

Reality Or Wild Strawberries?

Paul Philibert, O.P.

Is Ingmar Bergman a moralist? Certainly his films give eloquent commentary on the present state of man. Bergman, however, offers no salvation. Paul Philibert brings us from Bergman, through Theology, to God.

The opening scene in the movie, "Wild Strawberries," presents a penetrating indictment of contemporary man. The picture opens showing an aged man on a village street. The shops are closed, the doors are locked and the windows are boarded over. It is the neatest characterization of a lonesome soul ever shown on the movie screen. Moved by an eerie sense of timelessness, the old man reaches into his pocket for his watch, only to discover—to his horror—that there are no longer any hands on the face of his watch: his clock is an empty dial with meaningless numbers. At this point, he sees a figure in a trim businessman's suit step out from a doorway. Attracted to the only creature in this bleak surrounding with which he can in any way communicate, he runs toward him to ask the time. But when he confronts the trim suit and the neat figure, it is only to discover a faceless monster: the figure turns toward him, falls on its back, cracks open at the head, and empties out its watery contents: a stream of waste rushing into the sewer. At this point, a team of wild black horses careens around the corner dragging a caisson on which a coffin is loosely fixed. As this frenzied combination passes by the old man, the coffin slips off the caisson and lands with a crash in the middle of the street. The old man fearfully creeps toward the coffin, afraid of what he might find there. As he puts his hand on the edge of the box, ready to examine its contents, a hand from within the coffin grabs his wrist and pulls at him; the lid falls off, and within the box he sees—himself: his own face, his own body, there mocking at him.

This is a horrifying story. But, in a certain sense, it is a true one. It is true insofar as it describes the condition of a faceless generation. The scene is symbolic of a three-fold emptiness: first, a *rootlessness*, as seen in the old man's inability to relate to anything familiar: windows and doors are closed to him; his own past and present and

future are cut off from him in the loss of the hands on his watch—symbols of the realness of time and the realness of experience. The second emptiness of the faceless generation is *powerlessness*, as seen in the fragility of the man-like figure in which he hoped to find companionship, and found instead a fleshly balloon unable to stand for long in the hostility of an empty world. The third emptiness is *purposelessness*, seen in the mockery of the man's own self in the coffin. This morbid symbol is a declaration that after the coffin there is nothing: not only in the private sense of *nothing more*, but in the absolute sense of *nothingness*. So the dead self reaches out to the living self; it hopes to cling to what remains of life—as if to say: there is no more after what you have here and now After the coffin, there is nothing.

Ingmar Bergman has done us a service in this film by portraying the condition of a faceless generation, by showing in this dramatic manner the extent to which the insanity of man has gone in the contemporary world. We have complained for decades that man was becoming more and more powerless, more and more psychologically sick; finally, we have also acknowledged his growing lack of purpose. His lack of conviction for meaningful living is seen in the glut of pleasure-seeking, constantly hawked on T.V., in newspapers, everywhere. But it takes the genius of a Bergman to put all this into a dramatic framework, and show us, in the concrete visualization of film art, what the integral emptiness of the faceless generation has produced.

The richness of life betrays the insanity of contemporary man's estrangement from his roots, from his strength as a man, and from his purpose as a creature destined for life. Yet, against this promise of life we see time and again the restatement of the faceless generation's despair—as in these words of Robert de Montherlant, the French existentialist:

We are moving toward nothingness, precisely because we are moving toward everything, and everything is attained at the moment in which all our senses are ready to set out. Days are fruits, and our role is to eat them and to taste them moderately or voraciously according to our own nature, to profit by all that they contain, to make of them our spiritual flesh and our soul, to live: and to live is nothing else than that! (*Aux fontaines du desir.*)

The Christian cannot wish with Montherlant that the flesh be our fountain of happiness. For it leads to defeat: suffering is there, and

especially death is there; man desires in vain a kind of sensible fairy-land where everything corresponds to his wishes. Man dreams in vain of a bodily paradise where he can escape the servitude of reality. And it is this very dream which defaces him, which makes him rootless, powerless, and purposeless. By living entirely for the excesses of material delights, man becomes faceless: for it is no longer man who determines his destiny, rather it is man who is forced into the mold of some other, some less than human destiny.

We are confronted with the modern world's testimony to absurdity. We must look elsewhere if we are to find life's meaning. It has made man rootless, weak, and purposeless. If we are to find man's roots, if we are to understand man's destiny in the face of denial—then we must find out where man came from and where he is going. This is the work of theology. Only an understanding of what God is and what man is can bring us up from the wild strawberries of absurdity to solid, God-centered reality.

First, the faceless generation finds itself *rootless*. Man has no beginning; man is, in the conception of Jean-Paul Sartre, "his own maker scraping together out of his fund of behavior and imagination what he desires to make of himself." The faceless contemporary is a self-made man in the actual testimony of his experience. He looks within himself; he refuses to raise his eyes beyond his own self-scrutiny; and he finds despair in having to be his own maker—and disappointment in finding he has botched the job.

But everything depends upon where we search for an answer. If we look to theology, then we *can* sink roots, we *can* plunge ourselves into the vital stream of life. We can, in the act which staggers the belief of the faceless generation, communicate with God. And because we receive the continuing message of God's word to us, because we perceive the continuing aliveness of God's working in our lives, we can sink roots and live.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth . . . and last of all God created man and placed him in the garden which he had made for man upon the earth." Here are our roots: here is our redemption from the insufferable fate of having to be our own creator. But what is more, God has spoken of Himself: "*I am the one Who am,*" He said, communicating to us some glimmer of understanding of that well-spring of truth which never runs dry. He is the one who is: what then are we? If He is *all that is*, then we are *in*

Him, *through* Him, *by* Him. Our roots are not mere price tags indicating that we came forth from the divine productivity; our roots are not mere echoes of the divine speaking, calling us forth into being: our roots are now and forever sunk deep into the totality of activity, the completeness of being and reality which is God. We are not rootless, we are not faceless: our roots, our dependence, our reliance as sons reach into that abundance which is God's and mark us, sustain us as partakers of His life.

