

ENGLISH IRONISTS

ONE of our Lord's more terrifying anathemas condemns both the satirist and the ironist, for their occupation is to make contempt readable and to mock with delicacy. Yet he said that the sin of contempt must be accounted for in the courts of hell. The satirist who savages human beings better merits the condemnation than the ironist who mocks their dreams and ideals, but neither can escape the questioning glance of the Christian moralist.

Mr. A. E. Dyson, who in *The Crazy Fabric* (Macmillan, 30s.) has written a good critical study of the English ironists from Swift to Orwell, might not agree with the distinction of the previous sentence. Indeed, he is clear that no definition of irony can be composed which would cover all his thirteen subjects. But he is well aware of the moral dubiety of the ironist's pose when the searching gaze of Christ scans it.

Though an ironist's main intention is often moralistic, his mood is attuned to ridicule, rejection, mockery, even despair. The very attitudes he employs for moralistic purposes are intrinsically suspect. We may agree that some people and actions are disgusting, but is the man who cultivates disgust the best moral guide we can find? Charity and forgiveness might be more constructive, even though (perhaps significantly) they are the last responses an ironist can employ.

Mr. Dyson's subjects therefore are only dubiously his heroes. He is far from being starry-eyed about them, and perhaps it is this which makes of his writing a work of good and creative criticism.

True to his standards, Mr. Dyson is charitable himself. The only ironist who really seems to disgust him is Lytton Strachey, whose

study of the Oxford Movement and Cardinal Manning is one of the most readable and least scrupulous pieces of writing perpetrated in this century. Mr. Dyson turns Strachey's own mastery of irony against himself and convicts him, on his own evidence, of a repulsive, luxury of cruelty. But he says that he enjoys reading "Eminent Victorians" (as we all do), even while knowing well that he subjects himself to what he believes are corrupting influences.

THE EDITOR'S TABLE

But, because he knows what he is doing, he remains uncorrupted. He is completely fair to all his ironists. He makes clear what they were trying to do, what abuses they mocked, and how and why they mocked them. Like a good entrepreneur he stands aside from them and helps them to exhibit in the best possible light the fullness of their wares. Swift and Orwell have rarely been better expounded. In passing, it is not easy to see what Orwell is doing in this gallery. He hated Big Brother and he feared him desperately. What then did he mock? You do not mock what you hate and what terrifies you. Was it the attitude of "it can never happen here" which so goaded him? Then, again, is Thackeray's "Vanity Fair" really ironical, if irony is the definitive term which describes the work of Swift, Gibbon, Samuel Butler and Evelyn Waugh?

These ironists, however, are a varied collection of writers, for in

addition to those already mentioned we have here Fielding, Sterne, Peacock and Mark Twain, all of whom are so good-tempered, and their irony so humorous as well as so delicate, that no charge of paltering with the truth can possibly lie against them, and we know that, if we met them in the flesh, we should much enjoy their company. Perhaps this natural liking or disliking of writers as persons provides some sort of ground for estimating their literary worth, since no man can be wholly divorced from his work.

It is a reasonable guess that the more likeable the writer the more effective will his irony be, and the less does his work become part of what Mr. Dyson rather oddly calls "The Crazy Fabric." Mockery becomes so genial that it gives no offence, and cleanses the more for its very gentleness. It is then not contemptuous, and so it negatively fulfils the law of Christ.

More Lenten Reading

THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS. By J. W. C. Wand. (Mary Sumner Press, 4s.)

PRAYER IN YOUR LIFE. By Trevor Southgate. (Church Literature Association, 3s. 6d.)

BISHOP WAND, in an ideal short Lenten book, at once establishes friendly relations with his readers with a prefatory note: "If you find the first chapter a little stiff, please persevere: the rest is easier."

The inclusion of both the note and the chapter were wise, for the ordinary reader is not likely to be interested in details of biblical criticism, such as the relation of Mark to "Q": yet to those with theological interests the chapter is important.

The treatment of our Lord's temptations is fresh and original. Each of them is considered from four points of view. What did it mean to Jesus (a) in his inner consciousness, (b) in his public life and ministry? The third "prong to the fork" concerns the contemporary situation of the people for whom the first three Gospels were written: these were Christians of the second generation, living for the most part in the reign of the Emperor Nero, who made them scape-goats for his burning of Rome. The last "prong" is the impact on readers today, for the Holy Spirit so inspired the writings that they have a particular meaning for the modern world.

