6-1-1954

God in the Moderen Novel with Special Reference to the Young Christian Reader

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GOD IN THE MODERN NOVEL, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE YOUNG CHRISTIAN READER

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Practical Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Divinity

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by

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June 1954

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Church finds herself today, as never before, flooded by a truly massive publication of novels whose message, to a great extent, is diametrically opposed to the Revelation of Truth as it is found in the Scriptures. This fact is so widely known as to be almost trite. Yet the Church itself -- and by the Church I mean all Protestant Christian congregations in the world -- has very nearly completely ignored, from its beginning, this particular stream of literature.

The Protestant churches have done pitifully little to challenge the modern novel. What has been done has been done in an unorganized, hit-and-miss fashion. A few reviews appearing in column spots; perhaps a note in a theological journal; perhaps a line in a newspaper; or a "plug" in a publishing house book-jacket; or a sentence in the pulpit -- only this bit to fight what is probably one of the most potent public forces, along with the movies, in existence.

The Roman Catholic Church has done more to stem the tide. First of all, she has produced more novels of her own, even at the risk of sometimes certain financial loss. I refer particularly to the works of the contemporary mystic, Thomas Merton, whose early writings must have lost the Empire much in funds. I refer also to the recent novel, The Cardinal, which not only appeared in "Cosmopolitan" magazine as a serial, but went on to become a "best-seller" on the book stands -- and not, according to any competent literary standard, deservedly.

Certainly The Cardinal cannot conceivably be ranked with books of the caliber of James Jones' From Here to Eternity[1] in literary quality.

Then, too, the Roman Catholics have maintained a steady and clear eye on the goings-on in the literary world. Few novelists have berated the Roman faith, and made off with it. To be analyzed, puzzled, and finally laughed at by a magazine which carries the weight of, for example, "America", is not a desirable experience for any novelist. Most of the writers who know "the ropes" stay away from the priesthood and the elevated Host: or, on the other end of the scale, they bombard the sanctity of the Roman Church with kindly bits of humor (of the Bing Crosby, Barry Fitzgerald type), and win the smile of the Archbishop. And we have not even mentioned the Library of the Forbidden Books, nor the fast hold which the Roman Church gains on the reading of its children through the powerful day school.

And, truthfully, the Roman Church ought to be praised for its energies directed toward the novelist. The Roman Church has seen the need, and acted upon it maturely. It is possible that the Protestant Church has only glimpsed the need, and has chosen to act upon it in a correspondingly sporadic manner.

The Church needs creative novelists, and good ones, to place the message of the Gospel into the hands of a strange, elusive audience. The readers of Gladys Schmitt, possibly, could be reached with a fine Lutheran pamphlet, but it is doubtful. Or conceivably they could be touched by a church service, but that is doubtful, too. Readers of the novel are very

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[1] From Here to Eternity has been cited by many critics as America's best novel in the last decade, the "work of a natural novelist, a genius." The work will be quoted directly later in this paper. As far as literary style and capacity is concerned, Robinson's book cannot stand alongside that of James Jones.

often the kind of people who avoid preachiness of any kind. That's why they read the novel -- because it doesn't preach; it insinuates.

But who insinuates? The author? Can he be held accountable for the words of his characters? Is the author doing the insinuating, or is he merely holding the mirror up to his times, and leaving it to the mature reader to do his own culling, his own moralizing, his own judging? This argument is constantly advanced by the novelist himself against critics who wish to hold him morally responsible.

It ought to be said, relevant to that argument, that no novelist can actually write without identifying himself with at least one character in his work. It is impossible to make a character live whom one does not "know." And since every novelist knows himself better than anyone else, he will almost invariably put some of himself into every novel. It is possible to find Hemingway in every Hemingway hero, and the same applies to nearly every other modern American novelist.

Secondly, who reads the novelist? Only the mature? Any druggist will quickly point out that a considerable number of teen-agers, for example, browse daily about his pocket book twirl-counter. Are these teen-agers capable of doing their own judging? Or the determined member of the Book-of-the Month Club, the young wife and mother who manages to drown her perhaps disillusioning life with her husband and children by reading the latest sexual exploits of a Frank Yerby hero -- is she capable of doing her own judging?

If the author can shrug off his responsibility to the young, and to the immature, in such easy fashion as in the past, the Christian reader is indeed in a sorry position. He may dislike, but he cannot criticize. If he likes the author's morals, fine! If not, the author

can claim artistic immunity.

This immunity, incidentally, is not so conveniently present for every form of art. Hollywood has snuffed it with the Hayes Office. The government has snuffed it with a refusal to send through the mail any pornography. Unfortunately, this law has not extended to the novel, which often is as pornographical as any nudist colony journal.

It is a problem, of course, as to how far one can hold the novelist responsible for the words and actions of his characters. The writer of this paper believes he can be held as responsible as any essayist for his essay, as any teacher for his teaching. That is the opinion which controls the tenor of this paper. It is so because the writer has seen, in three years of ministry, the tragic effect which sordid fiction can have, and often does have, upon especially the teen-age mind.

The modern novel carries a potent message. The Church ought make no mistake about that. The time for ignoring the novelist and his novel is over. We shall either find a means to deal with the novel, or we shall let our Church suffer from it. But we shall not ignore it longer. The baby has grown far beyond expected proportion, and the Church has a problem on her hands.

