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The Paperback in the Pew

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The Paperback in the Pew

Portraits of Man in Modern Literature

By DONALD L. DEFFNER

To understand contemporary man that we might better reach him with the kerygma, we do well to listen to his spokesmen. A. L. Kershaw¹ points out the need to listen to the "sensitive spirits" among the contemporary poets, novelists, playwrights, artists, and composers of the day, who, he avers, "have been far more sensitive to the judgment of God on the hollowness of our life and society than have the majority of religious leaders."

Furthermore, a whole spate of books has appeared in recent years analyzing the contemporary "images" of man found in current literature and drama and in addition often affirming that the novelist or dramatist is giving us a more realistic picture of man than do most clergymen or theologians. The authors of these works include such names as Nathan A. Scott, Jr., Amos N. Wilder, Stanley Romaine Hopper, and William R. Mueller. (A listing of typical works is appended in the bibliography.)

For the purposes of this article it will suffice to cite the somewhat representative thesis of William R. Mueller in *The Prophetic Voice in Modern Fiction*.² This writer scores the mass of contemporary literature of an explicitly "religious" nature as failing to qualify as either great literature or profound religious thought.

¹ A. L. Kershaw, et al., *Alone in the Crowd* (New York: National Student Council of the YMCA and YWCA, 1954), p. 7.

² William R. Mueller, *The Prophetic Voice in Modern Fiction* (New York: Association Press, 1959).

There is much pulp devoted to the mawkish expression of man's love for God, just as there is to man's love for woman. Much "religious" writing is sentimental; it titillates flabby and easily seduced emotions and offends the taste of anyone with either literary or religious sensibilities.³

He affirms that a Dante or a Milton would be unlikely in our century since Biblical situations and vocabulary have been overworked and sentimentalized by superficial and inept artificers. To be effective any serious writer must resort to the portrayal of different situations and the use of a different vocabulary.

In short, there is the paradoxical situation in which much of our ostensibly religious writing is hardly worth the time of a person seeking religious insights or aesthetic satisfaction, and in which the most profound religious writing is frequently to be found in works which may initially appear to have little or nothing to do with man's relationship to God.⁴

Although Mueller feels that we find man's condition nowhere more expertly diagnosed than in the pages of today's perceptive novelists, he does not press for a *sequitur* that the individual in search of himself and God can now "lay aside his Bible and confidently turn for the revelatory and redeeming Word to the words of James Joyce or Albert Camus. . . ."⁵ But in modern fiction the serious student

³ Ibid., p. 23.

⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

may find affirmations regarding man that are forcefully set forth and have previously gone unnoticed. Biblical truths regarding man may come home in a startling and penetrating manner through the medium of drama or fiction.

The novelist will not save us, but he may well bring us to the knowledge that we are in need of salvation.⁶

As James Pike has also said:

Motion pictures and plays which do not appear to be the least "religious" may provide an honest analysis of a human problem which will so raise the question that the religious answer will be more relevant and understandable to our people.⁷

The images of an individual have been compared to the four tines of a pitchfork. The one is the real, "inside" me. One is the me I think I am — my mask to the world. One is the self I would like to be. And there is the final self I ought to be. The authors of some of the aforementioned books contend that much preaching and religious writing is more often concerned with the last three tines of the pitchfork than with the first one and that the imaginative "secular" literature of our time shows us man "as he really is."

Stated positively, much of modern literature at least points out that man is in desperate need of salvation. The "popular" image of man in the world today is of a man swimming in three feet of water, casually interested in a nearby boat. At any time he can stand on his feet and walk to shore. But the voices of modern fiction are rather presenting man as struggling in 30 feet of water, where reaching the boat

is a matter of life and death. Man senses that he is trapped and needs some kind of salvation. At the same time the wailing voices disagree on what the boat is — or indeed, whether there is any boat in sight at all.

As we look at these literary portraits of man we find that types, of course, are not clear cut. They interplay and merge with one another. Furthermore, the works cited — some great and some not so great — serve simply as examples. While they are not being recommended to be read for edification, they may serve to depict pagan man more clearly to us.

It is also true that these literary images impinge upon the thinking of our parishioners, who with their countrymen are reading more than ever before.⁸ To a great extent, they, too, are what they read. Identification with the hero or the heroine is a subtle process which may lead to a rationalization and sanctioning of acts and points of view portrayed in a plot.

Contemporary man may therefore be found also among our own people. According to their "old natures," they represent a mixed array of images in church on Sunday morning. To that extent we are dealing with "the paperback man" in the pew.

