

THE GENESIS OF GREATNESS

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. . . when Eva hung up in their study a small map of the world, the next day Serra hung alongside it a gigantic map of the province of Gerona.
—*Where the Soil Was Shallow*

ONE OF THE most amazing paradoxes of our times is the overwhelming appeal of the modern Catholic novel, despite the perennial misunderstanding and hostility which surround the Church herself. A partial explanation of this phenomenon, of course, is the fact that we are fortunate enough to have more than capable writers who, if they do not always manage what is an essentially Catholic view of reality, do manage to attain brilliant flashes of insight into the recesses of the Catholic mind. But this explanation is not as satisfying as would seem at first glance. All writers, even those who have achieved incredible mastery of technique, must have substantially interesting and durable material out of which they can produce literature of high quality; one cannot build a cathedral out of soap. And it is in the material with which they deal that Catholic writers have a peculiar advantage, for the Catholic personality, when explored with understanding and artistic skill, is capable of exciting interest and universal admiration.

It can be said with some justice that this interest is only curiosity; undoubtedly the Catholic concern with the supernatural is an oddity in a century which munches, somewhat distastefully, on the fruits of liberalism and moral anarchy. But closer observation forces us to conclude that there is a real interest in Catholics because they have preserved unblemished the basic truths of humanity. There is a fascination in the truth that those who have been considered the totalitarians *par excellence* have salvaged humanity and that the humanitarians, the liberals,

have degenerated into totalitarians—and in the process they have loaded vast numbers of the world's population with the chains of slavery. This ironical turn of events would be high comedy, if the realities we face today were not so tragic.

Sigrid Undset has summarized the dilemma of the liberals quite succinctly :

When men so stubbornly hold fast to the hope that it will be impossible for mankind to find Absolute Truth, it is because they imagine that life would lose all its enchantment and there would be an end to our freedom, if a truth should really exist—a single truth, in which all the rest must be comprehended.

Yet those who have clung to the Truth, who have submitted to the discipline of dogma, who pride themselves in being pilgrims of the Absolute, are the very people who have retained their freedom. This is the source of the fascination those outside the Church have found in Catholics, whether they understand this source or not. Catholics have known the Truth and the Truth has made them free.

There is little wonder, then, that the souls of Catholics, struggling against the world's anarchy or submitting to the grace of Christ, are such a rich deposit of literary wealth. Literature seeks always to imitate human action, and human action is nowhere more vital than in the lives of those who are profoundly conscious of their ordination to the Creator, to God Almighty, in Whom "all the rest must be comprehended."

Among the writers who have recognized that man's common search for happiness is, in reality, the search for God and that dramatic conflict finds its highest expression in the ensuing struggle, we must include the Spanish novelist, José María Gironella. The publication in English of his work, *Los Cipreses Crecen en Dios*, was understandably greeted with some astonishment. Here was a book which had preserved the dignity of man and the great gift of human freedom, which embodied the reality of unutterable sorrow veined with sublime joy. Here moral conflict was seen in its truly heroic proportions, and not merely as the torturous burden of repression and inhibition. And yet, *The Cypresses Believe in God* was another disturbing product of a totalitarian, a Catholic, and what seemed incredible to many, a Spanish Catholic. This book breathed forth the essence of that most intransigent of modern nations, that anachronism on the map of progressive Europe, Spain. And it presented a Spain whose people it was difficult not to admire, difficult not to love,

for the very reason of that humanity which Catholicism is supposed to suppress and destroy.

Thus, with Señor Gironella Spain has given the world a novelist of undeniable power, one who has called forth comparisons with Tolstoy. But the question naturally arises: how has this come about? In English-speaking nations, at least, contact with Spanish literature is limited, for the most part, to a somewhat superficial knowledge of Cervantes. For the rest, there is an acquaintance with names: Calderón, de Vega, Unamuno, Blasco Ibáñez. And of these, only the last mentioned has a reputation as a novelist, Unamuno being more noted for his peculiar brand of Existentialism. In America, especially, knowledge of Spain itself has been derived from the poetic evocations of Washington Irving and the social propaganda of Hemingway, while those who pretend to wider understanding have some vague ideas about the Inquisition, Philip II, and the Lincoln Brigade. The problem is surely baffling; a major novelist suddenly springs from what was generally considered barren territory. Even granting the unfortunate prejudice against Spain, which is only now being dissolved, a truly great writer would have been acknowledged, if there had been one to acknowledge.