The youth of the Church are not, of course, the only ones involved in this problem. But it is the contention of the writer that they are the most susceptible ones[2], and that, therefore, the problem meets them

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[2]Many modern novelists would themselves agree with this. Gladys Schmitt, in Alexandra (New York: Deal Press, 1947), tells dramatically how the young girl Alexandra, in her teens, patterns her life so imaginatively after her book heroines that she actually, at times, experiences periods where she and her idol are one; where she is her heroine. This phenomenon, according to many modern psychologists, is not unusual to teen-age girls.

with peculiar focus. That is why the title of this paper is: "God in the Modern Novel, with Special Reference to the Young Christian Reader."

CHAPTER II

"NO CONVICTIONS"

Ernest Hemingway has said a lot of words since he first started publishing in the years following World War I. No one really knows how many people have read him, and believed his words. The number runs up into the hundreds of millions. When his last novel, Across the River and Into the Trees, appeared in "Cosmopolitan" magazine about 1950, the editors of that journal reported that Hemingway had never written a bad line in his life.

Perhaps the idolizing editors chose to ignore statements like the following, which fairly well indicate the morally hollow strain which runs through Hemingway's works. The Colonel is speaking:

> Now we are governed in some way, by the drags. We are governed by what you find in the bottom of dead beer glasses that whores have dunked their cigarettes in. The place has not even been swept out yet and they have an amateur pianist beating on the box.[1]

If that is not a "bad" line in almost every conceivable way, we might as well toss the principles of literary[2] and moral criticism down the drain and open the flood gates to a host of inept, pale and distraught writers who have nothing to tell us except: "We have nothing to tell you."

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[1] Ernest Hemingway, Across the River and Into the Trees (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), p. 227.

[2] Some critics would argue that the passage contains that Hemingway touch which makes it literature. There is no doubt that Hemingway can write a down-to-earth, vivid prose which is its own greatness. However, the position of the preposition "in" in the above passage does not improve the line, "We are governed . . . ." In fact, the preposition might be considered as detrimental to the passage, and in thoroughly bad taste.

Nor is the hollowness peculiar to Hemingway. Gladys Schmitt, quite well known in the literary field for three novels, The Gates of Aulis, Alexandra, and David the King, is a member of the United Lutheran Church. Yet her novels are hardly less than Hemingway's shot through with a completely vacant morality. In Alexandra this attitude comes to the fore in the story of an actress who falls into illicit love with at least three successive paramours. The goal:

> I no longer thought it possible for them to become lovers. Their faces, side by side against the mauve and pink stripes of the sofa, ruled out any such possibility. The flesh of her cheeks looked young, pliant, moist; she was fresh and resilient in the certainty of his satisfaction. But he, brooding on old soured triumphs, was limp and lusterless. His cheeks sagged, his eyes were strained and yellowish, he was plainly out of breath.[3]

Hemingway and Schmitt seem to be representative of their generation.[4] It is possible to list a clique of powerful writers--Steinbeck, Maugham, Faulkner, Caldwell, Wouk, Mailer, Shaw (Irwin), and even Spillane -- who fall into the identical category. They have no hope to give, and yet they write and prate their hopelessness about as if they could save the world with their vacuum. In fact, they often are proud of their emptiness.

"At the present moment," wrote Flaubert in his Preface to the final edition of Madame Bovary, "I believe that even a thinker (and the artist, surely, is three times a thinker) should have no convictions."[5] Flaubert

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[3]Gladys Schmitt, op. cit., p. 70.

[4]"The Lost Generation," as they love to refer to themselves. However, they are not so much a lost generation as one found by a strange, reactionary moral code.

[5]Gustave Flaubert, Madame Bovary (New York: Modern Library, 1947), p. vii.

has been called the "Father of the Modern American Novel". At least in the sense of the statement above, it would be difficult to discredit his title. Most writers of novels today seem to be without conviction of any positive sort. To the average reader of the novel, that must certainly seem the case.

But is it possible to have "no convictions," really? Biblical theology says no. If you do not love Me, said Christ, you hate Me. There is no middle road, no place where there is no faith and no denial of faith. There is either, or, always.

So it is with the modern novelist. He may wish to state his lack of beliefs, but he gives himself away in countless sentences. Thus D. H. Lawrence writes: "Give me the body. I believe the life of the body is a greater reality than the life of the mind: when the body is really awakened to life."[6] Is that being "without conviction"? And Prew in James Jones' From Here to Eternity:

> He felt a great deal like an amnesia case must feel, upon waking in some foreign land where he had never been and hears the language that he cannot understand, having only a vague, dream-haunted picture of how he ever got there. How came you here? he asks himself, among these strange outlandish people? but is afraid to listen to the answer himself gives him back.[7]

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[6] D. H. Lawrence, Lady Chatterley's Lover (New York: Modern Library, 1948), p. 17.

[7] James Jones, From Here to Eternity (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), p. 22.

The point is: there is an answer. There never is no answer. There is always conviction. It may be negative,[8] but it is there nevertheless.

