

AN ENGLISH TESTAMENT

STANLEY B. JAMES

THE cult of internationalism has made it somewhat difficult for those of English blood to know themselves. In comparison with other peoples whose racial consciousness has been quickened by recent tendencies, they find themselves at a loss. The school of thought prevailing among them has laid no great emphasis on the patriotic virtues. Current economic doctrines, encouraging foreign investments and trade, have dissipated their interests, and the changes which have taken place in their manner of life owing to the Industrial Revolution have so transformed them that they scarcely recognize themselves in the traditional portrait of John Bull. Without any definite image of what Englishness means, the appeal to national pride fails to win the response which the exigencies of the hour demand. To revive the memory therefore of one who by common consent was a representative man but who, for various reasons, has been neglected, may prove to be a profitable task.

But to find our typical Englishman, it would seem necessary that we should go back some distance in our history. If it is desired to discover the basic element in the racial character, we shall have to pass over the centuries during which he was in process of becoming "a good European". Even the Elizabethan period, generally considered as the Golden Age of our history, was rather the fruitage of the preceding civilization than anything distinctive. Our Shakespeare, as we like to call him, in the opinion of Carlyle, was merely the product of medievalism developed under the stimulus of the practical age. To discover what we want, it is advisable to fix our attention on a time preceding even that which saw the intermingling of the original Anglo-Saxon blood with the imported Norman strain. When we do this, the effect is like that of a home-coming after foreign travel. "This," we say, "is the real 'me'." That is my apology for dealing with William Langland, author, as is generally supposed, of *Piers Plowman*. Though Langland lived in the fourteenth century, he represents the older strain in the national life, and voiced a tradition which was then beginning to disappear.

As to his claim to speak for England, we have many concurring testimonies. He is to be heard, asserts the Cambridge

Medieval History, "making articulate the conscience, the pathos, the indignation of the plain godly men who paid in their labour and their lives the monstrous price of pomp and war, revolted by the injustice, the callousness, the hypocrisy of the powerful in Church and State, but at heart conservative, lovers of old ways, suspicious of the new age, untouched by any foreign influences, the permanent substratum of English life. It is a voice from the very depth of the English countryside and the crooked little towns that hide there." The romanticists, with William Morris at their head, who expounded the ideals of "Merrie England", by common consent took Langland's contemporary, Chaucer, as their symbol. It is therefore instructive to hear what the authority just quoted says on this point. "In Chaucer", we read, "we have the voice of the fashionable go-ahead world, of the society that did the king's business and made his court brilliant. This was the society that moulded and used the men for whom Langland spoke. It was a society where the number of educated laymen was increasing, a society secular in its temper and cosmopolitan in its outlook. Its culture and its language, its codes and its interests owed hardly less to France and Italy than to English tradition." A French critic has confirmed this. Says M. Jusserand: "His views accord very well with this most important period in the history of England, when the nation, growing conscious of its own individuality, becomes decidedly averse to over-extension, does not want the Pyrenees for its frontier, nor a French town for its capital; but seeks, on the contrary, whatever its leaders and kings may aspire to, to gather itself up, to concentrate its forces, to become a strong, well-defined, powerful body, and cease to be a large and loose invertebrate thing. . . . Langland is a true Englishman, as truly English as Chaucer; even more so. One important characteristic is wanting in Chaucer: he is not insular; there is an admixture of French and Italian ideas in his mind; at bottom, no doubt, he is mainly English, but still, there is something of a cosmopolitan tinge about him. . . . Not so with Langland, who is nothing if not insular; he may even be said to be the typical insular, and one of the first on record." Equally emphatic are the words of Mr. Christopher Dawson. Speaking of our poet, he says: "It is a voice from another world—the submerged world of the common English—a voice that is by turns harsh and pitiful and comic, but always the authentic voice of the English people. Where Chaucer took the world as he found it, and found it good, the author of *Piers Plowman*

judged the world and found it wanting. He represents the English view of life as it had been formed by nearly a thousand years of Christian faith, not the official view of the theologian and the scholar, but the spiritual vision of a prophet chosen among his fellows by his inspiration alone." Finally, here is Professor R. W. Chambers, probably the greatest living authority on Middle English Literature, declaring that "in *Piers Plowman* we find the English spirit as it still exists", and he quotes with approval Earl Baldwin's characterization of Langland: "How much the less man you, if you do not know *Piers Plowman*? For therein is to be found the key to the Englishman of to-day, with the same strength and weakness, the same humour, immutable."

It has been necessary to quote these numerous authorities regarding the poet's exemplification of the native character because our examination of his work, contradicting certain current ideas of that character, might create suspicion as to his right to speak for us.

