

- BOOK REVIEW -

GOD AND MAMMON

by Francois Mauriac

(Reviewed by G. Gillespie, M.A.)

Ostensibly a discussion of how far a Catholic writer need make himself responsible for the spiritual life of his readers, this little book, the first of a new series of the "Essays in Order," turns out to be a discursive essay, penetrating and highly French, on letters and the Catholic life in general.

France, proverbially the land of measure and balance, seems also to foster in her sons an intense hatred of compromise, a haunting fear that some opportunity for going the whole hog has been overlooked. It is this aspect of the French character that explains so much of the history of the Church in France. There is a special ardor, a special generosity, in the great French Catholic lives, just as there is a special profundity, a wonderful penetration in what great French thinkers have said about their Faith. French enemies of the Church, similarly, have been moved by a special hate, a special determination to discredit and destroy.

The spirit of this passionate French Catholicism is everywhere in the present book. There are fascinating pages on the Cross, the Eucharist, the presence of God in the soul. There is an eloquent interpretation from the Catholic point of view of the career of the French poet, Arthur Rimbaud. About one third of the book is occupied with its specific problems—the rest is what the celebrated Catholic novelist has to say about his religion.

This problem is, how can the Catholic, knowing that even the most restrained and tactful treatment of aspects of life that no sincere novel can disregard, can be scandalous or unsettling for certain readers, how can the Catholic, knowing this, continue to write novels?

Let us summarize Mauriac's statement of this problem, before passing on to the solution he finally arrived at.

First of all, it is universally admitted that describing, theorizing about or even mentioning certain things can be

troubling or disturbing to the reader, and this is quite apart from the case of pornography, this being taken as condemned *a priori*. Yet no vital and sincere picture of life can avoid at least mention of these very things.

Mauriac has, again, no illusions about the power of any book over its readers; he insists that even the most innocent-seeming book can and does become a source of temptation to any abnormal few, that reading is truly a "collaboration between the reader and the writer," with unforeseeable results in the mind of the reader.

There are some fascinating pages on the things for which modern readers look to the novelist. Entirely without philosophical culture, and having no time for the immense labour of acquiring it, they long for a writer who will solve their personal problems, a writer who will teach them how to live. And this further increases the responsibilities of the writer.

But there is more than this. Suppose the writer does avoid both unsettling suggestions and false philosophy, which even with the best will in the world he may not succeed in doing. There is a third way in which his work can be harmful. Mauriac quotes Bossuet: "Do you not feel that there are things of no very specific effect, which without seeming harmful at first, put evil tendencies into people's minds? Everything that provides food for the passions is of this dim origin If anyone could discern in a man a certain depth of sensual joy, and a certain restless, vague disposition for indulging the pleasures of the senses—tending nowhere and yet tending everywhere—he would know the secret source of the greatest sins."

There is thus, says Mauriac, "absolutely no need to write about obscenity to spread fire in the world," for it is this very element in human nature, mentioned by Bossuet, that the novelist instinctively and without knowing it depends on to make his work appealing to the reader. "Can we honestly deny that it is nearly always this 'secret source of the greatest sins' which is probed by the writer? All his art is concentrated on reaching the secret source of the greatest sins, and the more genius he has the more surely will he reach his end.'"

This then is what the sincere Catholic, who also happens to write novels, is brought to, that his books, which seem to force their way from the depths of his

nature, are from the moral point of view merely sources of evil and misery.

And this compulsion Mauriac insists, is very real indeed. The novelist apparently must write, and the shaping and determination of the result is not in his own hands: "the necessity which obliges a genuine man of letters to write must not be forgotten. He cannot not write Our judges come down on us as though our work was entirely dependent on our free will, as if we made a deliberate decision to write a good or a bad book, tell an edifying story or a scandalous one. They do not seem to have the remotest idea of the mysterious, unforeseeable and inevitable element in all creative writing. The urge to write in a man of letters ends up by becoming a monster-like necessity which cannot be frustrated.

Nor can the sincere novelist, striving to apprehend "living men in their completeness, in their heights and in their depths—the human creature as he really is," avoid dealing with matters it is probably unsafe to lay before certain readers. Impelled by the whole force of his nature to report on life itself, the born novelist must regard any limitation of his *material* (it is not a question here of attitude or methods of presentation) for reasons of modesty or edification as devitalizing and even stultifying. He claims the Sophoclean privilege of "seeing life steadily and seeing it whole."

The problem resolves itself therefore into a conflict within the breast of the novelist between two loyalties. There is the loyalty of the Christian to the supernatural order, which insists he do nothing to endanger other souls; and there is the loyalty of the artist, demanding that he be true to his own gifts and give expression to his own intensely personal vision of life.

After all the trouble taken in throwing the problem in all its difficulty into sharpest relief, the solution, when it comes, has at first the air of being oversimplified and inconclusive. Seizing on a text of Maritain: "The Blood of the redemption, which can turn a man into a friend of God, can also, if it touches them, exercise Art and the Novel," Mauriac pictures himself as laying his difficulties before "the humblest priest," who tells him: "Be pure, become pure, and your work too will have a reflection in Heaven. Begin by purifying the source, and those who

drink the water cannot be sick." He adds, "I give the last word to the priest."

