

# THE MODERN TEMPER IN LITERATURE

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Theological students and clergymen, like other professional people, are increasingly aware of the proliferation of knowledge. When they think seriously about it, they are astonished or bewildered by the masses of information to be assimilated and brought under some measure of intellectual control. The natural sciences double the information within their fields every few years. The behavioral studies like social science, psychology, and anthropology are amassing descriptive data and research information at a similar rate.

Phenomenal development is evidenced as well in other disciplines like theology, history, philosophy, and the arts. Specialization, much as we deplore the narrowed horizon it imposes, has been for many modern men the only possible response to the knowledge explosion. But not everyone should be a specialist alone—certainly teachers and theologians ought not limit themselves to the province of their special competence.

Most churchmen are aware of theology's current lively interest in contemporary literature. Seminary courses in theology and modern literature, conferences addressing themselves to the renewal of dialogue between the church and the arts, scores of books and articles on the subject, are witness to the apparent discovery of related concerns. The theologian finds in modern writing a valid description of contemporary men—the needy ones to whom he is pledged to bring the redemptive message. Concrete human situations made vivid and urgent in the novel and drama may often lay bare the basic self better than the philosopher's abstractions and the sociologist's statistics. To be seriously interested in literature is to be seriously interested in life.

If modern literature is to serve any useful purpose it must be approached on its own premises. The once didactic literature of the nineteenth century, the genteel tradition, has given way under the impact of two great wars to literature of a different order. Most modern writers do not regard their work as a force for moral uprightness and cultural stability, as the Victorians commonly did. They preach no absolutes, seek no anchorage in tradition, plead for no fixed

moral code or rigid discipline of self. Old patterns of thought in politics, economics, and general culture apparently must be routed. "The establishment" has broken down under new cultural burdens. The stiffness of the past is as anachronistic as the Gothic cathedral on a modern city street.

Down a twisted and rutted road contemporary man gropes his way with neither pole star to guide him nor echoing heavens to comfort him. Alienated and alone, an outsider, he is filled with anguish and dread, tormented ceaselessly from the depths of the subconscious. This is the vision of disillusioned man, who has forfeited, or never known, his identity as a unique creature. He is the rootless wanderer who moves through the pages of Sartre, Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Bellow, Mailer, and a host of other writers.

These writers find it hard to acknowledge an external superintending force. Hence they engage in a ceaseless effort to create God in their own image, to lock eternity into time. They sketch a world which may make it on its own by setting realizable moral limits. In breaking off metaphor from belief, they would claim, they are not acknowledging loss of faith but a search for new reality.

The novel is quickly responsive to every intense concern—existentialism, the new morality, civil rights, homosexuality, the loss of identity, economic reform, the threat of nuclear war. Existentialism has had its most striking expression in French works like Sartre's *Nausea* and Camus' *The Stranger* and *The Plague*. Although there has been no American existentialist school, there are characters in pursuit of existential values in Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* and Saul Bellow's *Herzog*. Ellison and Bellow are concerned with identity in the modern world, with meaning in a world without God, with the source of values when transcendence and ultimacy have been denied. Many critics now regard Bellow—after the passing of Faulkner and Hemingway—as the foremost living American novelist. It is of the nature of the times, unhappily, that he could not give any kind of positive answer to the question, "Why am I here?"

The negro novelists have championed the cause of their own people in words of angry protest. Most of these writers are astute enough to realize that they must choose between literature as art and literature as protest. For the time being at least, they have chosen the latter. Art can wait until the territory of conscience has been invaded. Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, and James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and *Another Country* are all strongly denunciatory of a society which imposes numerous indignities upon a large number of its citizenry. Most of these books are violent, although there is a substantial structure of truth in them. *Another Country*, praised by some competent critics, is inexcusably debased in language and situation; it lacks both taste and art.

Flannery O'Connor, at the time of her early death in 1964, was winning a growing acclaim. Hers is essentially a Christian world view, although it is often difficult for readers to recognize such a vision in the midst of the violence Miss O'Connor thought it necessary to use in order to gain attention in an age of violence. John Updike continues to be warmly championed by the critics as a superb stylist, but his limited canvasses lack wide popular appeal. He has yet to show the breadth and depth and intensity of a major novelist. J. D. Salinger's saga of the curiously erratic Glass family seems about played out. The prolific James Gould Cozzins, whom many felt would be a major talent, appears to have fallen short of the promise. Critical preoccupation with novelists who reflect the raw and jagged edges of a broken world, who subscribe to the naturalistic assumptions, leaves little room to acclaim quality novels like Shelly Mydans' *Thomas* (the story of Thomas a Beckett), Zoe Oldenbourg's *Destiny of Fire* (about the Albigensian persecution), and Conrad Richter's wholesomely pleasant novels of American pioneering days.