It is the business of the religious critic first to pinpoint this conviction of the novelist, then to estimate its truth in the light of the Bible and Christian experience. If the novelist has a dogma, and as we have showed, he does, then that dogma must be either in accord or discord with the teachings of God as revealed in Holy Scripture. And it must be the concern of the Church to state itself clearly concerning other dogmas.

What is the doctrine of the modern novel? And how is the young Christian involved? These questions will concern us in future chapters.

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[8]It almost always is. Prew, in From Here to Eternity (Ibid.), ends up dying on a golf course, shot by one of his own friends as he tries to return to his regiment during the attack on Pearl Harbor. It is significant that this novel has achieved such high honors in the few years of its life, not only for its method, but also, presumably, for its message.

CHAPTER III

EROS AND EROS

A novel is not all imagination. The major ingredient in any work of fiction is the experience of the author. Without experience, a writer could tell no story. And, if you look for a central doctrine, or meaning, in the modern novel, you must seek it in a central experience.

It is common knowledge what that central experience in today's novel is. It is "Love." The hero and heroine of almost every work of fiction on current stands can weave through only a few pages before stripping each other naked and enjoying usually unsanctioned passion.

> Love, in the novels at least, exists to give the woman a chance to "get her own back." It is, apparently, the one means thought to be at her disposal for humiliating men and "putting them in their place." The heroine of one current best-seller carves the initials of every man who goes to bed with her on the handle of her fan, just as the bad men in the old-time westerns carved notches in the handles of their guns whenever another "varmint" bit the dust.[1]

"Love (Eros)," according to Frederick Hoffman, "is the champion of life, engaged in a relentless struggle against Death."[2]

So then, we may assume, the "life force" in the modern novel, the most prominent doctrine, is the "gospel" of Love, which is enjoyed amidst the Death of the world -- the wars, the sickness, the decay, the

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[1]Bergen Evans, "This Thing Called Love," Atlantic Monthly, 181 (Feb., 1948), p. 29.

[2]Frederick Hoffman, Freudianism and the Literary Mind (New York: Philosophical Press, 1945), p. 77.

failures. We can cite no more fervent exponent of this doctrine than Ernest Hemingway, especially his novel, For Whom the Bell Tolls.[3] Jordan, the hero, repeatedly experiences amorous adventure with Maria, a refugee from Fascist invasion of her homeland. At the end of the story, Jordan goes to his death defending Maria, dreaming that their Love will live on beyond the bullets.

James Jones presents the story of Karen and Milt Warden, also illicit lovers, who snatch from the drall hum of the army barracks some excitement of sex.[4] Alan Paton, a British author whose recent novels have enjoyed a vast popularity in America, tells about Pieter, who cannot resist, because of a cold wife, the temptation to have an affair with a colored native of South Africa.[5] The story is always be the same. Love against night. Love against the world. Lovers against fate. And, sometimes, Lovers against God.

It is strange, though, how often doubts of this religion creep into the pages of even the strongest exponents of Love, and how often the lovers lose everything because of their relations. Hemingway's Pilar complains:

> One has a feeling within one that blinds a man while he loves you. You, with that feeling, blind him, and blind yourself. Then one day, for no reason, he sees you ugly as you really are and he is not blind any more and then you see yourself as ugly as he sees

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[3]Ernest Hemingway, For Whom the Bell Tolls (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940).

[4]James Jones, op. cit.

[5]Alan Paton, Too Late the Phalarope (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953).

you and you lose your man and your feeling.[6]

James Jones' Karen tells her lover:

> "I love to touch you," Karen whispered, "to cuddle you, be fondled by you, love you. But it always leads to sex. You'll never know the times I've wanted to touch you, but not done it, because it always leads to sex."[7]

Note that immense "BUT." Evidently Karen isn't very happy with the kind of love Milt Warden is giving her.

The hero of James M. Cain, relating a conquest:

> I kissed her, then held her tight and kissed her again, and again after that . . . . I knew I was going to have her. But when I did, she cried and kept on crying.[8]

Are these tears of passion? Or regret?

And Djuna Barnes, in her poetic fashion, explodes the entire sex myth:

> Because the lesson we learn is always by giving death and a sword to our lover. You are full to the brim with pride, but I am an empty pot going forward, saying my prayers in a dark place; because I know no one loves, I, least of all, and that no one loves me, that's what makes people so passionate and bright, because they want to love and be loved, when there is only a bit of lying in the ear to make the ear forget what time is compiling.[9]

But the most striking instance of this failure of Eros, as portrayed in the modern novel, may be found in Gladys Schmitt, whose David[10] is

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[6]Ernest Hemingway, op. cit., pp. 97 and 98.

[7]James Jones, op. cit., p. 826.

[8]James M. Cain, Past All Dishonor (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), p. 129.

[9]Djuna Barnes, Nightwood (New York: New Directions, 1947), p. 79.

