# THEOLOGICAL BEARINGS IN MODERN LITERATURE

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LITERATURE is the barometer of the spiritual climate of an age. While purely literary fashions lie on the surface, to be debated by the reviewer and the professional critic, the more profound influences upon creative writing are less easily diagnosed because they press in from the total atmosphere of the time, moulding both the writer's self and his material. That is why, the more essential the terms of literary history seem to be, the more they elude definition. Labels such as "romantic" or "metaphysical" can neither be abandoned nor reduced to simple meaning; they include so much that they demand an evaluation of all experience. The final word must rest with the philosopher and the theologian for, in the long run and whether they are interested or not, they hold the keys of this kingdom. If they are indifferent to this, they should realise how much the arts—literature especially—help towards self-knowledge, since the influences apparent to all in the changing face of art are the same as those which operate more obscurely in their own fields, where fashions also come and go. But, unless they have lost the desire to make their disciplines come home to men's business and bosoms, they will be concerned. Even to-day, songs are more powerful than laws and the poets are still the interpreters of the gods to men. The effects, for good or evil, of the pulp magazines and the limited edition, of the radio loudspeaker and of the cinema or television screen, stem from the implicit and explicit beliefs of the artist and his public. Thus the sins of omission and commission of the spiritual teachers in any age are visited upon their own and succeeding generations through the medium of the arts. The artist's sensitivity functions as a seismograph, recording the underground disturbances which lead to cultural disintegration and renewal. Human nature may not change greatly. The tales which hold children from play and old men from the chimney-corner may be much the same in every age. But the moral and spiritual pre-conceptions of society can modify enormously the way in which those tales are told and their effect upon their hearers. A great gulf divides the pious Aeneas from the crafty Ulysses, Falstaff from the Vice of the morality play. Raffles is not Robin Hood, though he is of his clan; and what seemed his endearing foibles to the public of the last years of

Victoria's reign would have looked like the villainy of a Jonathan Wild to the eighteenth century. Raffles, in turn, would have repudiated the manly graces of a Roderick Random as the dirty tricks of a low cad. Even the waywardness of genius is limited by the quality of an age. The values, which literature expresses concretely and which we try to identify abstractly in terms of "tendencies" and "the spirit of the times", are also dependent upon the beliefs of those who create and those who respond. An examination of literary tendencies from a theological view-point is therefore not simply helpful to theology, but a necessary part of literary criticism itself. The shifting, kaleidoscopic pattern of literature in the past half-century, just because it has been so widely divorced from the traditional Christian framework, is particularly amenable to description by the concepts of theology. Possibly poetry demonstrates this paradox most fully. But the lesson is written in larger letters in modern fiction, drama and biography, so that he who runs can hardly fail to read.

The century began confident in the belief that on the Carmel of Darwinianism the prophets of the Jewish-Christian God had been slain and the unextinguishable fire of Evolution kindled upon the altar of man's self-sufficiency. The sword of Huxley and Herbert Spencer had been bequeathed to those who should succeed them on a pilgrimage where the trumpets would eventually sound in the terrestial city. The curse of Adam had been revoked when man, knowing that he was not immortal, saw sin to be nothing more than the imperfection which the sweat of his face would remove for his children. Science, enabling us to control our environment progressively, guaranteed a bright future, which was already visible in an awakened social conscience. That the wisdom of the Victorians culminated in a paralysing doubt rather than in such brash confidence was clear from such a shrewd comment as Mallock's *The New Republic.* But utopianism proved its hold upon the popular consciousness by creating a generation that had no ears to hear the lessons of parables and, in any case, did not want to listen to parables, only to stories of "real life". The fascination of H. G. Well's scientific fantasies, for instance, lay in their sturdy realism. The chief difference between the New Jerusalem ahead and Arnold Bennett's Five Towns was to be that *it* would be pleasant where *they* had been uncomfortable; and in its streets would walk as heirs come into their inheritance, the Kippses and Mr. Pollys of this world, in white and shining garments. (Just