Modern drama had its beginning with Ibsen and the "social problem play" (*A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*). The emphasis was continued in Shaw (*Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Major Barbara*) and Galsworthy (*Justice*). More recent drama, like other art forms, has been vigorously alive and abrasive. It has set forth the climate of our times, recognized the doubts and confusion of the age, explored the dark recesses of the human heart. In America Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, working in reasonably conventional forms, continue to be the leading playwrights, often mirroring inner deterioration and that fear of meaninglessness which Tillich has designated as the special dread of contemporary man. Other dramatists worthy of attention are O'Neil (generally thought to be the greatest of the Americans), Synge, O'Casey, Anouilh, Pirandello, Brecht, Lorca, and Wilder.

Abroad the theater of the absurd, one of the radical experiments in drama, has attracted substantive attention with its ideas and innovations. The absurdists have appropriated the underlying philosophic assumptions of existentialism. They see man trapped in a world he did not make and cannot alter, wandering without significance and identity toward the doom of death, which frustrates reasonable expectations for long life, happy marriage, and modest security. This structure of ideas draws together such writers as Camus, Sartre, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Adamov. They are most concerned with thematic ideas. Commonly they make no distinction between farce and tragedy, for in a world of absurdity and impotence our emotions can easily be reversed to make us laugh at the pitiful and cry over the ludicrous.

Eugene Ionesco's *The Bold Soprano* introduces the Smiths and the Martins, who can no longer talk lucidly to each other because they can no longer think or feel passions. They have lost their

identity as unique beings; they could become as interchangeable as bits of standard machinery. What Ionesco deplors is the unrelieved conformity, the loss of individuality, the easy acceptance of shibboleths by the multitudes which transforms them into robots. The world has lost its philosophic sensibility, its sense of mystery.

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* has been the most striking of the absurdist plays. At the beginning of Act I two tramps are seen on a country road by a single tree. The play ends as it begins with these two engaged in directionless dialogue, waiting in vain for Godot, whose name clearly suggests God. Without ever saying it directly, the drama's mood implies an absurd world in which God is distantly known as a name but is nowhere engaged in the human venture. When asked what *Waiting for Godot* means, Beckett responded: "If I knew, I would have said so in the play."

Modern poetry has been less bitter than the novel and drama, yet the poet too shares much of the uncertainty of the other arts about ultimate things. Except for figures like Frost and Sandburg, modern poets have a quite limited audience, chiefly because the general reader finds the language and metaphor difficult. It should be remembered, however, that the poet has sought to do something really difficult in trying to suggest through his work all the complexity of our time in images that match the disarray of experience. He compounds the reader's difficulty by substituting for the propositional statement of nineteenth century poetry new symbols, images, and discontinuities of thought. In addition to Eliot, Auden, Thomas, Spender, MacNeice, the Sitwells and Larkin have been much praised. Of the more recent American poets Lowell, Roethke, Eberhart, and Wilbur have been particularly commended. No recent poet has been quite so much publicized as the young Russian, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, who in his flamboyant verse has spoken out with what seems like a surprising measure of freedom.

Human destiny, sketched in somber hues, has won serious attention in modern art because so many people have thought there is so much in the world today to authenticate the picture. If the vision were merely a ludicrous caricature of experience, no one would give it serious attention. Strongly fixed as the image of man in alienation is in the contemporary consciousness, the view does not go unchallenged. Man as a unique creation fashioned in the image of God has its defenders too.

T. S. Eliot was by far the most influential of modern Christian writers. He gave light and leading to many and showed that moral and religious standards in literature are something more than a Puritan anachronism. Impressive also have been figures like C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, Dorothy Sayers, Joyce Cary, Graham Greene, W. H. Auden, Paul Claudel, and Francois Mauriac. They have kept open a meaningful and attractive alternative to alienation and nihilism. They have helped also to excite significant dialogue

between theology and literature. Others too have joined in the dialogue, and out of the lively interest has come a substantial list of good books. Among them might be cited: *Christian Faith and the Contemporary Arts*, edited by Finley Eversole; *The Climate of Faith in Modern Literature*, edited by Nathan Scott; *The Failure of Theology in Modern Literature*, by John Killinger; *American Literature and Christian Doctrine*, by Randall Stewart; *Modern Poetry and the Christian Tradition*, by Amos Wilder, and *The New Orpheus: Essays Toward a Christian Poetic*, edited by Nathan Scott.