[10]Gladys Schmitt's David is not the David of Scripture. He is, instead, a rather depressing combination of mystic and Epicurean. Miss Schmitt emphasizes David's romantic episodes to an extent not compatible with either Bible or decency, and so places this novel in a class with any completely secular work.

paying the penalty for his escapade with Bathsheba:

> Through the remainder of the long afternoon and evening, the King of Israel sought earnestly after the countenance of the Lord. He remembered those times when he had drawn nigh unto Him -- the night when he had sensed the brooding presence hovering above the Gibean cave in which he waited for his last meeting with Jonothan; the evening when he had sat beside the open grave in Samuel's house, touching the dry soles of the prophet's feet; the afternoon when he had knelt in the brown house of Abinadab, pondering upon the half-obliterated symbols cared upon the ark of God. And he was amazed to see how few and far apart were the occasions when he had looked upon his Creator. They rose, distant and widely separate, like the few mountain peaks that lifted themselves out of the plains of Israel; and seas of mist, seas of impenetrable blackness floated between. They are beyond me now, he thought; my eyes behold them as through a fog. Strive as I will, I cannot be lifted up, nor can I truly see them from below . . . . The long ray of light paled while he strove to remember. The voices in the garden ceased; the outlines of the earthen jars and the wineskins grew vague and were lost. Surely, he thought, if I call upon Him with all my spirit, He will come again . . . . But the longer he persisted in his search, the more dim and remote that which he sought became. He turned on his face and beat his fists against the earth in rage and bafflement. "O God, God, God," he said aloud. But the word refused to yield its blessed essence.[11]

So David fails to meet his God after his Love with Bathsheba. The penalty for physical "life," then, is spiritual poverty, bordering on Death. God will not come. Only Bathsheba will.

The aunt of Pieter Van Flaanderen in Paton's Too Late the Phalarope tells the retribution which comes to Pieter after his adultery with the South African native:

> But though the captain and I followed, we did not go into the room, but stood at the door; for he was saying that he was cleansed, once and for ever, but why must a man be struck down to be cleansed, and why could not the man who had struck him down have warned him, for by this very warning he would have been cleansed for ever, and why could not God have warned him, and

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[11] Gladys Schmitt, David the King (New York: Dial Press, 1946), p. 465.

> why must God strike him down so utterly, and why must the innocent also be struck down, and why and why and why?[12]

The "innocent" are Pieter's family, who shut themselves off from society forever[13] because of Pieter's folly. This is probably one of the more honest portrayals of the result of sexual depravity in the novel today.

William Faulkner equates Love with an early death. In "An Odor of Verbena," one of his early stories, he writes:

> Sometimes I think the finest thing that can happen to a man is to love something, a woman preferably, well, hard hard hard, then to die young because he believed what he could not help but believe . . . .[14]

It is true, as Bergen Evans wrote, that Love (or rather sex which is confused with Love) is portrayed as the "sole end of life, the obsession of every mind."[15] It is held up as the ideal of life, the blossom and the fruit of existence. Nevertheless modern authors, with an instinct bordering on divine, sense their own failure in preaching their own gospel. Said Aldous Huxley:

> Having, by their voluntary ignorance, wrong-doing and wrong being, caused the divine springs to dry up, human beings can do something to mitigate the horrors of their situation by 'keeping one another wet with their slime.'[16]

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[12]Alan Paton, op. cit., p. 262.

[13]Few narratives are so utterly relentless in depicting the results of sexual sin. Pieter's family live henceforth in a shuttered house, having their groceries brought to them by a servant. They have no friends. They die from loneliness and sickness. And Pieter is forever alone, because, for one moment, he tried sinfully not to be alone.

[14]William Faulkner, The Portable Faulkner, edited by Malcolm Cowley (New York: Viking Press, 1949), p. 199.

[15]Bergen Evans, op. cit., p. 28.

[16]Aldous Huxley, The Perennial Philosophy (New York and London: Harper and Bros., 1944, 1945), p. 91.

But the slime seldom achieves a lasting reality. And soon, invariably, those who practice this manner of life must find themselves facing a stone wall of destruction. The indiscretion of youth, made into a quick god, soon turns upon its creator with a terror and a thrust. Marcel Proust: "Blaming this final calamity, I return to you forever; my last illusion has been torn away, I am forever unhappy."[17]

That is it. Eros and Eros and Eros equals Love. But, finally, there is only unhappiness. And then there is certain Death.

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[17]Marcel Proust, Pleasures and Regrets (New York: Philosophical Library, 1943), p. 57.

CHAPTER IV

DE MORTUIS

We have indicated that Death is the almost invariable catastrophe which succeeds a full surrender to Eros. Nearly all of Hemingway's heroes die, eventually, as a natural outcome of the sort of life they have chosen — the Eros life. Only the Old Man, in The Old Man and the Sea, lives a sort of pathetic existence, dreaming of lions and remembering that once, once, he had caught a big fish:

> He unstepped the mast and furled the sail and tied it. Then he shouldered the mast and started to climb. It was then he knew the depth of his tiredness. He stopped for a moment and looked back and saw in the reflection from the street light the great tail of the fish standing up well behind the skiff's stern. He saw the white naked line of his backbone and the dark mass of the head with the projecting bill and all the nakedness between.[1]

This last of Hemingway's novels ends: "The old man was dreaming about the lions."[2] So even this comparatively clean character (nevertheless cast in Hemingway's own mold) eeks out a fairly existence. One experience is supposed to carry him into Death a content man.

That may indicate, in a little way, how lightly Death is finally treated by the modern novelist. Hemingway's war novels are replete with instances wherein Death is scorned by the Man, the Soldier, the Lover. This was Jordan's most vital strength — the ability to laugh at Death:

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[1] Ernest Hemingway, The Old Man and the Sea (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), p. 133.