If the work which makes its way almost by violence from the inmost nature of its creator is to be really good, that inmost nature must be subdued to Grace, Mauriac concludes.

The present review gives merely a bald summary of the central argument of this book. Its 104 pages are packed with reflection and comment that cannot but be of real interest to all interested in letters or in the Catholic life. A Catholic novelist's discussion of his profession, it should help us for example to a sympathetic understanding of another Catholic who is writing novels, the Canadian, Morley Callaghan.

VOLTAIRE

by Alfred Noyes

(Reviewed by A. Campbell)

Those who were charmed by Alfred Noyes' "Unknown God" may be surprised—and some, perhaps, shocked—to see him devoting 635 pages of his rich prose to the defence of Voltaire, whom legend represents as the foremost attacker of that very same God. But there is no inconsistency here; it does not mean that he has changed his views. It simply means that in this man, whom the Atheists and Deists joyfully claim as their own, and Christians condemn as a modern Lucifer, he has discovered a new, a different Voltaire.

After carefully studying the entire works of that famous Frenchman, Mr. Noyes has come to the conclusion that Voltaire's true nature was missed by his biographers. "It is true," he says "that on one side, he was a destroyer. His thoughts, his wit his ironic smile were among the events that destroyed a wicked world." There were, he admits, contradictions in his character; at times he did seem to be ridiculing belief in God, but "when the personality is seen from its depths—the good, I believe, will remain and the 'insult to heaven' vanishes."

This is his thesis—for such it is—which he puts before us in a mild, learned exposition. Step by step he clears away the obscuring mass of misinterpretations, calumnies, and lies, and brings into the light a sincere,

kind-hearted Voltaire who never doubted the existence of an all-loving, all-merciful God.

He was not, it is true, ready to accept all the doctrines of Christianity; but he came nearer the Christian ideal than many a high Church officer who led a life of sin. That devastating mockery was directed not against true religion—which Voltaire defended—but against hypocrisy and superstition. "You know well," says Voltaire, "that I speak only of superstition. As for religion I love and respect it as you do."

The book is richly inlaid with literary criticism. An epic poet himself, the writer subjects Voltaire's works to a careful analysis. He compares the "Luminary of France" now with Chaucer, now with Erasmus. Racine, Corneille, Locke and Pope come slowly across the stage, linger for a while and disappear.

Portions of the smooth, level-tenored narrative are unconsciously dramatic. The last two or three chapters give you alternate feelings of suspense, hope, fear, and sympathy. Voltaire, great and famous, returns from exile to receive a tumultuous welcome in Paris. But illness seizes him, death is near. Beset by powerful enemies and haunted by the fear of being "thrown into the sewers," he welcomes the virtuous Abbe Gaultier. There follow his Confession, his refusal of the Sacrament—and death. Late that night figures steal from the dead man's house into a waiting coach drawn by four black horses. A clatter of hoofs, and Voltaire's body is borne away to a secret burial place, safe from his enemies.

This is the picture he gives us of Voltaire. A trifle too brightly colored perhaps. In his zeal to do justice to his hero, Mr. Noyes, I think, has gone too far in the other direction. Instead of condemning an obvious fault, a hypocritical act, or a rather doubtful comedy, he too often explains them away. He was not, he says, as bad as Erasmus; or he was merely indulging in an impish prank. It is not convincing—Voltaire wrote that coarse lampoon on Joan of Arc "to fill in his leisure time"—and published it.

This book brings out a side of Voltaire hitherto unknown or unconsidered, it may be a long step toward a truer understanding of that brilliant man. But it is too clearly an "Apologia;" Mr. Noyes displays more of the dramatist's warm enthusiasm than the biographer's calm judgment.

WORLD D.

by J. K. Heyden

(Reviewed by H. Landry)

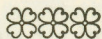
Is this the work of unrestrained imagination, or does World D really exist? The reader may judge for himself. If he is a firm believer in the powers of Psycho-Physics, he may try to reach Helioxenon. This new world, strangest of all hitherto known, is located somewhere down under the lava beds of the Pacific Ocean. Since our world, at this moment, seems to be dying of its own futility, the new world has been established for the preservation of the human race. Its founder, Blenkarn, a noted Psycho-Physicist, has begun to people it with men and women selected from this world.

Life in this sphere is upon a high intellectual plane. There are many seemingly incredible inventions, among which are the Hallucinator which causes one to see, hear and feel things that really do not exist. A very convenient machine is the Allopasmid, which, if broken, at once repairs itself; and the Psychophone, which enables one to communicate with all outside worlds.

Blenkarn, who, by his highly developed intellectual powers constructed this new World D, is about to die. Knowing that he must have a protector for his infant realm, attempts to set up, by means of Psycho-Physics, close communication between Helioxenon and Triangulum—another more highly developed world. On the success or failure of this attempt depends the outcome of the story.

I said story, for this is only the background for a love romance. In this strange love story, the heroine may choose one of two states in life: She may accept marriage, thus giving in to the dictates of her heart; or she may remain in a state of virginity as a model to future dwellers at Helioxenon. We will not spoil the story by telling you what her decision is.

It is a strange book, and the climax is unusually thrilling.



And better had they ne'er been born,
Who read to doubt, or read to scorn.

—Scott.