

the grasp of the average intelligence — that richness will have little effect on Christianity in America.

E. Christian Kopff is the editor of a critical edition of Euripides' Bacchae.

A Private Sensibility

by R.S. Gwynn

Life Sentence: Selected Poems

by Nina Cassian

Edited by William Jay Smith

New York: W.W. Norton;

130 pp., \$17.95

A generous spread of four poems that appeared in the *New Yorker* early in 1990 introduced many American readers to the work of the renowned Romanian poet Nina Cassian (Renee Annie Ștefănescu). Even though her poetry has been appearing in English versions for the better part of a decade, the *New Yorker* set, translated by such respected practitioners of the art as Richard Wilbur, Stanley Kunitz, Dana Gioia, and William Jay Smith, drew belated attention to a poet whose body of work ought to rank her among the foremost contemporary virtuosos of the short lyric.

Nevertheless, it may be difficult for American readers to appreciate Cassian fully, the dual fault of our recent literary fashions and the uneven abilities of her translators. She has apparently been too involved with getting on with her life (her bibliography lists 24 separate books of poetry, as well as children's books, puppet plays, fiction, and translations) to worry much about being stylishly neurotic. Her love lyrics, in particular, are so *healthy* in their emotional clarity that an audience raised on confessional breast-beating may find them old-fashioned. Her work is not political in any overt sense, though one might hasten to add that in a totalitarian society the cultivation of the private sensibility, expressed in lyrical poetry, may in fact be considered a subversive act. Cassian's personal history, as related by Smith in his excellent introduction to *Life Sentence*, is a fascinating tale in itself and one that, if not entirely happy in its outcome, at least manages to avoid the type of

tragic ending that for years was all too common in the poet's unfortunate country.

Cassian was born in 1924, the child of non-practicing Jews who saw to it that she had piano lessons and could read and write before her sixth birthday. Her father was a translator of French and German and was the author of the Romanian version of Poe's "The Raven," which may provide a faint clue to the meaning of "The Burning of the Famous Castle Nevermore," one of Cassian's most cryptically surreal poems. At 18, Cassian married a young Jewish Communist poet. She was divorced, and then married again, this time to A.I. Ștefănescu, a critic and novelist who was her great love for 35 years and is the subject of many of her finest lyrics. Her early poems occasioned a typical Marxist literary controversy, for their resolute aestheticism fed ammunition to the regime's apologists. Smith relates the case: "In one poem she described Lenin sitting at his desk while the light filtering through the window turned his inkwell into a great blue light bulb. The poem caused a scandal; she was accused of wishing to write about the ink and the light bulb and of using Lenin merely as a pretext." Subsequently she wrote four books of politically correct poetry (which she now disavows), books for children, film criticism, and a number of musical compositions.

Following the death of her husband, Cassian accepted an invitation to visit the United States. While teaching a creative writing course at New York University in 1985, she learned that Gheorghe Ursu, an old acquaintance and confidant, had been arrested. In his office the police discovered a diary in which, apparently in all innocence, he had jotted down his friends' anti-government remarks and verses and identified the sources by name. Cassian's exile was apparently sealed in late 1987 when she learned that her library and personal effects, left behind in Bucharest, had been seized by the authorities. Smith's introduction was written early in 1989, almost a year before the revolt that toppled the Ceausescu regime, but Cassian has not yet ventured back to her homeland. Her recent project, translating *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into Romani-

an, will perhaps provide an occasion for her return.

Smith admits the difficulty of translating Cassian's poetry, which provides some challenges that free-verse translators are ill-equipped to meet. She often employs elaborate verse forms and a variety of meters, and a range of translators' strategies, some more fruitful than others, is evident here. Since the volume is not bilingual, one can only guess at what the originals' formal devices sound like to a native speaker. "Dream Girl," for example, appears to have originally been a poem in rhymed quatrains. Brenda Walker and Andrea Deletant translate it as free verse, with a hint of rhyme in the final stanza:

And your familiar sleep
splintered into seven fragments,
and lips became transparent
in a kiss.

That's how we wandered
through heaven,
seven times seven . . .

— Really?

— No, just a dream. Just a dream.

On the facing page, Fleur Adcock renders the exquisitely fragile "Because You Don't Love Me" with its rhymed tercets more or less intact:

I smile, and feel my feeble grin
drip like a blood-streak down my
chin
because you don't love me.

I dance, and my heavy hands
just trail
like a pair of anchors. I am pale
because you don't love me.

I light a cigarette, and choke
in an Isadora-scarf of smoke
because you don't love me.

Twenty different translators worked on this volume, alone or in collaboration, and Cassian herself contributed both advice and several of her own English versions. As one might expect, the overall results are mixed. Petre Solomon's attempt to rhyme results in this inept stanza:

Some there are who, meeting
me, have said:
"Welcome to my life, you living
wonder!"

Other [sic] had nothing
whatever to say to me,
and I left them far behind,
wanting upward to wander.