how white and how shining, Wells was later to make visible on the screen in *The Shape of Things to Come*). The cock-sure prophecies of Wells and the down-to-earth materialism of Bennett contrasted strangely with a parallel philosophy which put no trust in the power of intellect to shape environment, nor in the march of history to overcome evil with good. Nietzsche and Ibsen, however, were for years no more than dark shapes on the Anglo-Saxon horizon, except in their influence upon Bernard Shaw, whose humanism they modified in an anti-intellectual direction, lending him weapons to use against accepted religious, political and moral dogmas, without persuading him to take a tragic view of life. Not until D. H. Lawrence proclaimed the "dark gods" was the radical rejection of reason considered seriously, or the solid achievements of technological advance counted as dust in the balance over against the eternal savagery of man's unconscious drives. The dethronement of humanity as captain of its soul to make room for the human animal as slave to its impulses, was a more important event for literature, as for theology, than the verbal rejection of deity. The fool may shout from the housetops that he need not believe in a God who lives in the heavens in order to be a good citizen upon earth. He will deny the existence of the sun by closing his eyes, but he will continue to sit in the sunshine. The worshipper at the shrine of the subliminal powers, of the Baalim of fertility and the Molochs of cruelty, on the other hand, does not restrict his experiences, but enlarges it. He chooses darkness rather than light and discovers the compulsion of worship, the necessity for sacrifice, and the ecstasy that does not shrink from slashing one's own flesh with knives or passing one's own sons through the fire. In the history of thought, pessimistic naturalism is the twin of optimistic humanism, a Jacob destined to supplant his too easy-going brother. Theologically, it is the devil-worship which follows the idolatry of self-worship, the seven devils returning to the garnished house. Honesty of feeling and breadth of experience are the conditions of healthy literature; and these are to be found when faith is mistaken, but hardly when it is absent. Hardy's resolute (though regretful) rejection of theism had brought with it a vivid evocation of the pathos of existence, though his "immortals" were too shadowy and provisional for his universe to yield the catharsis of tragedy. Perfervid atheism gave at least the promise of depth of feeling.

Depth was conspicuously absent in the "disillusionment" which followed the first World War—the first major set-back

of the progress-through-science dogma. A "lost" generation felt that the intellect was better occupied in mockery than in seeking for the good which might turn out to be a mirage. The emotions, too, were probably tyrants, exacting service without wages. A mood of serious triviality, a spirit of enjoying what is not worth enjoying while remaining conscious of the hollowness of the pretension, a playing of the fool in earnest and pulling faces at the same time, was reflected wittily in Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* and *Decline and Fall* and in Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow* and *Antic Hay*. Huxley, whose fun was less forgiving than Waugh's and more haunted by a Swift-like revulsion from the flesh, later put it on record that his philosophy of near-nihilism was partly a pose to quiet the moral conscience and to make irresponsible sexual ethics more plausible; for the twentieth century, as for the fifth, it was true that the will in its corruption darkened the intellect. But, if not entirely sincere, the attempt to live without faith was a serious enough experiment, reflected in new literary forms. The pessimistic *Rasselas* ended in a "Conclusion in which nothing is concluded". The novels of the twenties ended in deliberate inconclusiveness. Taken to the point of breaking down previous values, the experiment had not accepted the Nietzschean demand that we must recognize the full implications of declaring God dead by proceeding to a transvaluation of values.

More harmful, in the long run, than moral and intellectual scepticism was the pretence that the rejection of God affected nothing except the moral code. In *South Wind*, Norman Douglas suggested that the mere sight of a lotus-eating society, possessing culture and scorning principles, would be quite enough to enable a sensible bishop to abandon Christianity. Man could very well live by bread alone, if only his belief were "debunked" by exposing his romantic posturings as the vain attempt of a featherless biped to make himself seem dignified. The "debunking" of history by Lytton Strachey and his imitators was essentially frivolous, centering chiefly on an attack upon Victorian ethics. Since the publican and not the pharisee was by now the socially popular figure, there was no danger in attacking hypocrisy. It was flattering to the small to belittle the reputedly great, to call Matthew Arnold "Matt" and find him out in concealing a love affair from the family; and the good work was forwarded by invention where fact proved disappointing — General Gordon furnished with a whiskey glass and Thomas Arnold with short legs. Underlining the inadequacy of the

