tend to receive the work as a type of Christmas literature. The glitter of tinsel has blinded us to the truth.

Unfortunately, we often do the same thing, when we read so-called "Catholic literature," particularly the modern novel. We see something that resembles a Catholic attitude towards man and the world about him, and we mistake the resemblance for the reality. Actually, the Catholic vision of reality becomes limited and is equated with the view of a particular author.

On the last page of *The Heart of the Matter*, for example, Father Rank says, "The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn't know what goes on in a single human heart." Although the Church may not know the labyrinth of Major Scobie's heart, Graham Greene should know it and should be the reader's guide through its twisting corridors. But in this novel the reader's view is clouded by the author's demand for sympathy for the main character. Throughout the whole work, Mr. Greene has given us a masterful portrait of the destructive tendency of an uncontrolled pity. Yet at the close of the book, he says to us, in effect, "Sympathize with Scobie; mercy is shown to the merciful." The burden of *The Heart of the Matter* is pity. But, in the author's view, pity is equated with mercy, and he has Father Rank, the representative of the Church, state, "He believed in mercy for everyone but himself." This may perhaps sound rather blunt, but the Catholic novel should "call a spade, a spade." It does not confuse the virtue of mercy with the emotion of pity; moreover, it does not influence the reader to excuse pity by implying that mercy and pity are synonymous.

The problem ultimately resolves itself into the question of Christian realism, a realism which begins in the cave of Bethlehem. The pagan who enters the cave sees only a mother with a new-born babe,

a man he supposes is the child's father and a few animals. But no Christian can pretend that this is an accurate picture. His Faith tells him that this cave shelters the Mother who has given birth to the God-Man, to the Word Incarnate. Thus Christian realism, if it be worthy of the name, must forever express, in the words of Chesterton, "the idea of a baby and the idea of unknown strength that sustains the stars." What this demands of a truly Catholic novelist will be seen from what follows.

In their thoughts and actions men show clearly the effects of original sin, and any attempt at realism must recognize the fact of the Fall. This does not demand, however, the fall of fact. There is a great difference between the realism which recognizes evil and that which is equated with evil. The tendency of most readers to identify realism with the "seamy side of life" is largely the fault of the realists themselves; the identification is made, previous to any consideration by the reader, in their very works. This is the gravest problem in realism: the portrayal of good and evil without distortion; the demand upon the artist to convey reality without that concentration on one aspect that implicitly destroys the other.

No one can honestly say that the writer of the Catholic novel should not be a realist. In fact, he has a greater right and a more solid foundation for being so than any other writer. But the greater right carries with it the greater danger. The awareness of evil should be more intense in the Catholic than in any other person; it should amount to profound understanding in the writer who is a Catholic realist, because of his artistic insight. The danger comes, however, in the concentration on fallen nature to the exclusion of even the possibility of redeemed nature. It is interesting to note that many of the novels accepted as Catholic convey an overwhelming sense of despair. The writers of these works may defend their viewpoint, agreeing that the drama of Christian life is acted out on Calvary, but stating that Calvary was in no way a place of peace and joy. Actually, like the pagan at Bethlehem, they have seen only the surface of reality. For on Calvary the greatest act of charity in the history of mankind was performed, an act which must produce peace and joy.

The ultimate meaning of Calvary for a sinner is hope; there the light which focuses on evil alone was darkened and the sinner moved into the merciful shadow of Redemption. Some novels, even such powerful ones as those of Francois Mauriac, do not reveal an understanding of that darkness. It seems that Golgotha means only terror to the characters in these books; their vision is fixed on their

own sinfulness in what is a parody of humility. The capability of any movement towards the Cross of Salvation is implicitly denied. And because these novels deny this movement, truly they can be called neither Catholic nor realistic.

We have the right to demand that every novel reveal an appreciation of good and evil as such; but we have a greater right to insist upon even more from the Catholic novel. We should expect that Chartres is more than an Arab mosque. Both are realities; both follow the architectural laws peculiar to each; both may be beautiful. However, there is a difference; the Arab mosque contains the sweeping curves of Koran inscriptions; the Catholic cathedral is inhabited by the Living Bread. Thus, what might be called moral orientation is not sufficient for the Catholic novel; we require this of every novel. A realistic novel which ignores the moral aspect is hardly commensurate with reality, for it ignores the very nature of man. The Catholic novel, while it recognizes the basic truths of man's nature, goes beyond them, reaching to grasp his elevation to the supernatural state. Hence, Ethics alone is not the standard of action for the Catholic novel; rather, the standard of good and evil given us by Christ should measure human actions.