Fortunately, for those who have thought about the mystery, Señor Gironella himself has provided the answer with an essay in the October 1956 issue of *Books on Trial* entitled "Austere Notes on the Spanish Novel." In this article we have a complete, if brief, analysis of the situation, and the blame for an almost universal neglect of Spanish fiction is placed unhesitatingly on the shoulders of the Spanish novelists themselves. Gironella summarizes five particular aspects which have characterized Spanish fiction both before and after the Civil War, and these five points adequately explain the lack of interest which the world has shown towards the modern literature of his country. We might also add that they amply justify that lack of interest, for they are characteristics which are inherently destructive of great literature.

What are these five limitations? Gironella enumerates them as follows: ". . . lack of connection with the world; over-production and multiple interests; stylism; provincialism; and the characterization of extremes." A close examination of the list shows that each one of these defects tends to destroy that universality which is a fundamental source of greatness in all art and, as Aristotle wisely remarks, the aspect of literature which

makes it of greater import than history. Thus, "lack of connection with the world" dulls the perception of the common humanity which men of all nations possess; "over-production and multiple interests" dissipates energy and drags the novelist away from a penetrating study of human action and motivation; "stylism" elevates a means to the rank of end, and, to use a phrase of Gironella, "cultivates appearances." The exploration of psychological terrain is hindered by "provincialism," insofar as it concentrates immoderately on local color and esoteric types; and, in a sense most destructive of all, "the characterization of extremes" places arbitrary and artificial dichotomies between men, creating caricatures of human personality. Any novelist who is unaware of even one of these faults in his work is like a child who has swallowed unknowingly the poisonous contents of some bottle in the medicine cabinet. The only thing that can save him is an immediate antidote, and for the writer this usually requires a complete re-evaluation of his artistic vision.

But while these five aspects fully explain the deficiencies in other writers, they are even more revealing of the inner core of Gironella's own work. For it is obvious that *The Cypresses Believe in God* is a great book precisely in the way that it avoids these pitfalls. We can, then, use the limitations Gironella has found in his fellow novelists as a starting-point in examining and evaluating the worth of his own writings.

If we had only this article from *Books on Trial* and *The Cypresses Believe in God* with which to work, we should be able to learn a great deal about Gironella the novelist, but we could scarcely perceive the phenomenon of his growth as a writer. However, thanks to the Henry Regnery Company of Chicago, an earlier novel of Gironella, *Un Hombre* (1946), has been published in an English translation by Anthony Kerrigan. Mr. Kerrigan has chosen a title from the Scriptural quotation which prefaces the work, and *Un Hombre* has become *Where the Soil Was Shallow*. The aptness of the change in title merits some attention and will be discussed below. The importance of this novel in a just evaluation of Gironella's skill and insight cannot be overestimated. With this book as a bridge between the explicit criticism of the article, "Austere Notes on the Spanish Novel," and the consummate art of *The Cypresses Believe in God*, we are in a position to witness the genesis and progress of a great literary talent.

Where the Soil Was Shallow is not a great book; in fact, it contains lengthy passages which are quite dull. But aside from its

own merits, and it does have some, it is of invaluable assistance in understanding the depths of *The Cypresses Believe in God*. The fact that Gironella was awarded the Nadal Prize in his native land for *Un Hombre* attests to the recognized superiority of the work over other Spanish works in this genre.

The one aspect of Gironella's art by which it transcends the realm of the prosaic is the profound consciousness it displays of the element of universality necessary to great fiction. A novel is the reproduction in prose of human experience, but it is defined, limited human experience, the actions and motives of this particular set of characters in their surrounding circumstances. The novelist may take men and women from the pages of history or from the leaves of his own imagination, but in either case he must create them anew. He must invest them with a significance which goes beyond that of their own historical circumstances or their own peculiarities. This is one of the great problems in fiction, as indeed, in all the arts: the investing of the particular with universal significance. It demands that the novelist be possessed of both depth and breadth in his vision of reality; he must search out the underlying motives of human action, must grasp the almost unlimited potentialities of character development stemming from the freedom of man's will. But, more than this, he must order the vision; he must place in the unfolding of story and character an inner logic, an intrinsic probability, which satisfies the unity and harmony, proportion and balance, required in any novel worthy of the name. Human experience in reality is too disparate, too particular, for thorough comprehension or, at times, for enjoyment; human experience in the novel is so ordered, so universalized, that comprehension and enjoyment are immediate. Moreover, such understanding and pleasure in a great novel should grow as perception of the order and inner harmonious structure deepens. It is in producing this vision of order, in presenting human deeds and thoughts with their defined causal relationships, that the novelist truly can be said to create.

