

IMAGINATION AND SOCIETY

A NUMBER of books dealing with the function of imagination in human life have recently appeared. Is this because external experience is becoming harsher, as the war proceeds, shattering delicate sensibility, so that we are forced into the internal world of images? Is it escapism? Or is it not, rather, a dawning realisation that in this interior faculty of sensation lies the key to the great puzzle of our mental decay and to future remedies for civilisation? Excluding, therefore, the complications of psychology and aesthetics, of reflexes and poetic experience, we may profitably return to the simple truths about the human imagination which still throw much light on present problems.

Of the works here under review,¹ the four-page News-Letter Supplement by Philip Mairet stands high above the rest in importance and value. He shows that the imagination, which is the property not merely of men of genius and 'vision,' but of all men, is a faculty of 'etherialised' sensations. With the memory it forms a kind of treasury of all one's external experiences, so that a man can see, hear, touch or taste things which he has experienced in the past almost as strongly as if they were physically present and acting on his nervous system. Miss Ellis-Fermor, although she claims that this faculty 'exists in most men,' wrongly identifies it with a poetic faculty in the sense of an essentially active and constructive power, creating new reality from the data of experience. This is only one function of the imagination which, as Mr. Mairet seems to suggest, automatically provides a background to life, so that one can interiorly retain contact with the day-to-day physical experiences even when withdrawn from them, as in sleep. Its most important function is to provide the material for the intellect which abstracts intelligible ideas from the experienced impression in the imagination; moreover, these experienced images accompany the intellect in all its thinking process, as the soul is accompanied by the body.

Thus the content of the imagination has a profound influence on thought, though Mr. Kroner turns the whole thing upside down when, going one better than Kant, he makes the real, objective thing

¹ *The Gospel Drama and Society*, by Philip Mairet, Supplement to Christian News-Letter No. 126, now published in *Real Life is Meeting* by J. H. Oldham (Sheldon Press; 1s. 6d.).

The Religious Function of Imagination, by Richard Kroner (Milford: Yale University Press; 6s.).

Masters of Reality, by Una Ellis-Fermor (Methuen; 6s.).

The Divine Drama, by Joseph McCulloch (Hodder and Stoughton; 6s.).

a product of the imagination ; for him the imagination links the unreal abstract of thought with reality 'which cannot be reached by thought.' Mr. Kroner regards this faculty as an intellectual power superior to that of thought and ideas, the master of reality and religion, while thought produces abstract ideas and philosophy in the sphere of unreality. Religious imagination is for him a divine power, the mystery working in man and inspiring him, culminating in the unity of God and man. But imagination in fact only supplies matter upon which the mind and will can act, the material vehicle of thought and worship, the physical counterpart of ideas and of the spiritual working of grace or nature. The idea of a house is accompanied by the picture of a house already seen or put together from houses seen ; the desire for a house has the same picture in the imagination. The mind and will are limited in this way because although there are many things a man can know or will which he cannot imagine, there are always images *symbolising* his acts of soul.

Thought and will do depend on imagination in the sense that while they are not actively engaged the imagination is producing a whole series of 'pictures' of sights, sounds, smells and sensations. They form a continual procession, linked up by association, passing through the waiting-room of the mind. In sleep the procession continues. Mr. Mairet concludes then that the imagination 'can control a person whether he knows it or not, in every moment of inattention. Imagination is, after its own fashion, doing our thinking for us in each moment that we cease consciously to think or will.' We can, moreover, only think and will in terms of what is set before us by the imagination, which records more or less accurately the immediate context of our physical lives. A native of Uganda does not think of or wish for a house in terms of skyscrapers or service flats, unless of course he has pictured them from what he has heard or seen in photographs. The predominating picture will be of local huts varying in size, shape and convenience. But imagination has nothing to say about what is true or false, good or evil. The intellect and will deal with those.

The importance of this faculty in every individual life is therefore tremendous. The mental equipment depends in this material way entirely on the furniture of the imagination, on the 'pictures' of experience that are retained. Since mind and will have the final decision, a man does not depend in any absolute sense on the images he retains, but those images will have a powerful effect on the man through these spiritual faculties. This is easily observable in the children of to-day, growing up in the atmosphere of war ; the pre-

dominating images that stream through their minds are those of guns, tanks, and aeroplanes. For most people now-a-days to think the thoughts of peace increases in difficulty as the sights and sounds of the age soak into their consciousness and their mental equipment is provided by the experiences of war.

