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"The Pen and the Cross: Catholicism and English Literature, 1850-2000", Richard Griffith, London ; New York 2010 : [recenzja]

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[Rev.:] Richard Griffith, *The Pen and the Cross : Catholicism and English Literature, 1850-2000*, London ; New York : Continuum, 2010. xii, 260 p.

It is beyond any doubt that Richard Griffiths' *The Pen and the Cross* is an interestingly written and a rather fascinating book, which certainly is a valuable addition to the study of Catholic writing. It provides a very basic insight into the development of Catholicism and Catholic literature in England between 1850 and 2000, which includes many notable, yet still forgotten novelists and poets. An attempt to discuss such a vast number of writers was very ambitious and certainly involved artistic as well as critical skill, and yet Mr. Griffiths manages to provide the reader with a quite clear and comprehensible description of Catholic writing. The main focus of the study seems to be the influence of Roman Catholicism on the writers (recusants, converts and even, in some cases, non-believers) and their works. It attempts to examine the importance of religious experience in shaping the intellectual vision conveyed in texts of most notable English writers including, among others, Hopkins, Greene, Waugh, Sparks or Lodge. Mr. Griffiths acknowledges the fact that quite frequently Catholic committed literature is on the verge of propaganda, but when it is done well, as in case of the aforementioned authors, it may provide an extremely profound outlook not only on religion but also modern culture, human behavior and original literary themes and techniques. He also raises the question whether the understanding of Catholic novels and poems is at all possible without specific knowledge connected with religion.

There are, however, elements of Mr. Griffiths' work that need some explanation. One of them is the title. More often than not authors of various critical works, including those which deal mainly or exclusively with Catholic writers, try to convey in the title as much as they can about the subject of their inquiry or the attitude taken by them. The results of this are, among many others, *Some Catholic Writers* by Ralph McInerny, *Literary Giants*, *Literary Catholics* by Joseph Pearce, *The Catholic Revival in English Literature* by Ian Ker, or *Catholic Literature: An Introduction* by Margaret Sum-

mitt. It seems, however, that Mr. Griffiths decided to go against this tendency. He chose not to provide (at least not in a straightforward way) any specific information on the scope of literature that he is interested in nor in the attitude taken by him in his investigation. Mr. Griffiths himself must have considered his title as not very informative, as he supplemented it. Only through the second part of the title is the reader informed that the work is concerned with Catholicism and English literature in the period 1850-2000. Still, it does not say much about the content. *Catholicism in English Literature* would be more suggestive, not mentioning other obvious options such as *English Catholic Literature*, *Catholic Literature in England* or, what seems also applicable, *English Catholic Writers*. All these suggestions address the issue straightforwardly and provide a sound frame of reference. Meanwhile, Mr. Griffiths refuses to include a term crucial to his work, and one that he otherwise uses quite frequently and discusses openly in the first section as the basis for further investigation; that is, "Catholic literature".

It is understandable that he avoids the term "Catholic writers" as some of the authors renounce it and consider it inappropriate. It is also understandable that he does not want to limit his investigation to English writings alone, as a substantial part of his comments involve French literature and he successfully presents the two as closely related and, at times, even inseparable. It is confusing, however, that he avoids calling his subject what it actually is, considering that his arguments supporting the validity of the term "Catholic literature" are very convincing. One reason for this evasion may be, of course, the marketing. "The Pen and the Cross" surely stands out among many other titles of works devoted to similar issues and may be considered appealing to the reading public. It is also possible that Mr. Griffiths does not want to impose anything on his readers but only suggests certain tendencies, leaving much space for speculation on the subject of the relationship between Catholicism and English literature in the period given. Also, he might have considered this title the only possible way of encapsulating all the social, historical and cultural elements which influenced what can be (and by Griffiths is) called the English Catholic literature.

There is one interesting implication of the combination of "the Pen" with "the Cross" which maybe did not immediately occur to some of Mr. Griffiths' readers. "The Pen" as a symbol of poetry and prose (specifically novels of a different kind) is combined with "the Cross" which indicates a specific religious commitment. However, bearing in mind Griffiths' comments on the turbulent history of Catholicism in England, cultural and social difficulties that Catholic believers, and above all Catholic writers must have overcome, and finally the "pitfalls" of writing Catholic literature without falling into sentimentality, it becomes apparent that producing Catholic works involved many sacrifices and may indeed be seen in terms of bearing

ones' Cross. Thus, the title can be a general statement as to the situation of English Catholic literature throughout the ages.

