

It seems to me that in any fiction grounded on theology there are certain desiderata for eliciting the conviction of the informed and experienced reader: that the theology be presented accurately; that the theology be seen as significant; and that this significance and precision be incorporated with verisimilitude into the body of the fiction. The theological framework of Braine's thriller is summarized (with disarming facility) in a verse from the New Testament providing one of its epigraphs: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things which are God's" (Matthew 22:21). The protagonist, a "pious agent," treats this directive as a straightforward strong disjunctive; he does not go beyond the Pharisaic self-deception of a theological legalism at once transparent and childish. Flynn murders and betrays for the state, while keeping the celestial ledger balanced by timely acts of contrition. The nescience of Flynn's religious views (since he has every intention to continue to murder and to lie for the state, his acts of contrition are invalid—a fact which even a schoolchild memorizing his catechism would know) may very well leave the informed reader slightly mystified at its banality. It may make the reader wonder why the author has chosen to present us with such an unconvincing tyro.

A precise and comprehensive notion of piety, secular and religious, has sufficient tragic irony built into it to allow, as other writers have shown since Aeschylus, for a more mature and better informed treatment of a profound theme. A reading of Pius XII's inaugural encyclical, *Summi Pontificatus*, published in the twilight of 1939, might also have suggested to the author that the theme of "piety" has been examined by Flynn's preceptors; and with what ironies, as history has shown, to our anguish and enlightenment. Braine's theological frame in *The Pious Agent*, in short, does not go beyond the propaedeutics of childhood.

Also, the literary form of the work, memoranda between agents and their departments, seems to me just a little worn, an analogue perhaps of the Bond-like clichés of gadgetry which mark the landscape. As with the form, so with the principal character. Flynn's final enlightenment has an impact of some significance, in my view, only if the reader has not gone beyond the oversimplifications of that might be termed theological boy-scoutism.

Flynn's theology, his character, and the literary form expressing that character strike me as far from convincing or significant. *The Pious Agent* has much to offer the reader who gleans his theology from thrillers alone. To others, I suspect, the work offers a faintly entertaining spectacle of the first few steps of an ill-informed spiritual novice. From the author of *The Crying Game*, one who declared, "I do have very strong political beliefs and in a sense can't separate them from my religious beliefs" (*Contemporary Novelists* [London: Macmillan, 1972], p. 167), one might have expected something more mature.

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STEFAN THEMERSON

General Piesc or the Case of the Forgotten Mission

London: Gaberbocchus, 1976.
Pp. 54.

Stefan Themerson's *General Piesc* is an allegorical novella full of humor, irony, and sarcasm; a well-written and highly entertaining story. Although he is known for his philosophical and controversial works (See *IFR*, 1, No. 1 [1974], 70-71), Mr. Themerson's latest book is not problematical or demanding in any way—neither stylistically nor intellectually.

In less than fifty pages the author succeeds in narrating—but not explaining—a strange incident that happens to a retired Polish general who lives in London alone after his wife had run away with another man. The story begins with General Piesc winning a large sum of money (£ 129,740) in the Pools. Instead of enjoying life as people expected him to, he decides to accomplish a mission which he had been planning for twenty-five years. After he equips himself with a new mackintosh "with exceptionally large pockets," (p. 11) and a "gun loaded with one solitary bullet,"

(p. 50), he begins with the execution of his assignment. On his way to a certain but undisclosed destination, "something illogical" (p. 18) happens in his head which makes him forget everything about his important project.

The remainder of the booklet deals with the General's search for his original plan and describes the last moments of his life; a few adventurous and strange episodes from his picaresque life are also narrated either by his illegitimate daughter, or by his girl friend.

There is no doubt that *General Pies* is a witty and amusing tale; however, one has to add that neither the protagonist's aim, nor Mr. Thermerson's intention are clear to the reader. What this overdimensional character symbolizes or represents is not easy to guess; and what this intelligent author alludes to is not always clear and perceivable. Although certain serious issues are referred to (philosophy, p. 12; prophets and reformers, pp. 25, 29; racism and prejudice, p. 31; saviors and saints, p. 32; evolution and decency, pp. 33, 39; religion and *Realpolitik*, p. 34), and many ambiguous leitmotifs (the mackintosh, the one solitary bullet, the seagull, the stray dog, and many more) are introduced, the author's intellectual intention and the work's moral significance are not easy to discern; and maybe this is part of this book's appeal to the reader.

S. Elkhadem

ENRIQUE ANDERSON IMBERT
Los primeros cuentos del mundo
Buenos Aires: Ediciones Marymar,
1977, Pp. 315.

In *Los primeros cuentos del mundo* Professor Anderson Imbert has collected 255 of the world's earliest tales. Some of these date from approximately 2,000 B.C. and others are more recent: 1095 A.D. Clearly this is a vast undertaking, but the author limits the scope of the book by stating that he collected these stories "porque no

encontré ninguna obra que, en un solo volumen, satisficiera mi curiosidad por los primeros cuentos del mundo" (p. 5). The audience for whom the book is written is not a particularly scholarly one, but rather is made up of "lectores curiosos como yo y, como yo, no especializados en la antigüedad" (p. 5).

The quantity of material covered is best understood from the following summary of the contents. There are eleven chapters, each of which is devoted to a different group of tales after this fashion: tales from (1) the Near East; (2) Egypt; (3) Israel; (4) Greece; (5) Rome; (6) the end of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Middle Ages; (7) India; (8) China; (9) Japan; (10) Persia; (11) Arabia. An analysis of any one of these groups of tales brings the critic into immediate conflict with one or more of the ten problems "de difícil solución" (p. 5) which Anderson Imbert outlines in his prologue.

These are as set out below: (1) The early tales are written in dead languages and not even the best translations in the world can be trusted. (2) There is a terminological problem in that many of these "tales" may be referred to, at least in Medieval Spanish, beneath one, or several, of the following headings: *ejemplo, fábula, apólogo, proverbio, castigo, hazana, consejo, balada, historieta, leyenda, novela*, etc. (p. 5). (3) The ancient tales do not fit into our modern definitions. (4) There may be a confusion between fiction and religion, particularly in the tales of Biblical origin. (5) The problem of oral tradition is almost insoluble. (6) The tales are called "early" or "first" because they show surprising complexity and can scarcely be called *primitive*, although some critics have attempted to do so. (7) Modern archaeology is making us undergo a constant revision of our knowledge of the culture of ancient civilizations. Hence, even seemingly basic facts may be subject to enormous changes. (8) There are many complications involved with both the selection and the ordering of the tales. (9) Many common themes abound, but there is no attempt to classify them or to relate them to any of the approved theme/motif indexes. (10) There is a transcription problem in that many of the ancient names have no adequate equivalent in Spanish.

The vastness of this material is a limiting factor. Many tales are so brief as to be