Yet, the creativeness must be something as subtle as the breathing of the human organism. Ordinarily we are unaware of our own breathing, but if it should cease, vital activity ceases with it. The creativity in literature is somewhat analogous to this. Perhaps Willa Cather has given the most accurate description of it:

Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—

that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or thing or deed that gives high quality to the novel. . . .

It is, in short, the production of an order and harmony beyond the mere recounting of events. Our understanding and enjoyment come from the perception of the points of contact between the lives of the characters in a novel and our common humanity. The illusion of reality is created without the disparity of contingent experience. And it is precisely under this aspect that Gironella's artistic growth can be best approached. In *Where the Soil Was Shallow* it resembles the vague stirrings of an embryo; in *The Cypresses Believe in God* it permeates every page with that vital spirit which so powerfully expresses the basic human condition and gives meaning to even the most terrible of calamities, sin and war.

We must now give an indication, however brief, of the manner in which Gironella has eliminated the five defects of other Spanish novelists. Because these defects are destructive of the universal element in fiction, the discussion will revolve around Gironella's ability to give universal significance to the particular characters and events in his two novels.

One thing is evident from even a cursory reading of *Where the Soil Was Shallow*; the novel is the product of effort, indeed, of strain. In this work Senor Gironella is obviously stretching character and event beyond their intrinsic worth. This is not to say, however, that the ephemeral qualities of the characters and events recounted could not have achieved the highest importance as a vibrant representation of the human condition, if they had been placed in relief against the solid background of the truly heroic, or even the truly normal. Gironella's awareness of the limitations in his fellow novelists showed him the things he had to avoid at all costs. But as a long series of negative warnings often smother positive action—the Puritanical approach to moral life is an example of this—so also, a sensitivity to the faulty aspects of the writer's craft sometimes hampers the productivity of more than competent results. Thus, *Where the Soil Was Shallow* is not so much a study of the central character, Miguel, as a human being, as it is a kind of experimental laboratory in which many of the problems confronting modern man are given ideal, that is, antiseptic conditions for analysis. Gironella places Miguel in desirable contact with the world by having him wrestle with the "God-emptiness" of modern life, but in the struggles, more often than not, we have the awkward gyrations of a puppet

rather than the human responses of a man. The type of modern man presented in the novel is vacuous, almost incapable of sustained human responsiveness, approaching one of Eliot's "hollow men" who end "not with a bang but a whimper." The effort to avoid lack of contact with the world has led to a chronic disregard of organic development in the character in favor of an episodic flight from one experience to another.

This is the reason why the change of title from the Spanish *Un Hombre* to the English *Where the Soil Was Shallow* is so apt, unless, perhaps, we consider the original *Un Hombre* as a type of supreme irony. At any rate, Mr. Kerrigan had ample justification for the change, as this quotation from the Fourth Chapter of St. Mark is found at the very beginning of the novel:

And others fell on rocky land, where the soil was shallow; these sprang up all at once, because they had not sunk deep in the ground: and when the sun rose they were parched; they had taken no root, and so they withered away.

This use of Scripture is an attempt to universalize the experiences of Miguel, for the immediate context leads us to believe that the story will be something of a spiritual odyssey.

Yet a difficulty stems from the fact that the development of Miguel's character is more peripheral than "soul-centered," as it should have been, if there was to be true engagement in spiritual conflicts. The theme of the work, as set forth in the quotation, undoubtedly demands this. However, there should be within the thematic structure some opposition set up, some intrinsically human and worthy element that would highlight the pathetic nature of Miguel's existence. We suspect that this is what Gironella intended when he records the final paragraphs of a letter which the Director of the Jesuit Seminary sent to Miguel's mother after the young man had abandoned his studies for the priesthood.

