

disintegrate into its component molecules.’ The form is therefore more than a simple pattern. It is what Nichols calls ‘a holistic cause’, something not just rearranging elements that could perfectly well exist in some other structure, but giving them the possibility of being in any sort of structure at all – the possibility of being independently existing things. ‘However,’ he goes on, ‘there is little support for this in contemporary science, so I do not insist on it’. Instead he says that it is enough, like Polkinghorne, to call the soul the ‘total informational pattern of the individual, which develops throughout life’. But does this ‘middle way’ between simple pattern and holistic cause make sense? And what exactly is the ‘contemporary science’ that has sent Nichols from the arms of Aquinas to those of Polkinghorne? Nichols’s powers of explanation deserve not to be sidetracked in this way. On the whole they are too good for that.

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**THE PEN AND THE CROSS : CATHOLICISM AND ENGLISH LITERATURE 1850–2000 by Richard Griffiths, *Continuum*, London, 2010, pp. 260, £19.99,**

*The Pen and the Cross* describes the ways in which Catholic writers of the last century and a half produced a distinctively Catholic literature. Richard Griffiths quotes Rowan Williams’s definition of such literature as writing that ‘could not be understood by a reader who had no knowledge at all of Catholicism and the particular obligations it entailed for its adherents’. This is a useful definition and for most of the book Griffiths is faithful to it. He writes with the authority of a former professor of French at King’s College London and one who has diligently read his way through a veritable library of books, many of which must have afforded very little critical gratification. Professor Griffiths was encouraged to embark on this study by admirers of his much earlier work on the French Catholic revival of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, *The Reactionary Revolution*. He records of that enterprise that it caused some young French students to refer to him as ‘the man who had read more appalling French novels than anyone known’, and during the earlier part of this book we are certainly relieved to think that in undertaking his laborious research, Richard Griffiths has saved us the trouble of reading some very dull English novels indeed.

The early chapter on Catholicism and British Society in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century is very valuable. Griffiths compares the English and French situations and describes the social and legal status of Catholics at this time and the (rather ludicrous) anti-Catholic literature put out by novelists such as Charles Kingsley (and Wilkie Collins, although Griffiths does not mention him). He identifies recurrent themes of nineteenth-century Catholic novels, such as renunciation and conversion and the importance of the priestly role. I found the section on the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Catholic literary scene particularly interesting and useful; Griffiths traces the development of the early Catholic novel from its primarily sentimental and didactic manifestations to the more complicated productions of the new century. He gives a thorough account of why the novels of the time were so preoccupied with social class and of the general tendency of European Catholicism to favour political movements which later became identified with fascism. Many modern writers of course assume that Catholicism is naturally synonymous with a taste for despotic political systems, and the subject of Catholic politics re-emerges later in the book.

Although Griffiths includes poetry in his account of English Catholic literature, one suspects that he is more comfortable with the novel. His chapter on the ‘Solitary Genius’, Gerard Manley Hopkins, is unexceptionable but he has nothing new to say about the poetry. Hopkins is also an awkward subject in that he cannot

be said either to have followed a tradition or to have initiated one. Professor Griffiths is happier with the poetry of David Jones, his deep admiration for which inspires him into unusual energy of expression, but in general his critical method is simply to describe the poets he likes, and although this is often interesting, it does not strike the reader as a particularly useful analytical exercise. It is at the end of the chapter 'The Generation of the Nineties' that one begins to understand the difficulty of the task Griffiths has set himself- a difficulty that is actually unnecessary. The chapter concludes, as all the chapters do, with a summary of its main argument, and in this summary Griffiths writes of 'specifically Catholic imagery' and how its use often produces banal poetry. Nobody could possibly deny this, and 'specifically Catholic' artistic productions since then have included, and still include, much that is truly dreadful. But what is this specifically Catholic imagery? It would seem that Griffiths is referring to poems about liturgy or about sacraments, but in fact the problem is one not of imagery but of vocabulary, of grandiose terminology, unoriginal ideas and over-heated emotion. Most of these writers were scuppered not because they were good Catholics but because they were bad poets. A proper poet like Hopkins might have been able to write a decent verse about a thurible, but he would be more likely to write about a bluebell because he could see the beauty of God in it. This strikes me as a thoroughly Catholic way of looking at things: if one considers the poetry of Seamus Heaney or George Mackay Brown one will find no religiosity but only a deep interest in the reality of which God is the source. One does not go looking for sacraments in the work of Chaucer.

Professor Griffiths, an Anglican, writes with great sympathy for his Catholic subjects, in some cases with more sympathy than they deserve, but he gives the impression that being a Catholic may be much the same thing as wearing a particular kind of hat, albeit a sincerely cherished one. This is perhaps why his analyses of novels and poems tend to concentrate on the paraphraseable content that deals with recognisably Catholic themes, whereas the 'Catholic-ness' of them usually subsists in something more difficult to define. For this reason, Griffiths is weaker on the novels of the later 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He writes interestingly on Waugh and Greene, especially on their overtly Catholic works. However, one might be more cautious in classifying David Lodge's writing as specifically Catholic: the terminology and general attitudes he describes are certainly immediately familiar to a modern Catholic reader, but Lodge does not on the whole engage with what one might call the workface of belief, at least not in the way that passages of *Brideshead* or *The Power and the Glory* do. Lodge is brilliant at depicting the sociological Catholicism particular to the time immediately following Vatican II and the slight change of *mores* that went with the Council, but there is nothing in his work that matches that sense of Catholicism as an absolute, unwelcome, even distressing, *requirement* that is so characteristic of Greene and Waugh and of the kind of Catholicism with which many of us grew up. One oddity should be mentioned. At the end of his chapter on Graham Greene, who had remarked on Pope John XXIII's difference from his predecessor, we find this comment: 'other Catholic writers [were] sharing that same sense of a new dawn at that time. How grievously they were to be disappointed!'. In the middle of Griffiths's unruffled, almost dispassionate, account, this strikes the reader as an almost embarrassing lapse of decorum. Whether or not one agrees with the sentiment, one slightly resents being thus propelled by force into the arena of non-literary opinion.

It is noticeable here that while Griffiths's information is entirely trustworthy, his critical pronouncements are less so. For instance he declares that David Lodge's *Deaf Sentence* is 'among the best he has written', a judgement with which few readers would agree, entertaining though that novel often is. His treatment of Muriel Spark, as a writer whose early work 'unobtrusively managed to convey a series of Catholic messages' is revealing. Griffiths deplores what he sees as

a decline in the quality of her novels which have become lurid and garish, he says, but whether this denotes a lessening of Catholicity or a statement about the 'conservative cultural base' of the traditional Catholic novel, we cannot tell. After all, it is observably possible to be lurid and garish and still be very Catholic indeed. With Muriel Spark, as with Alice Thomas Ellis, Catholicism is not so much a matter of the bizarre way people behave as of their being a part of a particular story. The remark about conservatism being a kind of natural base reminds us of Griffiths's earlier account of the right-wing tendencies of earlier literary Catholicism and it raises important questions about writing, about politics, even about the omniscient narrator (invoked in a brief but fascinating aside about David Lodge's comment on Spark). These are questions which one would like to pursue, indeed which ought to be pursued. This book, however, has a more modest though no less difficult brief to follow, which it does very well. One of its great virtues is its unassuming and unpretentious style; another is Griffiths's frequent and grateful reference to other critics, notably Bernard Bergonzi and Thomas Woodman, and this has the welcome effect of making the reader want to explore further into this strangely complicated territory.

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