over-stressed moralism of the Victorians had already paid large dividends. Galsworthy's novels have as their most recurrent theme the need for replacing a rigid social code by standards more closely related to empirical needs. Galsworthy was an inveterate moralist, though an uncertain one, and his plays were little more than the presentation of undigested moral object-lessons. Bernard Shaw before him had used the stage to attack conventional morality, though with more charm and persuasiveness, never forgetting that drama's virtue is to be concrete. Shaw's anti-moral moralities were more constructive than Galworthy's heavily-biassed case histories, yet their ultimate effect was to dissolve all values—his practical advice to let moral conduct function as before (approximately) being prefixed by the assurance that morality itself is superstition. Finally, his faith in the Life Force left him with no more acceptable moral ideals than the political opportunism of the dictators and the no less ruthless methods of strong-willed natural leaders in private life.

Human behaviour is more obvious than are the beliefs from which behaviour springs. The rapid pace of change in the face of twentieth century society also made the reconsideration of moral problems imperative; in particular, the emancipation of women made sexual ethics a popular and, for the first time, a public matter for debate. The moral emphasis was all the same, a diversion from the main issue. Even granted a half-way house, absolute like Shaw's God-on-easy-terms—a Guarentor of Being neither omnipotent, righteous or self-existent—the consequences of ridding the world and the self of ultimate value are prodigious; you begin by wanting to reform the world and end by hoping to reform the alphabet. Yet many who repudiated even a tentative approach to a focus of meaning in the universe, seeing Creative Evolution (rightly) as a vestigial trace of old-fashioned religious faith, expected everything to continue much as it had done. Into this vacuum of thought the psychology of Freud and the anthropology of Fraser fitted to a nicety, giving an intellectual cloak to the rejection of positive belief in anything. It was not the technique of psycho-analysis nor the anthropologic data which impressed the literary outlook of the inter-war years so much as the dubious philosophic judgments and relativistic assumptions of the two great scientists. Into the patterns of the unconscious mind and the primitive myth the literary experimentalist was already delving. The "realism" of the twentieth century had at first been the same

as that of the nineteenth—the realism of George Eliot and Anthony Trollope, influenced a little perhaps by Flaubert and Dostoievsky. Now a new realism arose, which took relativism seriously and abolished the unity of the self moving in an objective world of persons and objects for an internal "Stream of consciousness", moving on various levels in an environment of sense-impressions and memory united by symbol and myth. James Joyce was far more painstakingly conscientious in making his prose "true" to his canons than ever Zola had been. Though his treatment of his material in *Ulysses* was partly dependent upon arbitrary intellectual patterns imposed in it from outside, in *Finnegan's Wake* he built the whole structure upon the unity of sense-impression and primaeval myth where they are most nearly fused, in sleep. Virginia Woolf followed Joyce, substituting sensibility for his intellectual or psychological framework. Her *Orlando* is pure pastiche; *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* are lyrical meditations. Such purists were exceptional in their wholeheartedness. They represented the limits of experiment. Nevertheless, the conventions of novelists so diverse as William Faulkner and Miss Compton-Burnett can be traced from within these limits.

The new realism was too remote from common-sense experience to gain popular currency. A compromise, combining elements from the nineteenth-century objective universe with the twentieth century subjective phantasmagoria, has become the characteristic literary achievement of our age. Found most perfectly in the novels of Hemingway, it has now become a commonplace vision, exemplified at its lowest level in the "tough" magazine story. In it, a naturalistic philosophy is projected upon the external world of nature; the observing self retains its unity, remaining in external form unchanged from the self-determining intelligent being posited by humanism. In the novels of Huxley and Waugh we are still aware of an active consciousness shaping a mimic world to present the authors' valuation of life as in a distorting mirror. Contrastingly, the post-war disillusionment in *Farewell to Arms* gives us the converse of detached flippancy. We find an unself-conscious naivety which appears to be incapable of interpreting experience, but only of reflecting the objectively given. It is not easy to realise that the distorting mirror is still there and that this brand of realism—which might be called *synthetic* realism—has first constructed its universe from concepts of its own choosing before displaying it as pure experience. The characters