'Your son is a man destined to triumph splendidly or to lose himself completely.'

At face value this seems to be an accurate estimate of Miguel's character, and it is probably what Gironella aimed at in drawing the portrait. But the fact remains that the estimate is superficial; Miguel, as presented in the novel, does not seem destined to any real spiritual triumph as much as to a sort of magazine notoriety, and when he loses himself completely, the reader can hardly consider the loss important. The Director did not have such a keen perception of human character after all.

Miguel reacts to the world about him, to the ideas that govern its society, to the loves and hatreds which it engenders, but the reaction, to be quite paradoxical, is essentially passive. He has very little of himself with which to meet outside forces. Perhaps it is an exaggeration to say that he is as insignificant as one of Eliot's "hollow men," still he never reaches the point where he is a complete man, sufficiently delineated to hold a reader's interest over long periods. Gironella has gotten away from the "characterization of extremes," but he has not quite reached the territory of common humanity. Miguel travels the whole of Europe, and this is an indication of the essentially superficial aspect of his character; stability is a word wholly outside his vocabulary. He begins as the most fervent of Jesuit novices in his adult life, but his flame is hardly nourished by the wax of humanity, much less by the oil of sanctity. He sells rare books but never reads any of them; he is unable even to feed vicariously on the triumphs of others. The women with whom he falls in love, although the word "love" must be used advisedly with such a character, are really mirrors in which he can view his own exterior. He finally attains a certain pre-eminence as a circus impresario, but this fails also, despite the fact that it is the one occupation, essentially concerned with the external, the flamboyant, in which he might have attained stature and salvation. At the close of the novel we find Miguel taking up with disreputable border runners in the north of Spain. This is very close to ending "with a whimper."

Thus, the presentation of the type of superficial man was accurate enough, but such a person really lacks any sort of literary potentiality, and the lack is too strongly felt for the work to produce a lasting impact upon the reader. This, however, is only one side of the coin, for *Where the Soil Was Shallow* does give hints as to what Gironella will do in the future. The use of Scripture is one which will be important in the largest sense for *The Cypresses Believe in God*. Miguel's relations with his mother are the first faint stirrings of the deep spiritual bond which characterizes Carmen and Ignacio in the later work. The ability to embody facets of personality in quick flashes, in proper gestures, is seen in the smaller people who roam through *Where the Soil Was Shallow*: the enigmatic sailor of Cadaqués, the military men of Vienna "who ate candy," the performers in the circus. But most powerfully we begin to discern the superb talent for welding seemingly insignificant details of external activity with the spiritual substance of his themes. Thus, in *Where the Soil*

Was Shallow, Eva's hanging of the "small map of the world" and Serra's placing beside it "a gigantic map of the province of Gerona" gives an intimation of what might have been the real depths of Miguel's character; the flighty, external existence of the inveterate traveler who retains in the foundations of his personality the vitality of his Spanish forebears; the man who has a defined character, or, at least, a tractability which can assimilate outward experience, in contact with the far reaches of life itself. That the potential was not realized, however, does not militate against the symbolic power in the two maps hung side by side by his parents.

The maps, moreover, take on a larger significance in an examination of these two novels together, for while *Where the Soil Was Shallow* is without doubt a *small* map of the world, *The Cypresses Believe in God* is a *gigantic* map of the province of Gerona. In the later work the five limitations, which had become impressive warnings for Gironella, are no longer shackles for his creative imagination. The preliminary asceticism has accomplished its purpose, and he is free to explore the spiritual and social foundations of a whole nation during its most critical period in modern history—Spain caught in the vise of civil conflict.

The Cypresses Believe in God eventually will comprise a trilogy of heroic proportions. The part that has been published thus far deals with the years immediately preceding the Civil War in Spain and the first twelve days of that conflict. Despite the fact that we do not have the complete work, we are able to give a fairly accurate estimate of Gironella's skill; the published section of the book includes two volumes of almost 1,000 pages, and the sustained excellence throughout the course of these pages is an indication of the consummate artistry we can expect in the forthcoming volumes. The length of time which has passed since the first section was published, with no other books from Gironella during this period, clearly demonstrates that the author has no desire to become entangled in the vice of "over-production and multiple interests."