Thus, for instance, in a recent collection of Essays entitled *Arrows of Desire*, by Mr. W. J. Blyton, there is this expression of the conventional view. "Our Constitution, Empire, our parochial, and other social arrangements are not those of intellectually clever men, even of consistent or planning men. They are the astonishing combinations of the theoretically senseless, the technically indefensible—with the working and workable, the practically sane, which everywhere go by the name of English." In other words, instead of formulating ideologies for our guidance, we prefer to "muddle through", directed only by some rough, native sense of what is right. Now that is a very common conception. It has come to be accepted as axiomatic that there is something un-English in the adoption of a coherent philosophy or of a systematic sociology. Our ability to dispense with these has become a source of national pride. And, if we took into account only the contemporary Englishman, it would be possible to justify the view. One curious result of the present phase is that, reading ourselves into this fourteenth century document, we have found it disorderly and the alleged disorderliness has been attributed to our racial inability to appreciate form. In consequence, Langland has been credited with being, as regards style, ultra-English. But this misrepresents both the national genius and this particular exemplification of it. Recent investigations have disclosed the fact that this seemingly chaotic poem is very carefully planned, and that it moves within a phil-

osophical and theological framework which no one could accuse of being unsystematic. The work of Professor R. W. Chambers, Dr. Henry W. Wells and Mr. Nevill K. Coghill, not to speak of other critics, has finally disposed of the myth. The most recent work of note on the subject—*Piers Plowman: An Interpretation of the A Text*, by T. P. Dunning, C.M., M.A.—deals in detail with the poet's indebtedness to the scholastic philosophy of his time, and the agreement of his outlook with its teaching. If he is obscure to us, it is because he presupposed in his readers an intimate familiarity with that philosophy, and not because he ignored its categories. So far from being structureless, there is visible, once it is known on what intellectual groundwork Langland laboured, a well-thought out plan and consistently directed development. For his guidance he had, in common with his generation, the almost over-systematised Moral Theology of the Church. This was so well known that he could assume knowledge of it, and thus save himself the trouble of explanations the lack of which gives to us to-day an impression of confusion. With the key supplied by this Moral Theology, obscurities vanish and the work is found to be singularly coherent. Indeed, it is one of the most convincing pieces of evidence we have that our forefathers did submit to an ideology and that, in doing so, they lost none of their Englishness. It is true that in Richard Rolle, the fourteenth century mystic, and in Langland himself, we can see the beginning of a revolt against the over-subtle methods adopted by the later scholastics, but the effects of the mental discipline imposed by the medieval tradition are clearly apparent, and it is intensely interesting to see the English spirit working happily and without any sense of being warped within that tradition. Langland allowed the ideology of his age complete control of his mind. He never questions it. When his pilgrims set forth on their quest of "St. Truth", it is not of something outside of, much less in antagonism to the current system, but rather of the inner meaning and spirit of the system. As we have seen, conformity to the traditions of the schools in no wise impaired Langland's ability to express the native genius of our race.

It will come as a shock to those who have thought of the Englishman as a good-natured but blundering fool, saved from disaster only by some mysterious, intuitive practical wisdom, to find that, at a period when he was specially free from alien influences and in an individual who conspicuously exemplified this independence, he shows himself as conscious of and obedient to

controlling ideology as does any modern Italian or German. And we may note here that a belief in the consistency with Englishness of a definite national ideology figures prominently in the recent report of the Spens Commission on Secondary Education instituted by the British Parliament. We are beginning to recognize that inability to think coherently and purposively is *not* a racial asset.

No less surprising than Langland's revelation of the ideological Englishman is the way in which he illustrates the sociability of our people. It is the product of the individualistic era with which we are most familiar. The Englishman's reserve, his social inaccessibility, his willingness on all occasions to sacrifice solidarity to personal freedom are notorious. On the other hand, in recent times the pendulum has swung to the other extreme, and given us a population so standardized in taste and education and dress and manner that individuality seems to have been stamped out. The solidarity thus effected is of a mechanical and joyless character, not the hearty communal life in which the individual finds himself as a responsible unit of a co-operative whole. It is in the manner in which the life depicted in *Piers Plowman* steers clear of these two extremes that we are presented with a type of Englishman strange to us. Chaucer's pilgrims afford good evidence that there was no lack in medieval society of individualism. The unity imposed by its institutions by no means implied a dull uniformity. And this is apparent in Langland's work. The very ease with which in a few lines he can indicate the idiosyncracies of his characters, making each member of the crowd stand out from the others (particularly notable in the story of Gluttony's debauch) is itself a reflection of the social life which served as his model. He had his own full share of independence. His pen-picture of himself is convincing on this point:

Some blamed my life and few liked it.
They held me as an abandoned wretch unwilling to reverence
Lords or ladies or any living being,
As persons in fur apparel with pendants of silver.
I never said to sergeants in law or to such people,
"God save you, sirs," and suavely bowed to them.
Such men maintained me for a fool, yea, mad in folly.¹

