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The Battle of the Books

By

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Some years ago the *Index of Prohibited Books* was revised and published by order of Pope Pius XI. The Preface was written by Cardinal Merry del Val, who pointed out that in modern times the battle between the Church and paganism is largely a battle of books. During the early centuries of the Christian era the pagans attacked the Church with weapons of violence; the pagans of today rely mainly upon a literary propaganda which is all the more dangerous because it is so widespread and so subtle. It is for this reason that the late G. K. Chesterton predicted in *The Ballad of the White Horse* that the modern pagans would attack not with swords in their hands but with pens. He wrote:

“They shall not come with warships,
They shall not waste with brands,
But books be all their eating,
And ink be on their hands.”

THE DELUGE OF BOOKS

Today, we are literally deluged with books steeped in the propaganda of paganism. These books pour from the presses in an ever-increasing volume; they are published in cheap editions and distributed so as to be within the reach of everybody; they are praised in reputable magazines and newspapers by reviewers who have more regard for the paid advertisements of book publishers than they have for public morality. It will not do to underestimate the influence of these books. In our own time we have seen how a single book, Karl Marx's *Capital*, has brought Red Russia into being and has filled the world with the scourge of Communism. Little wonder is it that Voltaire, whose own books ushered in the French Revolution, said: “Books rule the world.”

SUBTLE PROPAGANDA

The propaganda of paganism is more dangerous today than ever before not only because its champions utilize modern inventions to circulate their books rapidly and widely, but also because they employ a subtle technique. In the eighteenth century when Diderot and the French atheists wished to spread their destructive philosophy, they compiled an Encyclopedia. Today, the thing is done in a more insidious manner by means of novels and plays which appeal to the general reader by reason of their wit and charm of style. Left-Wing dramatists use the theatre to propagandize Communism. Popular novelists motivate their characters in terms of the half-baked theories of pseudo-science. Whatever the subversive doctrine, there is always a clever pen to dress it up for mass consumption in the form of a novel or a play.

A MENACE TO CHRISTIAN MORALS

Pope Pius XI once stated that novels and plays which pander to sensuality constitute the greatest present-day menace to Christian morals. In America the traffic in novels and plays which describe the *bête humaine*, which throw a romantic glamor over sensual excess, which preach toleration for the nameless horrors of sexual perversity, has reached an alarming stage. Some of these novels and plays are banned from the mails, but the vast majority are found wherever books are sold. These novels and plays, with their themes of illicit passion, their pathological characters, their Freudian psychology and their pornographic passages, introduce the reader into a world of moral confusion, in which chastity is ridiculed or represented as impossible of attainment, and sensuality is painted in attractive colors or portrayed as inevitable. This literature of the obscene spells a resurgence of paganism, and as such it is a spearhead pointed at Christian morals.

EXCELLENCE OF STYLE NO JUSTIFICATION

Today, many critics in high places seek to justify sex-novels and sex-plays on the score of their artistic style. These critics argue that

works of literature are intended for those who can understand them, and hence that they should be judged by artistically trained minds. Their argument is based on the quaint assumption that a person who can appreciate beauty of style is immune to temptation, an assumption which is flatly contradicted by experience. Moreover, novels and plays must be judged by their effect on ordinary readers and playgoers. They are intended for the general public, and if the predominant influence on the normal mind be one of evil, those works stand condemned. The injunction of Christ to avoid giving scandal applies to the writer just as much as it applies to the average man. No writer can shift the responsibility by asserting that he writes for persons with trained minds. To hold that he is not responsible for the effect exercised upon the multitude by his immoral work, is simply to repeat the excuse of Cain: "Am I my brother's keeper?" A licentious theme cannot be justified on the score of a beautiful style. "Poison is poison, even though it be sipped from a cup of gold."

THE INTENTION OF THE WRITER

Some critics contend that the novelist and the playwright are free to portray "the devil-side of human nature" at full length, provided they have a good intention. "Given the right kind of worker behind the work," declares Professor Richard Burton, "and no subject, however repulsive, is inadmissible in art—at least in the moral view. The moral results lie in the intention." This is equivalent to saying that the end—the intention of the writer to reform society—justifies the means. But no one may use means which are evil to secure good, Professor Burton to the contrary notwithstanding. When such writers are sincere, their assumption seems to be that the knowledge of evil which comes from reading their books, will prevent people from falling into sin. But experience demonstrates that knowledge and virtue are not equivalents. Such books, therefore, so far as knowledge is concerned, stir morbid curiosity and defile the imagination. They are twice condemned,

by art as well as by morality. Dealing as they do with repulsive themes which sicken and appal, they cannot be beautiful; and there is no question about their evil influence.

ART AND SCIENCE

Other critics maintain that the literary man, like the scientist, deals with truth, and hence that he has the right, in the words of Zola, "to open wide windows upon nature, to see everything, and to tell it all." Although science as such seeks the truth, still the scientist both in acquiring and in communicating truth is bound by the moral law. Doctors do not hold their clinics in the market places, nor do they expose people who are afflicted with loathsome diseases on the street corners. The true scientist is guided by the laws of common decency. When he describes repellent aspects of life he expresses himself in a cold, technical language, and he writes for private circulation only. If the literary artist would transform himself into a scientist, then his transformation should be complete. He should not write about vice in a style calculated to stimulate the senses and to inflame the imagination. And he should withdraw his books from public circulation. When it is a question of treating evil, he cannot eat the cake of science and preserve the frosting of art. Moreover, if he insists on being a scientist when he writes novels or plays, he should tell the whole truth about life. It will not do to haunt the dark alleys and to shun the sunny streets. This doctrine does not mean that the literary artist is debarred from treating evil, but it does mean that he should observe the canons of decency and good taste. Beauty, not deformity, is the aim of literature. This aim cannot be achieved without the use of contrast, and hence the literary artist may portray evil. But he should not make evil attractive, nor dwell on it for its own sake, nor represent it as the whole of life.