Dr. Wand believes that the name "Satan" may be taken to refer to a person, "The Prince of this World," or to a pictorial embodiment of evil powers. The most moving chapter is on the temptation to do homage to Satan. Christian readers were not only in danger of their lives, but of their livelihoods. It was not only the soldier who was expected to recognise the Emperor's divinity, but the silver-smith, the schoolmaster, the gladiator, the doctor, the mid-wife. How near to the wind could a Christian conscientiously sail?

At the low price asked *Prayer in Your Life*, the Church Union's "Lent Popular Book" for 1965 (published in addition to its normal Lent Book),

German Saga

A DISTINGUISHED German historian, Professor Hajo Holborn, one of the large band of exiles from Nazism who more than thirty years ago found refuge in America, has long been engaged on a monumental history of his native country. The first two volumes of *A History of Modern Germany* have now been published in England by Eyre and Spottiswoode.

Vol. I (50s.) is subtitled "The Reformation," and deals in great detail with the political, social, economic and religious aspects of its subject. Vol. II (63s.) continues the story of Germany from 1648 to 1840; and here, in addition to all the political history, there are notable accounts of Baroque civilisation and the achievements of Kant, Goethe and Beethoven.

A third and final volume of what bids fair to be a definitive history of Germany, to bring the story down to 1945, is in preparation.

Pope John's Diary

JOURNAL OF A SOUL. By Pope John XXIII. (Geoffrey Chapman, 42s.)

"A MORE intimate part of me than anything else I have written—my soul is in these pages." Such was the author's own description of this spiritual diary when he gave permission to Mgr. Loris Capovilla to publish an edited version of the private notes and jottings which he had kept regularly since boyhood. And they do indeed afford remarkable insight into the innermost thoughts and aspirations of the man who rose from humble and obscure beginnings to the throne of St. Peter.

The tone of the Journal is often more emotional than might be expected by the English reader (this is, of course, an English translation of a work which has already been published abroad), accustomed to a tradition of restraint in the spiritual life. As is inevitable, it is also in very many passages eloquent of a specifically Roman

Catholic piety which must strike non-Roman Christians as something strange and almost alien. But there is never the slightest doubt of the utter sincerity of the whole volume, from the first precocious resolutions of the schoolboy to the final reflections of the Pope.

"Obedience and peace," he declared near the end of his long life, had always been the keywords and watchwords of his ministry. He fought a lifelong and clearly successful battle against self-will and self-love; Augustine's saying, "It is good for me to be humiliated," was always, he declares, in his mind and comforted him.

THE Journal also displays a victorious serenity of spirit, the fruit of an active and sustained trust in the overruling Providence which he felt always to be in control of his life at every stage in his career. After three years as Pope, he reaffirmed as the governing maxim of his life "absolute trust in God, in all that concerns the present, and perfect tranquillity as regards the future." His personal humility shines repeatedly from these pages in contrast to the enormous power and dignity of his office.

Readers should not be deterred by the somewhat fulsome and exaggerated language of the introduction, in which the editor seems to be staking a claim for the diarist's official sanctity; nor by a meditation, prefixed to the text of the Journal, in which the Pope's death at a great old age is extravagantly compared to Calvary. The Journal itself is certainly of absorbing interest. This is not so much because of any passing references to Pope John's public career, though it is intriguing to find him complaining, soon after he had become a bishop, of the trials inflicted upon him "by the central organs of ecclesiastical administration;" and it is revealing that the idea of the Vatican Council was "entirely my own idea," the apparent result of sudden inspiration.

The book is not really concerned with public but with private things. Added interest is lent by the inclusion of a selection of prayers written by the Pope and by a few of his letters. The illustrations are good—not least the photographs of Pope John's parents, to whom he bore a striking likeness.

THE late Pope John was a personality who lent himself inevitably to the collection of anecdotes about himself. Yet another collection of his sayings, and of the occasions which gave rise to them, has appeared, with the apt title *A Pope Laughs* (Collins, 16s.). The stories have been collected by Kurt Klöpper. They serve to strengthen still further the impression of a most lovable, shrewd and compassionate man, with a human touch amounting to genius.

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