The plan of *The Cypresses Believe in God* is indeed gigantic. In order to establish unity in a novel which is nothing less than the portrait of a modern nation, the author has focused attention on Gerona, a small provincial capital in Catalonia. This city has sufficient contact with the rest of Spain through governmental agencies, organized political parties, ecclesiastical groups (it is an episcopal see), and the military barracks to allow for immediate repercussions, when crises develop in larger cities like Barcelona and Madrid. Yet it is small enough to be pictured with amazing intimacy. Within the

"little Spain" which is Gerona, lives the Alvear family—Matías, the father, originally from Madrid and a strong Republican; Carmen Elgazu, his wife, a Basque, whose living faith and charity make her the secure foundation on which the family rests; Ignacio, César and Pilar, the three children, each having some qualities from Matías and Carmen, but possessed of developing personalities of their own. It is impossible to categorize these people, for they are as complex and beautiful as a great writer could make them. Each of them is a profound example of Gironella's remarkable grasp of the Psalmist's words: ". . . what is man, that Thou are mindful of him. . . . Thou hast made him a little less than the Angels."

The many other characters who populate this novel are equally alive, and although a great number of them are symbols of the parties and ideas current in Spain at that time, it is impossible to say that they are like the simple "walking" virtues or vices of the medieval morality plays. They are human beings primarily and symbols only in the sense that they fully express in action the principles in which they believe. These people represent one of Gironella's greatest triumphs, insofar as he was able through them to concretize the many opposing "-isms" which afflicted Spain during the thirties, and which ultimately turned the nation into the battleground for the most violent and bloody civil war in recent history.

The supreme unifying force in *The Cypresses Believe in God*, however, is the young man Ignacio Alvear. Strongly established in the discipline of the Faith, from the example of his mother as well as from the formation he received in the family circle, he yet retains a benevolently inquiring mind, an inheritance from his father. He is the symbol of young Spain, alive to the traditions of centuries, yet understanding better than his parents the effects which the social cataclysm will have on his own generation. Too close to the fluctuating pattern of events for dispassionate criticism, he nevertheless retains a remarkable objectivity regarding the people, both small and great, who are shaping these events. Because of the smallness of Gerona, he is able to come in contact with all the elements which make the city a seething caldron of revolution. It would take many pages to explore Gironella's superb method of summing up a whole nation's joy and agony, charity and hatred, clarity of ideal and confusion of practice, in this one adolescent.

A slight idea of his method of universalizing the particular, however, may be gleaned from the way in which he uses the Scriptural quotation which prefaces the novel:

From whence are wars and contentions among you? Are they not hence,

from your concupiscences, which war in your members? (St. James *Epist.*, iv, 1).

This short passage indeed gives tone to the whole work, and it calls to mind the sentences which St. James wrote immediately preceding it:

. . . where there is envy and contentiousness, there is instability and every wicked deed. But the wisdom that is from above is first of all chaste, then peaceable, moderate, docile, in harmony with good things, full of mercy and good fruits, without judging, without dissimulation. The fruit of justice is sown in peace by those who make peace.

A close reading of *Cypresses Believe in God* shows conclusively that the whole work is really a modern commentary on these eternal truths.

Moreover, as may be gathered from this Scriptural excerpt, the development of Ignacio's character is not limited to a growth in understanding of the social forces working during his formative years. He has a true spiritual life marked by failings and progress. This is best seen in his inability to face his mother after having fallen into grave sins of impurity. No longer is he able to be open with her; dissimulation becomes a kind of necessity, not only because he knows she will be hurt should she discover the truth, but more because she is a living representation of the beauty of God's laws. When the truth is finally made plain, Ignacio takes a giant step into adult life. The full weight of personal responsibility suddenly becomes clear to him. The scene in which he asks his mother's forgiveness is surely one of the most moving in all modern literature. And his mother's reaction, her accompanying him to church and her waiting in prayer while he receives absolution calls to mind the sublime pages concerning St. Monica in the *Confessions*.