of synthetic realism are commonly very little articulate and, physically active, their characteristic role is passive; they *suffer*; they are the objects of experience rather than its subjects. In the worst examples, stories of this kind present a plethora of violence and cruelty for its own sake. But in the best—as Hemingway can show—the circle of naturalism is not fully closed. In a land of lust and sudden death the shades of humanity—almost one-dimensional in their narrowness of comprehension—reach out towards a better country where there is the consolation of love and life which enfolds eternal values. So the possibility of tragedy arises out of mere frustration. Hell is recognised as such only when we see the doors of heaven closed against us.

Our age has seen a catastrophic renewal of the methods of terror, the substitution of ideology for reason, and the break-up of humanistic ideals before the assaults of mass vulgarity. But the omnipresence of violence in the "tough" novel is only superficially realistic; it belongs to the internal logic of naturalism rather than to the world of common experience. Presented as a blood-curdling reality, it shapes the external world to its pattern rather than drawing this pattern from life as it finds it. So the legend of the real-life Hemingway helps to popularise the Hemingway hero. Synthetic naturalism has even invaded the detective-story, that last stronghold of reason and the social virtues, with the result that in the hands of Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler this literary form has become the near-contradiction of itself. While truth and right may triumph in the end (*may*, but not certainly *will*), the playing out of the plot moves on the level of unreason and the detective shares the manners, methods and in part the motives of the criminal. In particular, the act of murder, which traditionally has represented the self-destructive revolt of the evil will against the integrity of personality and probity of society, (the *hubris* which brings inevitable *nemesis*) has almost lost significance as it becomes an incidental event in the course of the action. The majesty of justice is no longer mediated by the impartial weighing of evidence but by the bullet which gets home first.

Naturalistic behaviour is criminal in normal society and only possible in the abnormalities of warfare, or in such perversions of human interdependence as the concentration camp. As the ideal of naturalism became progressively actualized in experience in the thirties, literature began to revert to a social conscience and to seek, by making political affirmations, to reverse the stampede towards barbarism. The stage debated

the issues of pacifism and totalitarianism in such plays as *Idiot's Delight* and *Judgment Day*, while for Hemingway, as for many others, the bell tolled decisively in Spain. Even Virginia Woolf began to ask how three guineas might most usefully be spent. Theology alone could explain the root of the matter, namely that society could not hold a naturalistic philosophy without seeking to live its implications, to demonstrate these in life as in literature; by denying the image of God in man, a monster had been created. A generation which denied the relevance of theology was denied this insight. It was not the monster itself which inspired fear, but its habits, these were anti-social and so to be restrained by social action. Marxism was voted by many the best instrument for that purpose, although Koestler began to demonstrate how the monster prospered as readily on a diet of dialectical materialism as on one of national socialism. When the second World War came, it did not by itself illuminate the inadequacy of social palliatives for a spiritual disease, but it made clear that life was worthless without the values of truth, liberty and family affection. Faith, even an *ad hoc* faith, was seen to be imperative. For literature, the re-admission of value meant an escape from the blind alley of realism and the rediscovery of allegory.