On the other hand, Smith manages to
turn consistently elegant passages:

I was given at birth this odd
triangular
face, the sugared cone that you
see now,
the figurehead jutting from

some pirate prow,
framed by trailing strands of
moonlike hair.

Disjointed shape I'm destined to
carry around
and thrust out steadily through
endless days,
wounding the retinas of those
who gaze
on the twisted shadow I cast
upon the ground.

Not surprisingly, Gioia, whose versions of Eugenio Montale's *Mottetti* appeared in 1990, and Wilbur, whose translations of French dramatic poetry are contemporary classics, provide the best moments in the volume. "Orchestra," as rendered by Gioia, stands as one of Cassian's most memorable lyrics. Its opening two stanzas introduce a conceit, an apt one if we recall Cassian's musical training, on which the emotion hinges:

Climbing the scales three
octaves at a time,
I search for you among the high
notes where
the tender flute resides. But
where are your
sweet eyelashes? Not there.

Then I descend among the
sunlit brasses —
their funnels glistening like
fountain tips.
I let them splash me with their
streaming gold,
but I can't find your lips.

Wilbur's version of "Ballad of the Jack of Diamonds" is animated by a witty lilt that Cassian has doubtless carried over from her children's books:

The two dark brothers of this
jack,
Abetted by the third, alack,
(Who, draped in hearts from
head to foot,
Is the most knavish of the lot),
Have vowed by all means to be
free
Of him who gives them
symmetry,
Making a balanced set of four
Whose equilibrium they abhor.

If everything in *Life Sentence* came up to this level it would be easy to acclaim Cassian as one of the greatest living poets. That so much of her poetry, "vibrating, sensitive, pulsating, / exploding in the orgasm of Romanian," is able to overcome the obstacles of English translation provides us with a clear indication of its worth.

R.S. Gwynn is the editor of the Dictionary of Literary Biography volume *American Poets Since 1945, Second Selection*. He is a professor of English at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas.

BOOKS BY THOMAS MOLNAR

THE PAGAN TEMPTATION

"*The Pagan Temptation* is a wide-ranging, synthetic work, subtle and profound. Molnar draws on anthropology, physics, and literature to document the threat of a modern resurgence of paganism. He also devastatingly critiques the very remedies neopaganism prescribes for the ills of modern society."

— *The University Bookman*
Paper, \$11.95

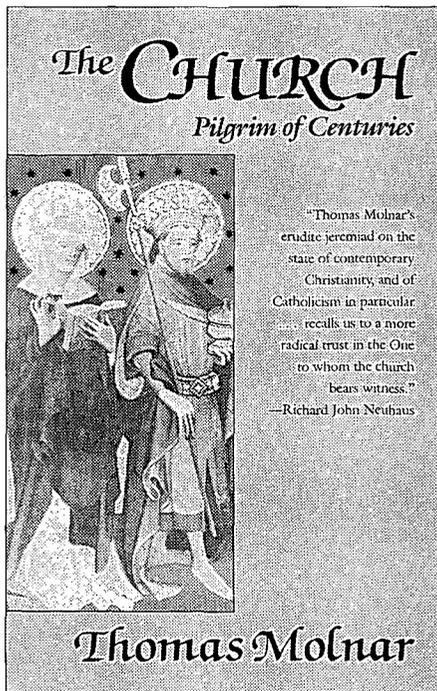
TWIN POWERS Politics and the Sacred

"This is an analytic work of great perception and insight about the need of politics to understand also what transcends itself. Molnar is a clear guide and a judicious commentator."

— *James V. Schall*
Paper, \$9.95

At your bookstore, or call 800-253-7521
FAX 616-459-6540

074  WM. B. EERDMANS
PUBLISHING CO.
255 JEFFERSON AVE. S.E. / GRAND RAPIDS, MICH. 49503



NEW THE CHURCH, PILGRIM OF CENTURIES

Paper, \$15.95

Offering a unique commentary on the Roman Catholic Church near the end of the second millennium, Thomas Molnar looks both backward and forward as he analyzes the status of the Catholic Church in today's world.

"Thomas Molnar's erudite jeremiad on the state of contemporary Christianity, and of Catholicism in particular . . . recalls us to a more radical trust in the One to whom the church bears witness."

— *Richard John Neuhaus*

Passion in Private

by Carl C. Curtis

A Bottle in the Smoke

by A.N. Wilson

New York: Viking; 320 pp., \$18.95

Over the last ten years, A.N. Wilson has been compared to the great 20th-century English satirists: Waugh, Amis, and Barbara Pym. Now that he is in the process of writing a trilogy, it was inevitable that some critic would add to these the name of Anthony Powell. Of course, publishers like to compare the work of older, established writers beside that of the young turks whose wares they hawk. As Scrooge might say of them, they are good businessmen.