COMPLACENT MAN

As intimated, any image which we fashion from a purview of current litera-

⁸ If our parishes are representative of the mainstream of American life we can expect an increasingly literate and culturally responsive parishioner. Figures of the American Library Association show books circulated from public libraries in cities of 100,000 or more increased by 10 million during the past seven years. Book production has also grown, one pocket book firm reporting sales of 700 million copies in the past 20 years.

⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

⁷ *The Christian Century*, LXXVII (March 30, 1960), 395.

ture will be somewhat arbitrary. The reader may also feel that this or the other novel fits better in a different category. But for the purposes of this study some selection had to be made.

We can speak of the "man of complacency." This is the type not only depicted in a lead article in *Time*⁹ about "Mrs. Suburbia" but also found in our urban culture. He is often the organization man, coddled with creature comforts, preserved by piety, pills, and psychiatry.¹⁰ "Generous Electric" company has become the god of apathetic or unconcerned man.

For multitudes among us there is no vision of a City of God coming down from the skies, such as appeared to the author of the book of Revelation. They have a vision of a vast conjuring trick coming up from the earth, from the mines and the factories—a paradise of chromium and ceramics, egg-shaped automobiles and layer-cake houses, skyscrapers made of glass, and clothing made of soybeans. They do not need a Day of the Lord; the General Motors will take care of all that!¹¹

Here is the breakdown of human values. The machine and the organization replace the rich human relationships of acceptance, affection, and love.¹²

Complacent man is not directly the subject of an extensive literature, for he is

essentially self-satisfied. But his image can be seen in such pedestrian paperbacks as John McPartland's *No Down Payment*,¹³ a raw story of the life of young couples in suburbia, and in a host of other works in the not so great category.

However, this life of the falsely secure man is not all bliss. Burt E. Coody describes the vague image he has of his "house of security."

In it are the rooms of the organization, the vocation, the job, the family room, the living room of social status and entertainment, the den for comfort, relaxation, sports, the bedroom for sleep and sexual gratification. The foundation for the whole structure is money and social status provided by being a member of the "ingroup." When these are removed the whole structure falls, and he is plunged either into despair or defiance.¹⁴

Although this type of contemporary man is perhaps the one commonly known among us, his complacency is actually deceptive, as Coody implies. For close under the surface of his delicately structured life the man in the gray flannel suit may be a figure either of the emptiness and hollowness of life or of one ready to blast out against his little world in torrents of hatred and anger. But basically he "has neither the desire, the ability, nor the courage to differ from the patterns of his organizationally structured existence."¹⁵

THE MAN OF DESPAIR

It is not hard to hear the voice of the "man of despair," for his lament is con-

⁹ *Time*, LXXV (June 29, 1960), 14—18.

¹⁰ William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956); also, Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1955).

¹¹ Halford Luccock, *Communicating the Gospel* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), p. 97.

¹² The poem "The Ecstasy of Mr. Price," by Morris Bishop points in this direction.

¹³ John McPartland, *No Down Payment* (New York: Pocket Books, 1957).

¹⁴ "The New Age and the New Man," *The Pulpit*, XXIX (July 1958), 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

stantly being ground out by those writers whom Niebuhr calls the merchants of despair — the futilitarians. He is the person futilely waiting for God (as some interpret it) in *Waiting for Godot*. And although the modern novel and drama which sketch this prototype often have no plot, suggesting that life itself has no plot or purpose, yet underneath it all we see the root of man's despair — an ineradicable and all-consuming self-love.

Luther had a phrase for it: *curvatus in se* — "curved in toward oneself." If a hermetically sealed capsule of this year's "hit" records were to be exhumed some centuries from now, the analysts would hear one recurrent theme in many variations as egocentric man croons: "I want you. . . ." "I need you. . . ." "I miss you. . . ."

One is reminded immediately of Jean-Baptiste Clemence's classic motif comment:

It is not true, after all, that I never loved. I conceived at least one great love in my life, of which I was always the object.¹⁶

Robert Fitch suggests that these writers make one think of a group of men on a ship at sea:

They toss the pilot overboard, cast away the rudder, wreck the compass and the sextant, bash in a few bulkheads, splinter the decks — and then sit down in a chorus to lament that they are lost. . . . [More-over] they insist that everyone must get into the same boat with them.¹⁷

As an example of the portrayal of the man of despair we might consider the

writing of Franz Kafka. In *The Trial* we see the frustrating, anxious, hopeless person who is brought to law but who never fully knows why he is being tried. The trial's preparations drag on for months, but the individual finally realizes merely that there is utter futility, that "it is futile to argue an innocence which does not exist and to look to oneself or any other human being for an acquittal which is not his to give."¹⁸

The theme of despair in Kafka emerges even more poignantly in *The Castle*. In this book a surveyor comes to a small village and asks people how to get to a certain castle where he is to perform some task. He finds that they only turn from him in fear and terror. Try as he might, the man cannot reach his goal. He ultimately dies without ever getting to the castle or finding out what he was supposed to do. Critics disagree on the ultimate message of the book. Is it that man cannot by his own strength reach God? Or is it that there is no real point to life, or if there is a meaning, is its purpose unclear?