[2] Ibid., p. 140.

> This was the greatest gift he had, the talent that fitted him for war; that ability not to ignore but to despise whatever bad ending there could be. This quality was destroyed by too much responsibility for others or the necessity of undertaking something ill planned or badly conceived. For in such things the bad ending, failure, could not be ignored. It was not simply a possibility of harm to one's self, which could be ignored. He knew he himself was nothing, and he knew death was nothing. He knew that truly, as truly as he knew anything. In the last few days he had learned that he himself, with another person, could be everything. But inside himself he knew that this was the exception. That we have had, he thought. In that I have been most fortunate. That was given to me, perhaps, because I never asked for it. That cannot be taken away nor lost. But that is over and done with now on this morning and what there is to do now is our work.[3]

Also in For Whom the Bell Tolls, Lieutenant Berrendo looks at a dead soldier, refuses to touch him, says: "What a bad thing war is."[4]

Hemingway continues:

> Then he made the sign of the cross again and as he walked down the hill he said five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys for the repose of the soul of his dead comrade. He did not wish to stay to see his orders being carried out.[5]

Death is not played with lightly because a dynamic faith has conquered it. Death is ignored, or laughed at, because it is "nothing," most certainly not an entrance into an eternity of life. If anything, Death is the dark, dumb shadow that anti-climaxes all of the brilliant lights of the Eros moments, when and when only the nature of man and his world can be revealed and understood. The modern American novelist has little to say about the land beyond except that it is "nada, nada,

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[3]Ernest Hemingway, on. cit., p. 393.

[4]Ibid., p. 322.

[5]Ibid., p. 322.

nada,"[6] or, in other words, the last, the final, the deep slumber that is not life, and therefore is not.

Thus, the terror of the modern war novel, in particular, is easy to understand. Time and again the soldeir, the sailor, complain of the imminence of destruction, when the "I" will be no longer "I," and all will end without warning. Warren Eyster, in his Far From the Customary Skies, and also Nicholas Monsarrat in his The Cruel Sea are replete with this fear of immediate destruction and ensuing darkness.

In Eyster's book Ham is described:

> Yet even as he mocked he was helpless and bewildered before this deeper intelligence than his own, this mystery of being that leaves no clue and turns all search into defeat and humility . . . .[7]

And in Monsarrat, the fearful Ferraby laments the time when a torpedo may crash into his ship, indeed, into his berth, and hurl him into the sea of Death:

> At midnight, every night at sea, Ferraby was free to go below, and turn in, and sleep undisturbed till breakfast time: he had never found this possible save at the very beginning and the very end of a voyage, when they were in safety and shelter. There was something in the very act of lying down below the waterline that tortured his imagination: it seemed quite impossible that Compass Rose would not be torpedoed during these dark hours, and that the torpedo, when it struck, would not rip its way into the very cabin where he lay . . . . Night after night, when they were out in the deep of the Atlantic, these thoughts returned to him: he would lie there, while the ship rolled and groaned and the water sluiced past a few inches from his bunk, sweating and staring at the bulkhead and the rivets that bound the thin plating together. That plating was all that stood between him and the black water: he waited in terror for the iron clang, the explosion, the inrush of water, the certainty of being trapped and choked before he could make a move. One terrible night he had managed to get to sleep, even though there had been warnings of a submarine

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[6] Ibid., p. 77.

[7] Warren Eyster, Far from the Customary Skies (New York: Viking Press, 1953), p. 103.

> pack in their vicinity: after an hour of sweating nervousness he had dozed off, and then, between waking and sleeping, he had heard a monstrous explosion that seemed to come from within the ship itself, and as he leapt from his bunk the alarm bell clanged, followed by a rush of feet, and he had felt a surge of blinding panic as he raced for the ladder and the open sky.[8]

It must be stated that one contemporary novelist has succeeded in avoiding the "dead end" of his fellows. That man is Alan Paton. His two novels, Too Late the Phalarope and Cry, the Beloved Country, contain characters whose eyes are constantly crying for the intervention of Heaven, and whose faiths are set on the eternity beyond. Thus, in Cry, the Beloved Country, the pastor Kumalo thinks long and hard:

> Who indeed knows the secret of the earthly pilgrimage? Who knows for what we live, and struggle, and die? Who knows what keeps us living and struggling, while all things break about us? Who knows why the warm flesh of a child is such comfort, when one's own child is lost and cannot be recovered? Wise men write many books, in words too hard to understand. But this, the purpose of our lives, the end of all our struggle, is beyond all human wisdom. Oh God, my God, do not Thou forsake me. Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, if Thou art with me . . . .[9]

Pastor Kumalo on the train, traveling to rescue his son and daughter from the ravages of the City:

> The journey had begun. And now the fear back again, the fear of the unknown, the fear of the great city where boys were killed crossing the street, the fear of Gertrude's sickness. Deep down the fear for his son. Deep down the fear of a man who lives in a world not made for him, whose own world is slipping away, dying, being destroyed, beyond any recall.

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[8] Nicholas Monsarrat, The Cruel Sea (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1953), pp. 153, 154.

[9] Alan Paton, Cry, the Beloved Country (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), p. 62.