Ignacio, however, is not the only figure who commands the respect and attention of the reader, for his younger brother, César, is one of the most memorable literary creations to come along in years. If the former possesses the type of philosophical wonder which prompts investigation of reality through secondary causes, the latter is the mystic and saint who resolves all in the Causes, God Himself. Ignacio will find that the experience of day to day living eventually leads one to the recognition of the Divine guidance in human affairs; César has discovered this truth already in the Cross of Christ, in which he ultimately shares through martyrdom during the early days of the war. The closing pages of the novel, which treat of César's death in defense of the Blessed Sacrament, scale the heights of Catholic fiction. And César is no "edifying" youth, or hands-folded, eyes-to-heaven saint; his contact with the society about him is vital, and his effect on that society may be seen in the estimate made of him by

Mateo, the young leader of the Falange in Gerona: "That boy is authentic." He is one who has understood the Truth, and who realizes that to love It means to live It.

These two youths, their family, friends, teachers and enemies are all portrayed with magnificent objectivity. It is one of the marks of Gironella's genius that he does not play the partisan. The Communists, Socialists, Anarchists, Falangists, Carlists and Catholics are all viewed through the highly polished lens of veracity. The truth of human nature, both on the natural and supernatural levels, receives loving attention and is transmitted unclouded by petty prejudice. He is a realist beyond the pure delineation of fact and figures. His ability to use the facts and figures, to transform seemingly insignificant details and endow them with larger meanings is masterful. Examples of this are countless, but two of them remain vividly present to the imagination throughout a reading of the book, mainly for the reason that they epitomize the basic themes.

In the very first chapter the description of the Alvear home with its two balconies, one facing the town square, the other overhanging the waters of the Oñar River, becomes a symbol of the whole nation during the period. The Alvears are very careful to close the doors to the balconies, for they "knew that in a fistful of space they could create an intimate and impregnable world of their own." Spain herself, much like the Alvears, accepted voluntary isolation in order to protect the traditions she held most dear against the encroachments of a liberal and hostile world. Yet, as Pope Leo XIII graphically showed to the Catholic world of the last century, separation is not the answer; the Alvears, Spain herself, must take their rightful place in the modern pluralist society. The other incident which points to something larger than itself is the snowfall which covered Gerona on the night of December 28, 1934. Gironella states that the city "under the snow was like an immense Host," and the delight caused by the snow, for a time, called a truce in the ideological warfare which was raging during the preparation for elections. The use of the image of the Blessed Sacrament indicates that true peace can come to the city only when the people recognize that they are members of the Mystical Body of Christ, and that it is the King of Kings who must rule in their hearts before they can secure the firm foundations for civil government.

Such a treatment as the one presented in the preceding pages does no more than hint at the greatness of José María Gironella. We have attempted to show that his profound understanding of human nature is the central factor which saves him from the limitations of his fellow Spanish novelists—and be it admitted, from the defects of many other

writers outside of Spain. The question of "stylism" has not been treated, because such a treatment would demand a competence in the Spanish language which we do not possess. However, there are indications of greater simplicity and power of imagery in *The Cypresses Believe in God* over the sometimes "poetical" elements in *Where the Soil Was Shallow*; whether or not this is also a problem of translation would have to be thoroughly examined. But beyond these brief reflections, the truth remains evident that *The Cypresses Believe in God* is one of the great Catholic novels of our generation, and should the parts of the book yet to be published retain the same degree of excellence as that which we have now, José María Gironella will rank, along with Sigrid Undset, as one of the undisputed masters of Catholic fiction in the twentieth century.



In our own lifetime we have learnt to know the smell of rotting corpses on battlefields and in bombed towns; we know of the stinking sores and boils of prisoners from concentration camps, where dead and dying were made to lie on beds as wretched as the one Catherine had chosen for herself. We have poured out oceans of blood and tears, both of the guilty and the guiltless, while we hoped against hope that this blood and these tears could help to save a world reeling under the weight of its miseries. And how little have we achieved of the great things we dreamed! Yet we ascribe it to the confused ideas of the time she lived in and her own dark vision of Christianity when Catherine intoxicated herself with the blood of Christ—that blood which would put an end to human bloodshed, if only we could agree to receive it as the redemption from our blood-thirsty passions, our insatiable lust for imagined gain for ourselves projected into other nations or classes.

From *Catherine of Siena* by Sigrid Undset
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