What is also very unusual about Mr. Griffiths work is the fact that his presentation of the Catholic writers seems to be strongly influenced by his personal views and likings which are clearly visible through the tone of his descriptions. Even though he recognizes the importance and influence of all the writers he examines, it is apparent that he is fonder of some of them over others. He directs his attention especially to three outstanding figures: Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh and David Jones. His admiration for them is convincingly argued and certainly well-deserved. However, while Greene is described as "a pivotal figure in the history of the Catholic novel in Britain" and Jones is treated as a highly original and forward-looking poet, Waugh is presented primarily as a re-constructor of the already existing patterns, "entrenched in a last ditch defense of traditional values" and his works, in spite of their great value, are seen as "a dead-end". The last statement, although preceded by words of praise, seems unjust. Mr. Griffiths refers primarily and quite understandably to *Brideshead Revisited* as Waugh's best work. He indicates a number of interesting ways in which traditional Catholic themes are arranged and constitute a substantial part of fictional reality. However, he seems not to notice a whole range of new, original and often surprising elements which, if carefully analyzed, may indicate new paths for the development of Catholic literature.

First of all, the extensive use of satire, characteristic of Waugh's early works, in *Brideshead Revisited* gains new meaning. It seems that for the first time the satire is aimed at the secular, modern way of life and religious elements alike. The reader smiles at political discussions of Rex Mottram and his friends, the adventures of homosexual Anthony Blanche as well as at Cordelia's novenas for pigs and her collection of little black Cordelias somewhere in Africa. Bursting with laughter may occur especially at the account of Cordelia making fun of Rex about the rules of Catholic faith which supposedly include sleeping with one's feet pointing east, sending people to hell for just a pound or keeping sacred monkeys in Vatican. All this is presented to stress how different and confusing Catholic faith is for the non-believers, and yet Waugh seems to be the first to exaggerate and distort religious truths for this purpose.

He is also the first to create Catholic characters who are simply unlikeable. It seems a part of a convention to present Catholic way of life as full of difficulties and unattractive to the modern man, as it is with the Riversdales in Mrs. Wilfrid Ward's *One Poor Scruple*. However, in *Brideshead Revisited* the reader feels no sympathy for Bridey or Lady Marchmain, the two most pious members of the family, not so much due to their sacrifice or ascetic life but their personality traits and their attitude towards other people.

The potential saints are, quite surprisingly, short-sighted and egoistic. This is a strange novelty, and yet Waugh has a purpose in it. The two characters, especially when compared to other members of the Flyte family, make the reader understand that piety, devotion and knowledge of religious truths are nothing when compared to the sincere desire to act according to God's will, however mysterious it may be. Also, Waugh reveals here his fascination with the act of conversion which he clearly values very highly. This, however, the readers may find in earlier works by G.K.Chesterton, Charles Péguy or François Mauriac.

More thorough investigation would reveal a number of other innovative elements involving the creation of characters and spaces within which they function. This review, however, is not concerned with Waugh exclusively. The purpose, therefore, is just to signal that some important aspects of Waugh's novels, *Brideshead Revisited* in particular, may not have been recognized by Mr. Griffiths. Otherwise, however, his remarks are very interesting and insightful. In his defense it should be admitted that the creative potential of Waugh's works has not yet been fully explored by other writers.

However engaging *The Pen and the Cross* is, it should be treated most of all as a good starting point for more careful research, since for some readers the overall character of the work may not present a sufficient examination of the topic. One simply cannot pass over in silence the very peculiar omission of such highly important figures as J.R.R. Tolkien, Rumer Godden, Geoffrey Hill and some others. Their absence at least demands an explanation as it does not allow for a fully comprehensive picture of the topic. Nevertheless, *The Pen and the Cross*, due to its brevity, may actually succeed in encouraging some of the readers to conduct their own examination of presented novels, poems and their creators.

Key words:

English literature, religion, the Roman Catholic Church, christianity, catholicism, literature, Christian literature,

Bibliography:

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