Allegory, or its more restricted form the fable, presupposes a coherent philosophy of life and embodies values in its moral teachings. When we find it in the earlier years of the century it usually reflects a religiously-based humanism, such as is patent in *Dear Brutus* or *The Man Who Was Thursday*. Less clearly rooted were the novels of T. F. Powys, which had obviously turned away from realism. In their attack upon the brutality of actual naturalism in the name of an innocent naturalism these have affinity with William Saroyan's prospectus of a new Eden, free from original sin, to be found within the purlieus of Vanity Fair itself. Both represent a humanism which has lost faith in establishing itself rationally and seeks to support itself on feeling alone. In both, the flight from realism tends to evaporate into a sentimental falsification of experience rather than the discovery of a deeper reality. Yet they do succeed in reminding an age of inhuman techniques that the reasons of the heart still carry weight. Aldous Huxley scaled the watershed between the frivilous twenties and the earnest thirties in *Brave New World* where, if the satire was still without the note of urgency, the criticism of hedonism and naturalism was more than academic and prepared the ground for Rex Warner's

condemnation of the ethics of power, *The Aerodrome*, in the next decade. Allegory proper found its twentieth-century shape in Kafka's strange, compulsive outpourings. Except in the way of humour it had grown to be an almost forgotten form. But *The Trial* like *Piers Plowman* or *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a wholly serious exploration of an idea in a tale where every character and incident can be interpreted by using the proper key. In Kafka's case the key was hidden even to the author since it lay in the symbolism of the psyche itself; but, accessible to us, it shows us the inner despair of modern man, consequent upon his lack of inner resources. Kafka replaced the self as a conglomeration of warring impulses, or as a locus of random sense-impressions, by the self as an individual with a destiny. He restored the soul which naturalistic man had jettisoned.

Attacks upon the naturalistic creed and upon synthetic realism used various levels of allegory and fable, which might be plainly didactic or else persuasive, seeking to lead the mind to accept unfamiliar categories of thought. The novels of C. S. Lewis and those of Charles Williams show the two methods as applied from the single stand-point of Christian apologetics. The structure of the thriller was exploited by Graham Greene to disprove the naturalistic thesis on its own ground, by adding to the outward chase-and-escape plot an inward drama of pursuit by the Hound of Heaven. As literature became increasingly concerned with values and amongst writers a profession of religious allegiance (or a search for its equivalent) became a commonplace, unmixed realism became correspondingly rare. An instructive example was the progress of George Orwell, from his first essays in "reporting" style, through the political fantasy *Animal Farm*, to the Kafkaesque *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, where the political moral is subordinated to an examination of the corruption of the human soul.

God may be rejected by despair of His power to save as well as by a confident idolatry and it is perhaps this rejection rather than a reasoning atheism, which colours so much of present-day literature. Those who cannot believe in a God of love yet posit a God of retribution. Though Koestler no longer follows communism, he seems to retain that part of its dogma which asserts its inevitable victory. He demands a destiny for the God that failed; and that destiny, in fact, is to be the rod of anger in the hand of the true God to visit upon the democracies the consequences of their lack of faith. But who the true God is, or how faith is possible, remains unknown.

Only the coming Day of the Lord, which is darkness and not light, is known. Similarly, in *Nineteen-Eighty Four*, the triumph of the Party is assured from the first, partly because of its overwhelming front of power, but chiefly because of the innate weakness of the opposition. Orwell stresses the selfishness and feebleness of the moral will in his hero-victim even more than the lack of moral or intellectual integrity in his partner or the invincible ignorance of the uncomprehending "proles". Sartre's *Huis Clos* is compounded of two elements; the sinfulness of sin and the inescapability of eternal retribution. Divine Wrath, without Divine Grace, is indeed the presupposition of Existentialism in its "atheistic" form. Man's freedom of choice, *which makes no difference to his fate*, is a distorted Justification by Faith—the act of faith without a Saviour or the possibility of salvation. It is indeed the absence of God and not his non-existence which is thus affirmed and literature makes the difference plain.

We are moving in a no-man's land, between the fear of God which is the beginning of wisdom and the rejection of faith in God's will or power to redeem us, which is the mouth of hell. There is a shadow on the horizon of our world darker and more threatening than the atomic bomb—itself only the reflection on the material plane of that darker dread, and its effective symbol. Our feet have well-nigh slipped. Perhaps the residue of faith we still have may hold us until a firmer faith is gained. Once we are assured that a divine Providence rules in creation and has saving relevance even in our disordered generation, the works of our hands, and not least our books, may show the shape of eternal values in their earthly dress.