Nor is there so much freedom or independence in the sphere of imagination as in that of the spirit. For the spirit lives in the realms of free will, but images are conditioned by sensations from outside, and these are shared by all. In other words, there exists a common imagination in so far as men share common experiences. Mr. Mairet speaks of 'a common imaginative activity,' and the main theme of Mr. McCulloch's book is the need to crush individualism through the formation of a Christian background to social life. If we regard life as a drama, this author maintains, and consider ourselves as characters with parts to learn, we shall become a team of actors playing the drama of life written for us by divine providence. We shall be drawn out of ourselves when we begin to see the drama as a whole instead of being self-consciously concerned only with our own parts, and it is through imagination that our present lives are endowed with dramatic reality. Mr. McCulloch also regards this faculty as essentially active, putting man in touch with the concrete, giving an 'insight into the passion and energy of human life.' He is, in fact, inclined to overwork the analogy with the stage, and is certainly excessive in his condemnation of individualism. Yet he sets before the reader a most important truth by insisting that this common imaginative background, shared by all men of the present age, should become more creative and at the same time more consciously a thing to be shared. This is included in his plea that men become once again dramatically alive, like St. Francis.

The truth is that while every man is supplied with an imagination that absorbs the external circumstance of life, there are not many who use this faculty to extend their experience by combination and control of these 'images.' These various writers have this point in common: they call for an imaginative response to life, a training of the imagination not merely in a few cases of poetic talent, but as a common function in every member of society. For they are at one in recognising the incalculable harm done to men generally by the perversion and deadening of this faculty. Society has become entirely secular, so that man's common experience, which gets lodged in his memory and imaginative faculty, is predominantly secular. The materialism and mechanisation of society, divorced from any common religious practice, furnish men's minds with a stream of

secular images. And as the sensations flow on in mechanical regularity, the spiritual creative forces of intellect and will are dulled. In this society man, therefore, is increasingly carried along on the stream of a mechanised external life with its counterpart in imagination.

These authors have grasped the danger of the mechanised man. From the beginning he is influenced by an education which, as Mr. McCulloch points out, provides him with all sorts of facts about life, the biological urge, the sun's distance in light-years, test-tubes and test papers, but does not help him to form ideas about how to live, and leaves him at the end to scramble about for a livelihood in the machinery of modern society. Then his daily occupations—as Miss Ellis-Fermor says—provide him with mechanical devices to spare invention and even curiosity, 'so that an astonishing proportion of his movements are concerned with pressing buttons, turning on switches or taps, or lifting receivers and taking results for granted.' Worst of all, his recreations and reading are of such a nature as to mould his imagination most effectively in this mechanistic frame. The cinema and radio pour into the ordinary man a world of which he would otherwise be innocent, a world of false romance, of 'drawing-room' scenes, of easy crime and false sentiment. No act of mind or will is required from him; he simply sits in passive gloom, and weeps or feels amorous as the producer of the film intends, until those scenes become part of himself in the unreal world of imagination divorced from intellect and will. You will meet soldiers who stand or sit in the train in a dazed fashion, humming or whistling over and over again two or three bars of a song picked up from one of these mechanised recreations. And wherever you travel it will be the same tedious, crooning phrases that are sung or whistled at you. The common imaginative background is uniform and secular throughout.

