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Dorothy Green [Dorothy Auchterlonie]

John McLaren

Dorothy Green was intense, both as a speaker and as a writer. This intensity arose from a strong Christian faith that assured her that human life had meaning and that all human beings deserved a justice their rulers deny them. Her insistent belief that ordinary people "are still better than their culture" supported her optimism that they would eventually realize the minimum demand of justice, that none should go hungry in a world with the technology already supplying commodities beyond any demand, and her anger at the system that devoted this technology to greed and aggression and at the individuals who choose to use their intellect to serve this system.

Green, who in her earlier years was better known by her maiden name as the poet Dorothy Auchterlonie, began her writing career while student at Sydney University, where, as editor of the journal Hermes, she published an editorial essay, "People, Politics, and Poetry" early as 1938. The separate words in the title identify the issues that were to remain central to her concerns throughout her life, and their juxtaposition explains her moral passion. Poetry, and literature in general, were ~~for~~ ^{for Green,} means of identifying and clarifying human relationships, and her criticism is merciless in its condemnation of pretension in content and falsity in form. So in 1944, writing in Angry Penguins, she recognised the intellectual arrogance and the refusal to attend to either the opinions of others or the rhythms of the words presented to him that led Max Harris to his humiliation over the Ern Malley' hoax. More than a quarter of a century later, she was equally perspicacious in her identification of the flight from reason of many of the counter-revolutionary poets collected in Thomas Shapcott's 1970 anthology, and of the way the commodification of literature in Colleen McCullough's The Thorn Birds degrades the capacity for human feeling. Yet her feeling for the positive forces of life, which gave force to her condemnations of the shoddy, also enabled her to find virtue in works that she found deeply flawed. So, her review of Germaine Greer's book on women painters, The Obstacle Race, condemns the polemic that separates women as victims from men as oppressors, yet finds in the book reason to hope that women may lead the way towards William Morris's ideal of a world where art is a necessity of human life, common to the whole people".

The greater number of Green's essays were reviews, which take the form, when she is dealing with writers she admired, of a penetrating scrutiny of the work in question and a passionate engagement with the readers to convince them of the importance of recognizing its truth. She shared with Judith Wright the belief that the core of morality was to be found in the wholeness of humans and nature, and that evil was what defaced or deformed either. She shared with Martin Boyd, to whose writing she brought discriminating praise, the belief that the custodians of this value were artists and aristocrats, for whom the world was to be enjoyed and praised, not exploited for material gain or delivered to the dealers of death. The religion that supported these beliefs, although formally orthodox, was in no way narrowly sectarian. She accepted the many paths to God, including the Buddhism of Robert Gray's poetry as much as the secular humanism of Christina Stead. Yet she was intolerant of the easy acceptance of any universal ideal that denied difference and division, particularly the notions that all is permitted in a fallen world, or that humans do not have to wrestle with the divisions brought about by this fall.

The search for a wholeness that would transcend division without denying it accounts for Green's interest in the biologist, anthropologist and novelist Grant Watson, whose letters she edited and whose work she discussed in an important essay, "The Daimon and the Fringe-Dweller". In analysing Watson's work, Green reveals her own understanding of the mysteries of existence. The English-born Watson spent only two years in Australia, but the relations between its people and its landscape provided the theme for six of his ten novels. The fringe-dwellers of the essay's title are those who move out from civilization to pursue their daimon to the true centre, the land where nature communicates through the senses an understanding of life that moves beyond the merely human. This understanding, which Green likens to Hindu and Chinese thought and to the way of being of the Aborigines, brings the spiritual, the biological and the cultural into harmony. Green contrasts it with the exploitative modes of western rationalism, which subjugate both women and the land to the masculine drive to subjugate and possess. In this desire Green locates the divisions between individuals and nations alike.

Green's distrust of isolated intellectualism did not however mean any elevation of feeling over thought, or any romantic illusions about the innate wisdom of untutored sensibility. As she says in her essay - originally a lecture - "The Place of Literature in Society", the illiterate could exist happily only in societies where there was no pressure of population on resources. In the contemporary world, bondage to nature means misery, and the absence of public discourse means bondage to those who control the economic forces. Literature, "humanity thinking aloud", is the "great continuous discussion throughout the ages and across the world" that provides the insights into the human condition that alone can offer us the hope of freedom.

In her essay on A.G. Stephens, Green remarks that he fails the final test of a critic - the ability to develop his particular insights into a continuous argument. Green herself passes this test triumphantly. Her moral concerns are consistent from her earliest work, but develop as her understanding of the complexity of the human predicament develops to take account of the social origins of individualism, of the divisions of the self, and of the persistent and pernicious effects of power and greed. At the same time, the content of her essays provide an analysis of the developing responses of Australian writers to their environment. Her essays on A.H. Davis and Louis Stone identify the precise nature of their Australian experience, while those on Patrick White demonstrate how he uses this experience to contribute to world literature. All this is accomplished with a wit and breadth of knowledge that makes the essay themselves a major literary accomplishment.