> Already the knees are weak of the man who a moment since had shown his little vanity, told his little lie, before these respectful people.
> The humble man reached in his pocket for his sacred book, and began to read. It was this world alone that was certain.[10]

Paton is constantly aware of the destruction of all things. He is very sensitive to the imminence of Death, and questions its meanings repeatedly. But the answer he arrives at is the Christian answer, and his books are well lit by this hope.[11]

The tragedy is that Paton is alone in his offering. Many modern novelists allow their characters to flounder about in a vast sea of darkness, faced by Death as the inevitable finis to all life.

After Eros, then, there is nothing. People should want nothing more than each other's flesh. That is the climax of this life, and it is the only real life we shall have.

The question immediately occurs: Why live this kind of life out to a finish? Why portray the dumb creatures who stagger about enjoying each other's bodies with no other purpose than the experience of sex?

The answer of the novelists is simple: The experience of living, of loving, is justification for itself. Man needs no further responsibility than the enjoyment of himself and his kind. And the purpose of being born is to engage in this perpetual hunt for love. Thus,

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[10] Ibid., p. 14.

[11] Alan Paton's novels are written in a manner close to the King James Biblical style. His dialogue is punctuated by constant references to Jesus Christ. His tone is reverent. He has proved definitely that it is very possible for novels to be clean, and even religious, and still be interesting to this generation.

Hemingway's heroes may die, but not unfulfilled.[12] Their Love is enough for them, and their women.

"You see?" says Temple. "That's what's so terrible. We don't even need Him. Simple evil is enough."[13]

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[12]Frederick Hoffman (op. cit.) goes so far as to state that Death is the real ambition of Love as it is pictured in the modern American novel, and that Love reaches its fulfillment only in its suicidal denouement. From the mass of evidence in current novels, we may find this view quite tenable.

[13]William Faulkner, Requiem for a Nun (New York: Random House, 1950, 1951), p. 128.

CHAPTER V

PORTRAIT OF A SKELETON

One would almost suppose that the negative doctrine of the modern novelist would automatically exclude any ideas of the Church; indeed, a doctrine of no-life-after-Death would have to eliminate the Church also, since the Church on earth is primarily concerned with eternal life, not physical life.

Here, however, the novelists display some inconsistency. Every now and then one can detect in their pages a longing for the security of the altar. It is not unusual for a Hemingway hero to pray before the battle; nor for a Faulkner citizenry to speak for a church in their town:

> 'We're going to have a town,' Peabody said. 'We already got a church -- that's Whitfield's cabin. And we're going to build a school too soon as we get around to it. But we're going to build the courthouse today; we've already got something to put in it to make it a courthouse: that iron box that's been in Ratcliffe's way in the store for the last ten years. Then we'll have a town.'

But the church is only a part of the town, no more.

Hyster's sailors do not hesitate to attend a service on board ship. And even the ravaging, raping heroes of James M. Cain will bow before the Roman candlesticks one minute, and the next minute continue with their chase after sex.[2]

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[1] Ibid., p. 26.

[2] James M. Cain has written a story in which the hero rapes the heroine at the foot of a Mexican chapel altar (Roman Catholic), and then later prays for forgiveness. This prayer, of course, does not change his sex habits, for the rapine continues later in the story.

It is hardly possible to escape, in all this, a suspicion of hypocrisy. Either modern writers know nothing of what the Church is all about, or they are deliberately spouting their venom upon the Church with an intent to undermine.

More often than not, the former is the case. Modern authors have strayed so far from the central truths of religion as revealed in the Bible that they cannot possibly understand the <u>significance</u> of the Church. The only thing they can understand is the <u>appearance</u> of the Church. As a part of the human scene this indefinable institution must of necessity enter the picture in almost any story of some comprehension. But it enters, usually, as a mere shell of itself, shadow of ridiculous symbolisms and cheap glitter.

It is not uncommon to see, in modern fiction, the Church decimated by romantic slush so over-emotional and sentimental as to make the Church thoroughly distasteful to any sane reader. Such is the case with Hemingway, whose soldiers speak profuse prayers in battle and then renounce all claims to the Christian life with a typical Hemingway sexual encounter. Such, also, is the case with men across the ocean -- Evelyn Waugh, for example, whose conversion to Roman Catholicism brought forth <u>Brideshead Revisited</u>: a mass of symbols so meaningless that they render his "conversion" a matter for discussion.[3]

What has happened is this: modern writers have abandoned Agape for Eros, the Bible for Darwin, Christ for Self. But, because the

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[3]Evelyn Waugh's <u>Brideshead Revisited</u> (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949) is still carried on Catholic bookstore shelves as a testimony to the conversion of the author. As this writer has pointed out in the "Lutheran Outlook," however, the so-called Waugh conversion was a little more, if anything more, than a return to Roman Catholic romanticism ("Lutheran Outlook," Feb., 1948).

Church seems to be here for good, it must be portrayed somehow. And so it is -- portrayed in the same pale sheen as a dollar and ninety-five-cent necklace in a dime store.

The cathedrals are beautiful, but vacant. The music is there, but it is the music of Hearts and Flowers. The flowers are perfumed, but paper. The Church is, finally, a skeleton unable to move, with no breath, no life, nothing but a memory and a tear. She has no word but the word of emotion; no voice but the silly whispers of romance. She is only a Place Where People Get Married, or kneel to say a quick prayer before the next episode.