Writers like Greene, Eliot, and Lewis, while seeing orthodox religion as exciting material for the literary imagination, sometimes add to the substance of belief radical elements drawn from the most advanced pronouncements of contemporary culture. C. S. Lewis' space trilogy—*Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, *That Hideous Strength*—draws frequently upon insights from the new psychology, anthropology, and physics. In these novels Lewis introduces large and transcendent issues but hardly deals explicitly with them. His approach is through a world of myth. Clyde S. Kilby says of this myth world: "There is a great, sovereign, uncreated, unconditioned Reality at the core of things, and myth is on the one hand a kind of picture-making which helps man to understand this Reality and on the other hand a deep call from that Reality."

In the novels of Graham Greene the bearers of God's witness are people burdened by fallibility and incompetence rather than saints and heroes. Yet even in these fallen ones Greene sees grace at work in the wounded spirit. His fundamental obsession, that sin calls forth grace, that sanctity follows after sin, may have little approval in orthodoxy. Yet it should be noted that here is a major novelist in whom there is still an acknowledgement of transcendence, who believes a real God reigns, has expressed himself in the Word, and actually offers grace, mercy, and peace. *The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter*, and *A Burnt-Out Case* are generally thought to set forth the landscape of Greenland at its best.

Greene has frequently acknowledged his indebtedness to Francois Mauriac, who like himself is a Catholic novelist. The more positive and perceptive note is struck in Mauriac, particularly in *A Woman of the Pharisees*. Mauriac's characters are usually pressed hard by some consuming obsession like a desire to manipulate the lives of others, as in *A Woman of the Pharisees*, or for vengeance in *Vipers Tangle*. Yet unrighteousness is softened and transformed in Mauriac by a slow process invasion of grace from many directions rather than through a direct challenge by doctrine.

One may note that these Christian writers are predominantly Anglican and Catholic. Why these should be more productive artistically than other Christian groups is not easy to say. Some have suggested that within these traditions the commitment to liturgy, to symbol, to sacramentalism, to a theological structure more sensitive

to the aesthetic—encourages artistic sensibility and creativity.

That theological subjects or theologically related figures can make successful subjects for drama is shown in John Osborne's recent *Luther* (hardly an honor to the stalwart of Reformation faith), Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* (about Sir Thomas More), Archibald MacLeish's *J B* (using, or misusing, basic themes from *Job*), and Rolfe Hochhuth's *The Deputy* (a severe indictment of Pius XII's failure to denounce Hitler's massacre of the Jews). No drama in history has evoked so violent a response as Hochhuth's.

In a world as complex as our own no one banner draws the allegiance of all. Where there are many loyalties, no generalization is wholly valid. Ours is both an age of faith and unfaith. But denial has outpaced affirmation. Therefore Sartre and Camus get a larger popular following than Eliot and C. S. Lewis. Camus examined the assumptions of Christianity and found them, for him at least, an untenable option. And there are hosts of intellectuals like him. These people represent God in terms of His absence—the negative way—the “God-shaped blank.” Sartre says he bears the burden of the world—an impossible burden because God is silent. This is a preposterous declaration certainly, but one which is made with conviction nonetheless.

Some Christians would say in response to Camus and Sartre: “Why bother with these people; they are diseased minds.” To respond this way is to make our gravest error. They are artists who represent with great power one aspect of the world mind of our time. They brief us not so much on the environment we must denounce as they unfold for us authentically the area of our opportunity and responsibility. Here is where estrangement and denial can be responded to only by a reiteration of the Gospel of love in Christ. Rigorous unbelief can be matched by a small but intellectually very respectable company of modern Christian writers. Always, too, there are the great reserves like Augustine, Pascal, and Dostoevsky.

Contemporary Christian writing at its best is of a high order. But most modern writing gives back the world's own note. Even so, some close awareness of the natural can keep the church from becoming irrelevant. The sophisticated deniers of God's sovereignty in the world may well be serving His purposes by reminding us of what the world is like when Jesus Christ is denied His Lordship in human affairs.