

BOOKS

Back to the Classics

THE Summer, 1983, issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* was devoted to Jack Kerouac and Robert Pinget; but though Kerouac's posthumous fame has reached all the way back to Lowell, Massachusetts, which is dedicating a downtown park next spring to its wandering native son, Pinget remains, in the United States, the all but exclusive property of college French departments and fanatic buffs of literary pre-postmodernism. His slim recent works, faithfully translated by Barbara Wright and published by the way-out firm of Red Dust, are printed in editions of a thousand copies. Nevertheless, Pinget bulks large in the present rather lean world literary scene—a determinedly experimental and unfettered writer whose education in music, painting, and the law help give his curious oeuvre resonance. A considerable delay attends the publication of his books in English; the most recent to appear, "The Apocrypha" (Wright and Red Dust as usual; \$12.95), came out in France in 1980. It is, like its predecessors "The Libera Me Domine" (1968 in France; Red Dust, 1978), "Pascaglia" (1969 in France; Red Dust, 1978), "Fable" (1971 in France; Red Dust, 1980), and "That Voice" (1980 in France; Red Dust, 1982), an extension or variation of an established though unsettlingly fluid world—a rural village world of circling gossip, moldering architecture, lurking atrocity, and (ever more centrally) botany,

both in the wild and in the garden. From book to book, characters overlap—especially that of a reclusive "Master," who inhabits a mansion with his servant and brother or nephews or uncle, depending on how the forgetful, restlessly revising dominant voice phrases it at that moment. An atmospheric reality emerges all the more forcefully for the vibrant uncertainty of details; the decay and banality of provincial rustic life blur, at their margins, into something hellish, and also something redeeming. Pinget has said, in a note to "The Libera Me Domine," that "the interest of my work up to the present has been the quest for a *tone of voice*." The voice of his books (never quite the same) mitigates the sudden incidents of murder and madness with a comedy of expression, a garrulous patience, an onrolling indifference, a kind of cheerfully brute communal transcendence.

"The Apocrypha" seems to me not only an extension of Pinget's world but a consummation of it, his best novel (if comparative terms can be applied within a created microcosm so consistently indeterminate) since his best-known and most popular, "The Inquisitory" (1962 in France; Grove Press, 1967). The Apocrypha (a plural term whose root sense of "hidden" was applied by the Church to non-canonical works, which in time became magical in the popular imagination) are being composed by the

Master—tortuously annotated and revised notebooks he is keeping, and his heirs are trying to edit. "Unravel the intricacies of these chronicles which delight in getting in a tangle, there's a secret plan somewhere there... Upsurges of fervor which soon flag and leave him prostrate in his chair, his manuscript scattered all over the room, monologuing on the theme of the book to be written, of the adventure of art, and of the chaos in his mind." The Apocrypha are, among other things, the pages we hold in our hands. Pinget's recurrent method becomes a metaphor for its subject here: "The essential often seems to be brushed aside in favor of the adventitious as if some occult tyrant had adjured the scribe only to approach the truth at a tangent." The Master's notes to himself become Pinget's self-admonitions: "Beware literary tone;" "Clarify terms." The elusiveness of the endlessly complicated text serves as metaphor, too, for decay—the Master's decaying mind, the erosions of anamnesis, the loss of circumstance within memory. His notebooks, often called a "gramarye"—an archaic word associated not only with grammar but with necromancy—are then "secret wellsprings of this fight against nothingness." And, as the book moves toward its climax, its texture merges with the revisions of the annual natural cycle, the variations from year to year: "The work would take shape according to the rhythm of

the year, a forgotten arcanum." The years are almost interchangeable: "Leafing through the book he finds that the words he'd underlined aren't on the same pages, they've been displaced from where they were the previous year... Convinced that in the country things barely change from one year to the next, the first memorialist out of either laziness or lassitude might have confined himself to copying some of the passages dealing with the June of the previous year." The temporal struc-

Approval Heaven



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ture of "The Apocrypha" is clear enough: the year, marked by its seasonal weather and flowers and holy days, goes by twice, revolving about the figure of a shepherd most vividly seen in December. Stephen Bann, in a critical article of fourteen pages appended to this novel of not quite a hundred and thirty, explicates the pattern and also establishes clear textual links between "The Apocrypha" and Virgil's "Eclogues" and the Psalter. The figure of the Good Shepherd, of course, is where paganism and Christianity overlap: early statues of Christ show a beardless youth with a lamb on his shoulders, and lines from the fourth Eclogue were interpreted throughout the Middle Ages as Virgil's magic prophecy of Christ's birth, of a virgin, in the reign of Augustus. The prettified shepherds of classic eclogues, the Good Shepherd, and the shepherds who came to the Nativity in Luke all blend into one another while the *image* of a shepherd, in the Master's roving purview, migrates from a shattered cup to a zodiac-rimmed picture printed in an ancient book, "an old book he found at a junk dealer's, a modern mind would be ill at ease with it the subject matter is so jumbled up, commentaries on this or that work of Virgil." Mr. Bann, with his sometimes bristling critical vocabulary ("Plunged in his pettifogging apocalypse . . . is a vivid example of this reiterated catachresis"), pounces on Pinget's increasing use of Christian symbolism, and sees the author as "anticipating the concerns of an important direction of French thought and criticism" and helping to establish "a claim for the seriousness of theological tradition in a post-psychoanalytic culture." This comes too close to making of Pinget a latter-day Bernanos. Pinget's fiction has always been haunted and obsessed by the past, and Christianity is Europe's crumbling past—"the whole shebang of the centuries which now they're old project a terrifying shadow into their enfeebled hearts in which they're looking for something that ought to be the soul, what was it exactly, a precious gift now confused with the fear of death." On the other hand, the image of the shepherd does, in the course of the double annual round of "The Apocrypha," appear to become whole. The imperfections repeatedly noted in both its ceramic and printed forms ("a tiny shard wrongly glued," "a bit of mould obliterates the original contour of the face and hands, just look how clumsily

this ink line has been drawn to try to restore it") have by the last paragraph been, as if miraculously, absorbed into the perfection of an icon both Christian and humanist:

The halo crowning his head is the heart of a masterly composition in which each extended line at an equal distance one from the other joins the ecliptic of the heavenly body that governs the system.

IRIS MURDOCH, too, plays with a classical model in her new book, "Acastos" (Viking; \$15.95) binds together two Platonic dialogues, one of which has actually been produced in London as a short play. Miss Murdoch, of course, has taught philosophy at Oxford and published a book, "The Sovereignty of Good," upon Plato's views of art; her own Platonism informs the intellectual and erotic seethe of her tireless novels, whose characters reside half in a solidly realized England and half in a translucent realm of immaterial passions and ideas. "Yes," she and her favorite characters seem to keep saying, "the Good and the True and the Beautiful *do* exist, compellingly, bafflingly, absolutely." Plato himself, as a somewhat minor character in these two dialogues, asserts, "People know that good is real and absolute, not optional and relative, all their life proves it," and, when challenged by Alcibiades, gets quite sputtery about it: "Good must be pure and separate and—absolute—and—only what's completely good can—save us—" Alcibiades scoffs, "But your perfectly pure good thing does not exist, that's the trouble, dear, all the world proves *that!*" And Plato cries, "It *does*, it *must*—it's *more real*—I can't explain—" Plato, here a callow youth of only twenty, has already developed a lot of bullying mental maneuvers. God, too, *must* exist: "Religion isn't just a feeling, it isn't just a hypothesis, it's not like something we happen not to know, a God who might perhaps be there isn't a God, it's got to be necessary, it's got to