The printed word at one time provided a certain variety of images, and if you go far enough back you will find it impregnated by religion. But the printed word of that sort demanded intellectual activity, so that as the mechanisation of man proceeded, it became gradually reduced to headlines and pictures. It became necessary, too, to seize the attention by sensational captions if the printed word was to be bought and read at all. Thus journalism has joined the ranks of the mechanised army of image-producers. It is no longer concerned with truth or falsehood any more than is the imagination, but concentrates on vivid pictures that will be stored together with cinema and radio sensations without requiring any mental effort. It is therefore regrettable that Miss Ellis-Fermor, after diagnosing the

disease of the mechanised imagination, should proceed to offer a remedy that holds in itself the germs of the same disease. She maintains that if instead of allowing the mechanisation to master us, we 'maintain towards the machines an attitude of wonder, of delight, of reverence,' we shall free ourselves from this bondage. And she sets before us as an ideal the picture of a journalist who hopes to right the world by writing an article. This picture of a master of reality is in fact a typical example of modern suburbia, priding itself on its independence of thought and its free and broad culture, yet all the time bound down to mechanised convention of which a pseudo-intellectual journalism is its most unpleasant fruit. We may have to admit the fundamental utility of machines and industry and the necessity of preserving them in our civilisation, but we must also admit that at the present time there is plenty of wonder, delight and reverence displayed for machinery, and that this is precisely a sign of our enslavement to the man-made universe of to-day. Wonderment at nature, so long as it is not falsely romantic, should lead to God, offering images and sensations associated with divine things; wonderment at machinery, unless in minds already God-centred, leads only to man.

Diagnosis, then, is not enough. We must see clearly the lines on which to form a common imaginative background which will bring us back once more to a Christian society. There is, of course, much truth in the contention that until you have a Christian society you will not be able to supply the imagination with spontaneous and religious symbols. But this means that the efforts towards redeeming society will concentrate precisely on those elements of modern daily life which are most mechanical and have most influence over man's mental equipment. Education and the recreations of cinema, radio or stage, journalism or sport, must be the chief objects of the apostle's zeal. Education should be made to awaken the latent faculties of the soul, help them to become God-centred, God-informed and dynamic, God-empowered. So long as education is regarded as the exclusive function of the school in pouring into the imagination an over-burdening quantity of facts and figures, stiling the mind of the youth and preparing him for a good job in a mechanical world, we shall continue to sink deeper into the muck heap. Education is primarily the function of the home in conjunction with the Church, and only secondarily that of the school. And this more universal attitude towards education must be built up round daily occupations and religious worship.

'God may have intended man to live to work,' writes Mr. McCulloch; 'we have arranged it so that he works to live, and in the

higher flights of human endeavour he works in order to stop working altogether' (p. 51). The common background of our imagination represents work as a drudgery, the operation of a cog in a machine, and we have to use such symbols of escape from this as hobbies and holidays to convey any idea of a creative human activity. Yet work itself, if it is made consciously Christian through devotion to Christ the Worker, can become creative and religious even though it be the most monotonous industrial drudgery. When a mental and willed effort is made to turn the pressing of buttons or turning of taps into a sacrifice, coloured by the sacrifice of the Cross, a freedom and expansion are introduced into the imaginative field as well as the spiritual. A rural community may provide the best facilities for re-fashioning the imaginative stream of life on these lines, since it cuts away from mechanisation and encourages active observation and initiative. But with this essentially Christian background it is possible even within the urban civilisation of industry. The Y.C.W. has shown this to be practical.

Life must, therefore, gradually be informed by creative worship if we are to furnish the imagination with sensations that are not constantly militating against religion and making it an unnatural and unsocial effort to be religious at all. This is where Mr. Mairet's paper is of greatest value. Speaking of the discipline of the common imaginative faculty, he says: 'Public worship and ceremonial are among the chief methods of this discipline; and these are always centred in the reading, reciting or contemplation of the *mythos* . . . that is why the art of drama is specially related to religion: the imagination is more powerfully affected and shaped by dramatic events than by anything else . . . This is so with every great religion, and with Christianity most of all, because the sacred *mythos* is in this case also real history; a part of our whole inheritance of knowledge.' And Mr. McCulloch, whose whole work is a call to dramatic living through the imagination, applies this same principle: 'It is wrong that it now gives the majority of men a headache to consider the basic truths that some Christian children are taught to grasp before they are confirmed. Yet the elements of the Christian faith are elementary—that is, they can be revealed to children and yet remain hidden from the adult whose mind is a jumble of unconnected facts and discontinuous thought. It is probable that the sturdy villein of the medieval world had a wider philosophy and a better grasp of essential values than has the average "educated" man of modern times. At any rate, he had a world-view of human life, for Christendom still existed as the common heritage of common folk' (p. 55).