THE NEED OF GUIDANCE

When prominent critics in secular magazines and newspapers defend books which undermine

faith and morals, the need of an *Index of Prohibited Books* becomes self-evident. However, in combatting the bad books of the present day, we should obey the spirit as well as the letter of the *Index*. It is necessary to live up to the spirit of the *Index* because the number of books published daily throughout the world renders it impossible for the Congregation of the Holy Office to examine them all. Books multiply so rapidly that the *Index* cannot keep up with them. The *Index* contains a list of about 5000 authors whose works are prohibited to Catholics. Since 1900 only 109 books have been placed on the *Index*—an infinitesimally small proportion of the enormous number of books printed each year. It stands to reason, therefore, that we should exercise a strict censorship over our reading. We must do for ourselves with regard to books what the Legion of Decency does for the general body of Catholics with regard to motion pictures. Today, things have come to such a pass that, before buying or reading a best-seller, it is the part of wisdom to consult experienced guides or to peruse the reviews of Catholic critics.

READ CATHOLIC BOOKS

A book against faith and morals is spiritual poison, and we should avoid it as if it were a deadly serpent. But if we merely abstain from reading bad books, and do nothing more, we will be continually on the defensive in the battle of the books. In military circles it is a commonplace that the best defense is an offense. If we are to counteract the propaganda of paganism, we must fight fire with fire—we must fight books with books. The first way to fight books with books is to know our own books. The Church possesses a magnificent literature, which includes the most fascinating books—histories, biographies, poems, plays, novels, art critiques, philosophical and scientific treatises, and what not. We become like the books we read. To read widely in the literature of the Church is to know the Church, to be proud of the Church, to be able to fight for the Church. There is no dearth of good Catholic books in Eng-

lish. The difficulty is to persuade Catholics to read those books. Why do our college students lose their taste for reading after graduation? Certainly they cannot hope to grow in the knowledge of their religion unless they continue to read Catholic books. How many of our business and professional men read Catholic books? The number is very small.

DISTRIBUTE CATHOLIC BOOKS

The second way to fight books with books is to distribute our own books so as to bring them within the reach of general readers, both Catholic and non-Catholic. The American hierarchy has strongly recommended the distribution of Catholic books. Up to the present the average Catholic had some excuse for not reading Catholic books. He could not afford to buy them, and they were not easily accessible. But that excuse no longer holds. Here in Dubuque we may be proud of the Catholic Book Shelf which Father N. A. Steffen of Loras College has established in our Public Library, the first of its kind to be organized in the United States. This shelf, which places all the latest and the best Catholic books at the disposal of the reading public, enjoys a splendid patronage. A Catholic Book Shelf in a public library is perhaps the most effective way to distribute Catholic books. However, the service which it offers should be supplemented by individual Catholics who are the fortunate possessors of well-stocked libraries. They should loan their books on every occasion. Some one has said that a book-lover should own three copies of every book in his library—one to read, one to show, and one to loan. But if we possess only one copy of a good Catholic book, once we have read and mastered it, it would seem that the next best thing we can do with it is to keep it working by passing it around where it will produce the most good. A Catholic book collecting dust on a shelf in a private library is of no value to anybody—not even to the owner.

WRITE CATHOLIC BOOKS

The third way to fight books with books is to write books. Our archbishops and bishops have harnessed the printing press in the service of the faith. Today, the Catholic press is our chief weapon of offense in the battle of the books. For instance, here in Dubuque we have in the *Witness* an ably edited archdiocesan paper to which we can go for authoritative articles on present-day questions regarding the Church's teaching and discipline—questions in which the whole world is interested. But in America most of our Catholic writers are journalists. We need to supplement the excellent work of the Catholic press with creative writing. By creative writing I mean the kind of writing which is demanded by popular histories, biographies, novels, plays, poems and essays. In a word, we must imitate our opponents. The plain truth is that Catholics in the United States, so far as creative literature is concerned, are not articulate in proportion to their numbers. Some years ago a New York editor made a census of the books published in this country by American authors during the course of a single year. He listed 3,750 books, and of that total only 75 were written by Catholics. In proportion to our numbers—20 millions out of 120 millions—we should have produced 625 books. But that is only half the story. If we could examine the 75 books written by Catholics during that particular year, we would find the great majority of them to be expository and argumentative works. We need books of that type, and we have them, but it is a mistake not to supplement them with creative literature. In life, when it is a question of arousing emotion, of moving the will, of winning people over to our side, we must hold with Cardinal Newman that "persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us." And what is true of life is also true of propaganda. If Catholic propaganda is to prevail, it must employ creative literature to clothe truth in the concrete form of characters, actions and dialogue. The Divine Teacher did not disdain the use of creative literature, for whenever He wanted

to touch the human heart He spoke in parables, which is only another way of saying that He told dramatic stories, driving home the truth which He wished to convey by means of characters, actions and dialogue.

SUPPORT FOR THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL OF CREATIVE WRITERS

The talent to write creative literature is not given to everybody. At the present time we have in America a small but influential school of creative writers, who are producing works which embody in an attractive manner the Catholic philosophy of life and the Catholic way of living. By gaining a hearing for Catholicism, by stirring the curiosity and wonder of non-Catholics, and by leading them to admire and to sympathize, these writers are doing yeoman service in the battle of the books. They defeat the propaganda of paganism with its own weapons—by a Catholic propaganda charged with human interest, wit, pathos and beauty. If we are interested in the battle of the books, it will not do to permit the pagan propagandists of the present day to monopolize the writing of creative literature. The least we can do is to encourage and to support our own creative writers.

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