It is impossible to estimate the damage the modern novel has done to the Church as a whole. The sentimental attachment to the Church is somewhat of a unique phenomenon in America. Witness the annual splurge of attendance in the pews at Christmas. And the novelists have employed this emotional tug to the limit. The Church is there to be venerated, adored like a Christmas tree, and then forgotten while Eros continues on her way undisturbed.

The attack is so dangerous, so successful, because it is so insidious. The emotional appeal sounds good -- even to some religious writers. Books have been tagged "Christian" or "religious" which have little right to the title -- books such as Maugham's The Razor's Edge, or Waugh's Brideshead Revisited. And this happened right under the eyes of Christian readers. Totally ignored was the fact that these

novels did not once mention the heart and center of the Gospel,[4] nor even approached the concept of worship as prescribed in the New Testament, or the New Testament idea of the Church.

Most modern novels are guilty of insult against the Church, and especially the young people of the Church. It is difficult to see anything less than continuing harm coming to the Church from the millions of pages of libel[5] which yearly spring from the presses. The question is: Will the Church learn to defend herself? And-- how can she?

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[4] The confusion of religious emotionalism with religion is not an error peculiar to the secular publishers. Religious publishers have been more than a few times guilty of this, and have advertised as religious novels which are merely, at best, encouraging to the living of a clean, Christian-like life. Somewhat more care could be exercised, in this respect, by religious publishing houses.

[5] In the sense that, by polluting the teaching of the Church, the writers defame the very name of the Church of Christ, and render her a watered-down institution of charity in the eyes of the young prospects of the Church.

CHAPTER VI

TOWARD AN ANSWER

The Church can defend herself against the undergirding acid of the modern novel in one of two ways. Either she can take the novel to her bosom — and so inevitably weaken her own theology to the "thin bluish milk" as Professor Oliver Rupprecht termed it.[1] Or she can take a stand against the Eros and Death of the novel — a stand which will not abide any compromise.

Many of the Protestant church bodies in our country, unfortunately, have effected a merger. The "Christian Century" is able to find spiritual depths in Hemingway — indeed, Christian depths.[2] It is discouraging to hear book reviews of some of the worst novels in contemporary literature being presented with applause to the ladies' aid societies and guilds of almost all larger Protestant churches.

The compromise has, then, been made to some extent. It is no longer possible to discuss the Church as completely separate from her description in the novels as a gaudy bauble. Perhaps she has actually earned her name in the novel by her weak, puny form in the world. That is a definite possibility, but one which it is not easy to determine. Nevertheless, we may find a sure clue by merely watching how the Protestant

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[1] In a lecture on the modern novel given at Concordia College, Milwaukee, Wis., in May of 1945. Prof. Rupprecht had special reference to the emotionalism prevalent in novels, often mistaken for genuine religion.

[2] Robert Conover, "Hemingway, The Writer As Artist," a Review, Christian Century, Vol. LXX, No. 9, March 4, 1953, p. 256.

churches, for a major part, have failed to see in the modern novel any threat whatsoever to their own well-being.

The churches blame their failing youth societies upon poor organization, lack of teachers and leaders, and many other factors, and almost totally ignore the viper of the novel at the bosom of the entire Church youth movement.[3] For it is the youth who reads with most innocent susceptibility the novels of James M. Cain, Hemingway, Steinbeck, and all the other potential poisons which flood today's drug store stands. Hans Bruss questions the entire viewpoint of Christendom toward modern fiction:

> Religionists claim that they have the stuff that will meet the needs of our desperate hour, but a person would not suspect this by reading many of the religious books that appear, especially fiction.
>
> Perhaps we need to look again at what we mean by "Christian" literature, especially "Christian" fiction. Do we pass it off as Christian literature simply because it has been sterilized? Because any offensive smut or obscenities have been eliminated? Does that make it "Christian"? There are erroneous notions abroad as to what constitutes wholesome literature. There are still too many reformed taboos operating within Protestantism . . . .[4]

Such a "Puritan" approach, as Bruss points out, is hardly an answer to the problem of the Church's defense. You can't fight fire with milk, nor volumes with a pious expression. You can't win the youth of the

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[3]It is difficult to find any literature in church journals which deals exhaustively and realistically with the threat which the modern novel holds toward the Church. Even the current furor over the teen delinquency problem has failed to bring forth any evaluation of the role played by the novel in contributing to delinquency.

[4]Hans Bruss, "Obscenity in Popular Fiction," The Cresset, Vol. 15, No. 8, June, 1952, p. 32.

Church back by telling them that you will censor their books, or write namby-pamby new ones. The answer will have to be better than that. The answer will have to be real.

It will involve, first, a suitable education in Christian doctrine.[5]

It will involve, second, a psychological approach which will point out the failures of the modern novel.

The youth in the Church like to think that they can find, in the Eros love of the modern novel, a genuine happiness. The expressions of a Hemingway hero appeal to them. The phrases sound promising. They sound promising because, for a moment, they manage to dull the sense of sin.