Christendom existed then because it was built up round the drama of the Church, by the re-enactment of the life of our Lord in the liturgy and miracle plays, and above all round the representing of our Lord's final act at the Last Supper. The Christian *mythos* was recognised as real, and continued to exist consciously in the midst of men. It is sometimes said with a sneer that in those days men went to the church for festivals and holidays as they now go to the cinema or the football ground—for amusement. That is precisely where they had the advantage over us to-day, for this type of recreation furnished their imagination with sensations connected with religious worship, bound up with a real story which is more personal and immediate to each individual than anything else in life. The stream of imagination was composed of the song of angels, the Family of Bethlehem, the antics of the saints. Even if a man refused to profit by this content of his imaginative faculty, he at least avoided the deadly neutrality of to-day; when he blasphemed he did so in terms that had a religious and Christian meaning to him and his hearers, so that it was a public crime that could be severely punished. The mechanised swearing of to-day is not so punishable, for it has ceased to have any significance. The mental background thus built up helped the mind and will towards divine things, revealed a world-view of human life as God-centred. Nor was it mere representation of past events, for it was bound up with worship, and worship is an activity. It was not *mere* drama, romance cut off from reality, but a real action, formalised and repeated from day to day until it became part of man's general consciousness. The arts and crafts themselves were practised round the church and found their highest expression in furnishing the liturgical drama of daily worship with the best that human skill and inventive imagination could produce.

There would, therefore, be some hope of reintroducing a Christian mode of thought if religious drama, and especially the liturgy, could be made a natural and spontaneous action. At present the liturgy is unnatural in secular society, and the liturgical movement makes it self-conscious and uneasy. It ought to be possible to develop mimes of sacred events and doctrines as well as folk songs and dances—or even simple charades—not so much at school as at home and in connection with the parish. But this should not be divorced from the regular 'events' of the liturgical year in church. More especially should it be linked up with the Eucharist, which colours all Christian activity with its symbols of life and love. Analytical psychology seems to show that the religious symbols that are used in church are the natural property of all men, and it is only

our mechanised society which stifles their conscious use and replaces them with the symbols of Hollywood and the Daily Press.

Negatively, mass propaganda and the false journalism which seeks sensational headlines to make a 'story' rather than to tell the truth, the degraded standards of cinema and radio—these things must somehow be liquidated. They are fouling the imagination of society, and it is lamentable to see, for instance, that the Catholic Press often aims at 'stories' rather than truth. The necessity of selling the truth has led to this type of advertisement, which has helped to atrophy the creative and religious use of the imagination. Stated negatively, however, the task is impossible. Even should these mechanical recreations be removed altogether, it would take many years to purge the imagination of its false bias. It is by now deeply implanted in the faculty. Mr. McCulloch sees the way out of this hopeless situation in authority, which can destroy individual liberty as it restores personal freedom; and this indispensable authority is to be found in the 'Christian Church.' But we must be careful not to seek a substitute to do the work for us. The Church has always been there, offering us this true dramatisation of life with true and effective symbols to carry us out of ourselves. We have got to learn how to use them so that they become second nature to us and the stream of inward sensations gives us a Godward bias. The Mass is offered daily, and the whole day may be sanctified even exteriorly by sacred signs and symbols, by signs of the Cross, by the Angelus, by crucifixes and grace before meals. The Rosary itself is a most powerful means of training the imagination.

Imagination is the interior reflection of society, and to change one both must be changed. But this reflection shows at least the main elements in society that must be refashioned.

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.

AN ANTHOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS VERSE. Edited by Norman Nicholson. (Pelican Books; 9d.)

This is a collection 'designed for the times,' explains the editor; and the contributors were not asked to say their catechism. Hence some odd company.. But it is an interesting one to meet. Messrs. Eliot, Williams, Every and Co. need no introduction under religious auspices, while—one supposes—David Gascoyne is a new participant in festal evensong. If one makes special mention of his five poems included here, it is not because there is not much else that is valuable. But his verse has colour to its sinews; no padding, no moralising, no shop-soiled cranmerisms. It is very welcome.