This democratic attitude, however, was by no means inconsistent with sociability. Life on the manorial estates was distinctly of a communal character; the agricultural method pursued was indicative of this. The Church, of course, was a powerful agent

1. This and other quotations are from Dr. Henry W. Wells's modern rendering of *Piers Plowman*.

in creating the communal sense. Its feasts brought all together for both worship and sport. Langland's poem gives one the impression that medieval England lived in crowds, not the dull, apathetic type of crowd seen in the modern city, but alert, articulate, vital crowds. It is significant that the pilgrimage in search of St. Truth is not an individual affair like that of Bunyan's Christian, but a collective quest:

Then a thousand men thronged together,
Crying upward to Christ and to His clean Mother,
That grace might go with them to seek Truth.

From beginning to end the poem breathes the spirit of charity. We are reminded of Prof. H. W. C. Davis's characterization of medieval life. "What appeals to us in the medieval outlook upon life," he wrote, "is, first, the idea of mankind as a brotherhood transcending racial and political divisions, united in a common quest for truth, filled with the spirit of mutual charity and mutual helpfulness, and endowed with a higher will and wisdom than that of the individuals who belong to it. . ."¹ That may express the ideal rather than the actuality. There can be no doubt, however, that the citizens of the medieval community were in the habit of doing things together, whether that was recreation or work, and that they would have found our competitive society utterly alien. This is well illustrated by the advice which, in the poem we are considering, Grace gives the crafts:

He taught all to be loyal and each craft to love the other,
And forbad all boasting and debate among them.
"Though some are higher," said Grace, "consider always
That though I have given him the fairest craft, I could have put
him to the foulest.
Consider well," said Grace, "that grace comes of my favour.
Look that no man blame another, but love all as brothers.
And he who is most the master, be mildest in bearing,
And crown Conscience king, and make Craft your steward,
And let Craft's counsel clothe and feed you."

We scarcely recognize in this communal company with its corporate religious life, and its guild system uniting merchants and craftsmen in the service of the community, the same race which, under the influence of a *laissez-faire* philosophy, has developed a manner of life so entirely different.

Langland represented a functional society which was largely self-supporting. But he lived at a time when the importance

1. *Medieval Europe*. H. W. C. Davis. Home University Library.

of the producer was giving way to that of the merchant and speculator. He stood, in this as in other respects, for the old order. His hero is a plowman, though, as he is careful to show, his plowing is symbolic of all kinds of serviceable labour. He accentuates this ideal by contrasting it with that represented by the Lady Meed—a sinister figure by which we may understand the mercenary motives corrupting both Church and State. The changes then initiated were to continue, creating in course of time a new England. The growth of the commercial interests, the coming of a landed aristocracy whose roots were not in the soil, the series of enclosures whereby the self-supporting peasantry was displaced, and, finally, the Industrial Revolution completely changed the character of the nation. The factories, mills and mines which now absorbed the bulk of the population and the economic system under which they were conducted came to be identified in a special degree with England. It was *par excellence* the great manufacturing and trading nation. The wealth thus created, not satisfied with investment in home-industries, sought openings abroad. London became the clearing-house of vast financial operations. It was increasingly difficult to recognize in the new type of John Bull the descendant of *Piers Plowman*. In his own mind and in that of the world at large, the Englishman became completely identified with the new order. It was the success of the business man which fed national pride. Only in the last few centuries, it was supposed, had he found his true vocation and been able to exhibit his characteristic virtues.

This conclusion may be doubted. The later phases of English history were due less to any innate capacity for the rôle assumed than to the existence in the native soil of rich mineral deposits and to the country's geographical position. The Englishman seized the opportunities which the Industrial Revolution presented with characteristic energy. It by no means follows, however, that, under other circumstances, that energy would not have found an outlet which would have afforded equal scope for his gifts.

Difficult as it may be to credit such a statement, and to see John Bull in any other vocation than that which fate has assigned him, the possibility that, in a totally different calling, he might have been no less the true Englishman is made credible by a glance at Langland. If ever a community was at home in a system, it was the English nation as represented by the poet. This is even more evident from Chaucer's picture of contempor-

ary life than it is from Langland's comparatively sombre pages. If the Canterbury pilgrims were not a jolly company in full enjoyment of life, it would be difficult to find such a company. And if they did not represent Englishness, then that quality does not exist.

It may even be that the generation to which Piers Plowman belonged represented the true genius of our race better than do its modern descendants, and that we of to-day will best find ourselves by breathing once again the atmosphere of the poem we have been discussing. No less than an individual, a whole people may misinterpret its place and functions in the scheme of things. Since the conditions under which we have so abundantly prospered are changing, the reflection is not irrelevant to the present situation.