Yet in this case the comparison is just. True, *A Dance to the Music of Time* is four times longer than Wilson's two-thirds-finished trilogy and its pacing is slower, partly because of its greater length and partly too because of Powell's more deliberate style. But, like Powell's, Wilson's purpose is to project images of an age in England now past but the effects of which are still with us. Similar, too, is Wilson's method of telling the story through the largely introspective camera's eye of a first-person narrator, a device that necessarily has its limits. We see only what Nick Jenkins or Wilson's Julian Ramsay sees, know only the people they know. Because such men are not earthshakers and hence do not walk among the great, our glimpse of their England is more private than public.

Experience demonstrates, however, that the private either invigorates or deadens the public. One can read both Powell and Wilson without fear of missing much of the age they chronicle. If the reader doubts whether this is possible, he need only ask himself if he would acquire a better understanding of England's march toward pragmatic, self-serving collectivism if he read a biography of Atlee or Bevan instead of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, with its portrayal of the climber Widmerpool.

With results similar to Powell's, Wilson has created Raphael Hunter, a self-appointed voice of British culture. Hunter first appears in the inaugural volume of the trilogy, *Incline Our Hearts*, while Julian Ramsay is at a

school for boys, Seaforth Grange. Julian, orphaned in the middle of the war, lives between terms in the town of Templingham with his Aunt Deirdre and Uncle Roy, an Anglican priest. Typical of the age, his upbringing is not religious. Aunt Deirdre's two main interests are her garden and a radio soap called "The Mulberrys." Uncle Roy's passion in life is neither God nor his wife. He has spent his days memorizing every available bit of lore concerning an eccentric family of the local gentry, the Lampitts. Sargie Lampitt is Uncle Roy's dearest companion and favorite topic of conversation. Whether he would bother to help save a soul is an open question; it is certain that he would (and does) buttonhole a complete stranger in a railway station to talk to him about the Lampitts. Not that the family lacks fame: J. Petworth "Jimbo" Lampitt was a famous Edwardian belletrist, much in the mode of Pater. Other Lampitts, all leftist of one degree or another, have held government posts great and small. But the talents and accomplishments of a family that not one in a thousand could identify hardly seems worth the effort Uncle Roy invests in them. That he does anyhow is Wilson's way of highlighting the rather genial decadence of Roy's and Sargie's generation. Moreover, as the story progresses from Julian's teens in *Incline Our Hearts* to his early manhood in *A Bottle in the Smoke*, the Lampitts provide the ground for the alternating friendship and enmity of Julian Ramsay and Raphael Hunter.

Less genial and more decadent, Hunter unthinkingly and unfeelingly brings pain into the lives of Julian and those close to him. The first time the teenager Julian sees him is an embarrassing moment at Seaforth Grange. Coming around a corner he notices in a window the bare back of his art mistress and first love being stroked by Hunter, a man approximately in his late 20's. The incident might be no more, for Julian, than an insignificant and inevitable instance of adolescent heartbreak. But it proves to be typical of Hunter's way of life. He leaves the art mistress in the lurch for another whom, rumor says, he will marry. Years later, Julian discovers that Hunter never married her at all. Instead he took what he could from the liaisons with

both women, and left without a twinge of conscience. In an almost identical manner, Hunter comes to Templingham to meet Sargie Lampitt. His stated purpose is to write a biography of Petworth Lampitt. Quickly, he enlists the aid of Julian's cousin, Felicity, gets her with child, and departs with the papers in his care, leaving her at the mercy of a back-street abortionist.

When, on a call to see Felicity, Uncle Roy and Aunt Deirdre press him about his family and education, he says he never went to either Oxford or Cambridge and changes the subject. He is completely and charmingly Machiavellian in his use of people, and, apparently in his own mind, innocent of all wrongdoing. Women adore him, not because he is a passionate lover (he isn't anything of the kind) but because they want to evoke from him the same kind of passion he makes them feel.

Hunter's willing victim in *A Bottle in the Smoke* is Julian's wife Anne. By a curious twist of fate, she is Sargie's niece, a fact Julian does not know when he meets and falls in love with her. By this time, Julian is an aspiring novelist and actor—he cannot make up his mind which—and a part-time bartender at a local pub, the Black Bottle. Hunter is now a regular acquaintance and a BBC television celebrity. His fame stems from the first volume of the Lampitt biography, but the second volume remains unwritten. This is partially due to Hunter's laziness, but also to the Lampitts, who found the book offensive and refuse to let him use the rest of "Jimbo's" papers. Having an affair with Anne is really a calculated ploy to secure the copyright. By the end of the book, he has succeeded—his reputation, as always, untarnished—and is in a better position than ever to tell the British public what it ought to admire in literature and art. That a marriage has been destroyed is no concern of his. Julian, meanwhile, is not a famous writer but a radio actor on, of all things, Aunt Deirdre's beloved "The Mulberrys."

There is no way a short review can do justice to this outstanding novel. For one thing, the trilogy still has one volume to go. What is more, the novel abounds with characters too eccentric to describe here, some of the most