There is an interesting story told in connection with Francois Mauriac, which graphically illustrates this point. One time the French author was visiting a church in England which had passed into the hands of the Protestants during the Revolt. The Vicar, who was showing Mauriac through the building, was trying to impress him with its various architectural excellences. In their progress they came upon a barren section of the wall containing only a fresh slab of marble.

"What is that?" Mauriac asked.

"There used to be some Romanish statue here in the old days," the Vicar explained, "but we took that away and are going to carve a quotation from Scripture in the marble."

M. Mauriac was curious. "What quotation have you chosen?"

The Vicar replied, "The words of Mary Magdalene in the garden. 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.'"

We should raise the same lament after reading many so-called Catholic novels. Either the Lord is nowhere present within them, or the accent is so much on the empty tomb, that we view only the darkness of discouragement and despair.

It should be understood, of course, that this Catholic view of

reality does not relieve a novelist of the necessity of adhering to the canons of his art-form. True art is a strict master which demands fidelity to its laws. When we read a novel, we do not want a sermon or a tract in Theology. Thus, it is valid to ask if there are any writers who have displayed this universal vision in their works. That such a vision is possible of attainment should be obvious, for example, from the works of Sigrid Undset. In her we see Christian realism in its loftiest expression.

Kristin Lavransdatter and Olav Audunsson, by no stretch of the imagination, can be understood as human beings motivated merely by ethical principles in their struggle for the good. The whole majesty and humanity of these two characters spring from their awareness of being miserable servants of Christ. Both characters grasp the fact that sin is a despicable betrayal of Christ. They come to realize this, each in his own way. Kristin's gradual awakening to the facts of her own sinfulness comes from an understanding of earthly love and Divine Love; Olav's recognition finds expression in the terms of soldier and captain. Kristin ultimately discovers salvation in true piety, in knowing herself to be a daughter of God who sent His Son Jesus to die for her; Olav receives grace when he understands that loyalty is what Christ demands from his soldiers. The experience of love in the family circle renders Kristin capable of participation in the love of God's family; the devotion shown to his captain in battle is the key which Olav uses to open his heart to devotion for Christ.

The closing chapters, as well as the whole, of *Kristin Lavransdatter* should convince anyone that Christian realism finds tremendous power of expression in the novel. The same is true of Olav's story; it would be difficult to find a more powerful and moving example of the horror of mortal sin and the splendor of grace than Madame Undset has given us in *The Master of Hestviken*. Furthermore, these works cannot be categorized as merely edifying or apologetic. Sigrid Undset's Catholic realism is not out of touch with reality; rather, it searches the depths of our human experience with the Divine.

We do not mean to say, however, that Madame Undset is the only writer to achieve the expression of this unique realism. One has only to examine the work of the Spanish novelist, José María Gironella, to see this view attained in masterly fashion. But her success, in a sense, is a consolation for any English or American novelist who would seek to write in the great Christian tradition of art, even though the culture which surrounds him, to a large extent, has lost

the Christian spirit. We might return to Bethlehem once more for the explanation and solution to his problem.

All those who have seen the Christmas story with the eyes of Faith have found consolation in identifying themselves with some of the participants. Thus, the poor have a loving regard for Saint Joseph and the shepherds; the learned have seen themselves represented in the Magi. To which group does the Catholic writer of the twentieth century belong? We suggest that he finds his place with the Wise Men from the East. T. S. Eliot, speaking through the lips of one of the Wise Men who has returned to his home, says:

“We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.”

Such is the position of the Christian realist in England or America today. But the vision granted him is so magnificent, the joy he has in re-creating this vision for others so great, that to abandon it or to dim its splendor in his writings would amount to betrayal.

“God has . . . shown pity for the hearts of men; become incarnate for their sake, so that a human heart can beat in the breast of the Son of God, and be pierced by love for us and pour forth water and blood, so abundant and so powerful that they are able to wash away the stains of the whole world.”

—A. M. ROUGET, O.P.
Christ Acts Through Sacraments

“The Only Begotten Son of God, wishing us to become partakers of His Divinity, took upon Himself our nature and became man, so that men might become gods.”

—ST. THOMAS AQUINAS
Office for Feast of Corpus Christi