Theology saves us from rootlessness of a faceless generation; but much more, it opens up a garden of belief, it focuses light upon that vital dependence which marks us as children of the One Who is living, and promises us an excursion into His secrets of life.

Second, the faceless generation finds itself *powerless*. It is alone in a hostile world. Alone and weak. It is alone because it has no basis of communication between man and man, no language in which to call another "Brother." But again, everything depends upon where we search for an answer. Theology places before us the light of divine communication. God reveals Himself as Father of all men, who therefore find themselves linked by the love-bonds of a real brotherhood.

The measure of the faceless generation is the modern enigma of a creature made for hope who can only despair, compared with scripture's mystery of the son made for a royal inheritance who can only live in hope. On the one hand, man despairs because he is his own maker and he has no way to provide a destiny for himself. On the other hand, man lives in hope because he is not self-made, because he is confident—confident that he is neither the product of his own frustration nor the orphan of an indifferent Maker: "I will not leave you orphans," Our Lord promised. Rather man basks in the hope of the inheritance of a son, a son of a divine Father who rejoices in providing for the needs of his children. "My pleasure is to dwell with the sons of men," Our Lord assured us.

We are somehow realizing the legendary dream of the ancient Greek hero Theseus, the killer of the Minotaur—Theseus, who intuited that he was a son of a divine father, a son of Poseidon, the horse-god. For that reason he had confidence in the strength of his horse-god father, and that confidence was the power in which he performed his glorious exploits.

The untrammelled imagination of the Greek poets could invent such a tale, sure to touch the yearnings of their fellow men. But it took the creative love of a divine Father to make this story real.

The faceless generation attempts to refuse the adoption of God's paternity, in fear that if they are not fathers to themselves they will not be strong. But in refusing to be sons they refuse to receive strength, and so they leave themselves powerless, like a plant that refuses to take nutrition from the soil, like a child who refuses to take milk from his mother's breast.

Thrown up against this modern despair, theology opens up the intuition of our adopted sonship, proposes its richness, its wonder, its essential mercy. Under such an understanding of reality, St. Paul could affirm: "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" This is the power of the sons of God. Theology concentrates its light on the mystery of God's creative love which never abandons the creatures it brings forth into the air of reality. This is the mystery of God communicating the strength of His own divine will-power—that consummate, unremitting activity of love—and by that communication bringing forth, sustaining, augmenting, and predestining the children of that love for an eternal share of His divine vitality.

It is here, precisely, that theology opposes the third and final emptiness of the modern faceless generation: the *purposelessness* of contemporary man. The existentialist who would take upon himself the awesome task of being his own maker, finds that however well he may feel he has done his job, he is unable to complete it. It is here that the world of the self-made man falls into absurdity. If man makes himself, what does he make himself for? Sartre, again, provides us with the heart of the matter in his drama, "No Exit," in which he portrays hell as a place where persons are thrown together, unable to escape from their common togetherness, and unable to understand what any of them have to do. Hell for him is an eternity of repeating the unnerving question: "What am I for?"

St. Paul, the Christian strengthened in the power of adopted sonship, could see the answer. For him, "Christ is the first-born of many brethren . . . we are sons, because we are all reborn in the one, same Spirit of adoption, wherein we cry to our Adopter, "Abba, Father." "And if we are sons with Christ, we are also co-heirs with Christ." Heirs of his sonship: his a natural sonship, ours adoptive.

But the inheritance of both is eternal life. So the completion, the purpose, the destiny of our reality is not only affirmed by theology, it is also projected across the entire gamut of human experience as a final testimony to the meaningfulness of life.

Laconically, St. John explains: "And this is eternal life: to know the one true God, and him he has sent, Jesus Christ." It is so simply put that it almost tempts us to think that the inspired writer framed these words in a gasp of desperation; unable to express the richness, the vibrancy, the dynamism and satisfaction of that activity which is eternal life, he gave up. Gave up, merely to hint at the mystery and leave to the living words of God's-speaking-to-man the task of filling us with the hope, the promise, which these words imply.

Theology can be the savior of reality for our age. We have seen that, against the contemporary thinking about man, theology attests to man's roots, man's power and strength, and man's purpose, as it looks to God as maker and destiny of his rational creature. Existentialism, as a philosophy, may be soon on the wane. But the doctrines of existentialism are very much with us: the secularist, scientific, materialistic attitudes of our culture build upon the thesis that man is his own maker, that man enjoys *now* the divine attributes of omniscience and omnipotence. Theology opposes such a judgement, because theology can anticipate the verdicts of the psychiatrists who deal with our sick modern divinities, and see in the emptiness of the faceless generation its own ultimate frustration. God is the center of theology as the author of reality. He is the maker of all reality, but he is also—because of the infinite richness of his own goodness—the destiny of all his creatures. No goodness outside his own has meaning, because no goodness outside his own exists except as it is a shadow and a share of his own infinite richness.

The unrest of the human heart, to which contemporary man gives agonizing testimony, need not be seen as a talisman of an all-pervading absurdity. St. Augustine experienced the same evidence of a world filled with uncertainty and suffering as Sartre and Camus. But, unlike them, Augustine judged his unrest by premises revealed by his Adoptive Father. This unrest, seen in a theological perspective, was the ultimate mercy of a Creator drawing all things back to himself. The immortal words of Augustine never had more impact than they have today in our contemporary world: "Our hearts were made for thee, O Lord; and they shall not rest until they rest in thee."