Only when sin is made a reality in the heart of youth will Hemingway's heroes emerge in their real darkness -- as blind, dead, and enemies of God. Only when, under the cross of Christ, our youth bow submissively and say, "I am a sinner" -- only then will they be able to discriminate between the good and the bad in literature. That much is fundamental in Christendom, and especially in Lutheranism.

Naturally, that situation poses a responsibility. The Church needs a continuing religious education of her youth, who should be led closer to their Savior after the years of Confirmation, when the impact of the modern novel makes itself most threateningly felt.[6] And that education,

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[5] The United Lutheran Church has come to some discouraging conclusions as an outcome of a Confirmation Testing Program, recently completed. One conclusion: pastors in the U.L.C. have been too optimistic about their confirmation instruction, as well as the actual amount of doctrinal certainty which the average ULC pupil takes from the classroom into life.

[6] Early adolescence has been called the "putty" age, when the young boy or girl is frighteningly pliable. It is of course impossible to estimate the good -- or evil -- which a single book can effect in the mind of one who is in this age. But the estimate made would probably tend to understate rather than overstate the potency.

which should start after Confirmation, should best continue on into and through the adult years.

No one in the Church is free from the danger of complacency. Everyone needs to know the truth about God and himself. And only that truth can be the counteracting agent against the modern novel. The first answer, then, is the Bible Class, the study class -- the education of young and old adults in the doctrines of Scripture -- lest any young person in the Church should be forced, out of ignorance, to share the dreadful uncertainty of Temple: "To save my soul -- if I have a soul. If there is a God to save it -- a God who wants it --"?[7]

This education of the youth and adults will be the growing concern of the Church in the years to come. The forces of the world have been too well aligned for the Church to consider Confirmation a fair end to Bible education. Pastors, teachers, laymen, and writers will have to join to produce materials[8] and teaching hours which will safely protect the Church's own from the ravaging of Eros.

Secondly, the Church will have to point out the <u>failure</u> of the modern novel to meet life successfully. This can be done in the classes discussed above, in books, magazines, school rooms. The Church will be obliged to reveal the modern heroes for what they are: Godless paper weaklings, who

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[7] William Faulkner, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 212.

[8] After examining the Bible study materials of almost every Protestant denomination, the writer has been unable to find a single course, or quarterly, or leaflet, which touches upon the failure of the modern novel, or even, in any way, deals with the modern novel.

die hopeless, with no eternity ahead.

The characters of the modern novel will have to be honestly depicted as fully surrendered to the evils of the flesh, and as deserving only of the Death they inveriably encounter. Eros itself, the enjoyment of sex for its own sake, will have to be portrayed as the instrument of Death, and only Death. Eros will have to be revealed as a road to sin, and finally to hell, by the modern novelists' very confession.[9]

In 1948 a novel by a promising new writer appeared on the market -- one which contained a few rare gems of religion. It was the story of a minister and his family, and their adventures in post-Civil War days. The minister is praying:

> Dear Father in Heaven . . . these good young people have come a long waybacross the great continent of America and have suffered many hardships. So far Your kind providence has been upon them. We ask You now to continue to favor them with the benign light of Your countenance and take a hopeful view of their future, far-wandering across the land. May this little child that is this day born unto them live and prosper in the far land to which they are now journeying. Dear Lord, preserve him and his father and his mother in the trials that await them. May they reach that far-off beautiful land of California and may they find all of their desires fulfilled until they arrive as all of us must, after much wandering, on that Golden Shore where there is no distinction between here and hereafter. We ask it, Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen.[10]

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[9]In a Bible class in Detroit, the writer attempted this method, citing from the novelists themselves passages in which they confessed their own tragedy. In my opinion, the method was successful, and served to dispel some of the false "glamor" which the novelists sometimes manage to give their loose-living characters. Incidentally, it was made quite apparent to the writer, during the course of that class, that most teen-agers are quite well-read in modern American newsstand literature.

[10]Ross Lockridge, Jr., Raintree County (Boston: Riverside Press Cambridge, 1948), p. 33.

That prayer, and other jewels like it, appeared early in the book. Then, abruptly, with the story of the minister's son, the novel changed into a lush, bawdy escapade of sex adventures, until finally it bogged down into a wallow of filth and failure. Several months after the publication of the novel, and in the midst of a welter of reviews, the author committed suicide.[11]

A few stories like that, accompanied by a sound exposition of the doctrine of sin and grace, will tend to shatter the halo which youth places upon the hero of the modern novel. The clay idols must come down. In their place must come spiritual writers of another vein -- sharp-seeing sharp-thinking authors with real things to say: words of hope and joy and passion for God; words of Agape, the true and higher love; words of the Savior Jesus Christ; words of promise on the lips of characters who need not be ashamed.

They can be written, those words. Alan Paton is the one novelist of our time who has started to write them for the general public. Still other novelists can write them, until Eros is destroyed for Agape; until the heroes are God's heroes; until the final destruction of materialism and its vast influences is begun, and continued . . . :

> In the deserted harbor there is yet water that laps against the quays. In the dark and silent forest there is a leaf that falls. Behind the polished panelling the white ant eats away the wood. Nothing is ever quiet, except for fools.[12]

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[11]This story rode the news for several weeks. No one could explain why an author who had finally reached his dream of writing a best-selling novel would commit suicide. The death is still unexplained.

[12]Alan Paton, op. cit., p. 186.

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