

Foreword

Some years ago Mr Read published an account of his childhood under the title *The Innocent Eye*. It must have come as a surprise to many of his readers that the author of *Art Now* was brought up on a Yorkshire farm: a whole world of the imagination seems to separate the rather dry sophisticated critic from the vale, the orchard, the foldgarth, the mill and the stockyard – the fine simple stony architecture of his childhood.

‘The basin at times was very wide, especially in the clearness of a summer’s day; but as dusk fell it would suddenly contract, the misty hills would draw near, and with night they had clasped us close. The centre of the world had become a candle shining from the kitchen window. Inside, in the sitting-room where we spent most of our life, a lamp was lit, with a ground glass shade like a full yellow moon. There we were bathed from the fire, said our prayers kneeling on the hearthrug, and then disappeared up the steep stairs lighted by a candle to bed.’

Later, in *Annals of Innocence and Experience*, Mr Read took the account of his own life on out of the Yorkshire vale; a grim Spartan orphans’ school with a strong religious tone and the young Read absorbed in Rider Haggard; a clerkship in a Leeds Savings Bank at £20 a year, and the slightly older Read becoming a Tory and reading Disraeli and Burke; then Leeds University and loss of faith, religious and political, and so the war, and after it the literary career – and the settled literary personality, the agnostic, the anarchist and the romantic.

We should never have known without *The Innocent Eye* quite how far Mr Read had travelled. That is the astounding thing – Mr Read was able to go back, back from the intellectual atmosphere personified in Freud, Bergson, Croce, Dewey, Vivant, Scheler . . . And if we examine his work there have always been

phases when he has returned; the creative spirit has been more than usually separated in his case from the critical mind. (He admits himself in one essay that submitting to the creative impulse he has written poetry which owes nothing to his critical theories.) The critic, one feels, has sometimes been at pains to adopt the latest psychological theories before they have proved their validity, but the creative spirit has remained tied to innocence. ‘The only real experiences in life,’ writes Mr Read, ‘being those lived with a virgin sensibility – so that we only hear a tone once, only see a colour once, see, hear, touch, taste and smell everything but once, the first time.’

The mill where Olivero rescues the Green Child Siloën from the sullen, bullying passion of Kneeshaw is Read’s uncle’s mill – just as the stream which the returning traveller finds has reversed its course is the ‘mysterious water’ of *The Innocent Eye* which dived underground and re-emerged in the same uncle’s field. And it may not be too imaginative to trace the dreadful sight that met Olivero’s eyes through the mill window as Kneeshaw tried to force the Green Child to drink the blood of a newly killed lamb to that occasion in the foldgarth when the child Read caught his finger in the machine for crushing oil-cake. ‘I fainted with the pain, and the horror of that dim milk-white panic is as ineffaceable as the scar which my flesh still bears.’

‘Milk-white panic’: like the Green Child herself, Mr Read has a horror of violence. The conflict always present in his work is between the fear and the glory – between the ‘milk-white panic’ and the vision which was felt by ‘the solitary little alien in the streets of Leeds’, the uncontrollable ambition which ‘threw into the cloudy future an infinite ray in which there could always be seen, like a silver knight on a white steed, this unreal figure which was myself, riding to quixotic combats, attaining a blinding and indefinable glory’. If art is always the resolution of a combat, here is surely the source of Mr Read’s finest work.

Glory, it must be remembered, is not merely martial glory, or ambition. ‘Glory is the radiance in which virtues flourish. The love of glory is the sanction of great deeds: all greatness and magnanimity proceed not from calculation but from an instinctive desire for the quality of glory. Glory is distinguished from fortune, because fortune exacts care; you must connive with your fellows and compromise yourself in a thousand ways to make sure of its fickle favours. Glory is gained directly, if one has the genius to deserve it: glory is sudden.’

In his novel *The Green Child* Mr Read conveyed, as he had never done before, that private sense of glory. We see it working inwards from political glory – the ideal state which Olivero founded in South America and found so unsatisfying (‘try as I would I could not solve my personal problem in social terms’) – back to the real source of inspiration, the home of the ‘innocent eye’, the dream of complete ‘sudden’ glory – the absolute surrender of self. Alone in his crystalline grotto, in the mysterious unpolitical country, somewhere below the earth’s surface, to which the Green Child had led him, sinking through the water at the mill-stream’s source, the former dictator awaits death and petrification – the sense of sin, passion, the fear of death, all the motives of conflict which could not be excluded from his republic or from the human heart have been eliminated. Desire is limited to the desire of the final surrender, of becoming first rock, then crystal, of reaching permanency, like an image – the pursuit of glory could hardly go further.

‘When the hated breath at last left the human body, that body was carried to special caves, and then laid in troughs filled with the petrous water that dripped from roof and walls. There it remained until the body turned white and hard, until the eyes were glazed under the vitreous lids, and the hair of the head became like crisp snail-shells, the beard like a few jagged icicles . . .’

THE GREEN CHILD

It is the same sense of glory that impelled Christian writers to picture the City of God – both are fantasies, both are expressions of a dream unattainable by the author. The difference, of course, is that the Christian artist believed that his fantasy was somewhere attainable: the agnostic knows that no Green Child will ever really show him the way to absolute glory. The difference – though for the living, suffering man it represents all the difference between hell and purgatory – is not to us important. Christian faith might have borne poorer fruits than this sense of unattainable glory lodged in the child's brain on a Yorkshire farm 40 years ago.

Graham Greene
1946