Or read *No Exit*, by existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. In the brief 47 pages of the play, brilliantly written, Sartre paints the horrid, chilling picture of three wretched creatures imprisoned in a parlor "down under." One died a coward's death; another was guilty of infanticide; another methodically destroyed her closest associates in life. Moving to a dramatic climax, the truth finally breaks in on coward Garcin:

So this is hell. I'd never have believed it. You remember all we were told about the

¹⁶ Albert Camus, *The Fall* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), p. 58.

¹⁷ Robert E. Fitch, "Secular Images of Man in Contemporary Literature," *Religious Education* (March-April 1958), p. 89.

¹⁸ Mueller, p. 109, re Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf).

torture chambers, the fire and brimstone, the "burning marl." Old wives' tales! There's no need for red-hot pokers. Hell is — other people!¹⁹

As the three scratch and claw at each other, and baby killer Estelle attempts to kill carping Inez with a paper knife, they finally realize that they are "dead already." They slump on their respective sofas, faces blanched. Laughter dies away, silence follows, and Garcin mutters:

"Well, well, let's get on with it. . . ."²⁰

Here Sartre has played out a powerful theme of chilling nihilism in a stark drama which literally breathes the philosophy of the "unalterable futility of it all."

Or take a look at a Broadway play made into a Hollywood film, *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*.²¹ Much of the play graphically depicts creatures of despair, inmates of prison cells of their own making. Selfish, unable to accept each other "as they are," they eke out an existence of fractured relationships, and the house that they inhabit is not a home but is under a dark pall. The mood of the family is exemplified in the answer of the young boy. When asked why he fears the dark at the top of the stairs, he replies: "You can't see ahead."

In much the same vein is the classic description of Helen Detweiler in Cozzens's novel:

Close to Helen's consciousness, nearly impinging on it, was . . . the forbidden horror, the dreadful eyeless face of our existence. In a desperation . . . Helen pushed back the horror; refused to look.

On the world she never made, she imposed with all her strength a pattern of the world she wanted — a place of peace, of order, of security; a good and honest world; the abode of gentle people, who, kind-minded, fair-minded, clean-minded, remarked the perfect man and beheld the upright; and who, once believed into existence, could alleviate . . . Helen's recurrent anguish of trying not to know, yet always knowing, that in the midst of life we are in death.²²

There are other works one might consider to illustrate this theme: Tennessee Williams' *Baby Doll*, the very different *Long Day's Journey into Night*, by O'Neill, and more. Repeatedly the characters are "trapped by the past, caught in the web of their own ignorance and egotism and incompetence, and so, by a kind of atheistic predestination, move on to their doom."²³ The real, added tragedy often is that spectators viewing these dramas or reading these books are not moved to compassion, but rather intensify their own egotism and self-pity!

For a final moving portrayal of the man of despair consider the pitiful Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. Willy wanted desperately to be loved and accepted by his family, but felt the only way he could achieve this "acceptance as is" was to "wow" them by being a big success. The shadowy figure Uncle Ben tells Willy that life is a jungle and you have to "be hard." For a moment in the play, Willy sees a glimmer of hope. Speaking of his son Biff, he says: "Isn't that — isn't that remarkable? Biff — he likes me!"²⁴

¹⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), p. 47.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ William Inge (New York: Random House, 1958).

²² James Cozzens, *By Love Possessed* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1957).

²³ Fitch, p. 85.

²⁴ Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (New York: Viking Press, 1958), p. 133.

But soon he is back on the squirrel-cage treadmill to "success" again, roaring off in a car into the night — and suicide.

And in the movingly staged funeral scene, at which the expected crowds never appeared, the family members puzzle over the untimely death. The wife, who made the last payment on the house that day and felt all Willy needed was "just a little more salary," wails her lament: "Why did you do it?" But Biff sums up the poignant epitaph of Willy Loman — and of the man of despair:

"He never knew who he was!"²⁵

THE MAN OF DEFIANCE

A third major literary portrait we might see emerging from the tons of paperbacks and reams of print which go into the hits and flops of Broadway and the bookstalls is the "man of defiance."

Some may feel the prototype of this man is implicit in the egocentric, keenly analytical pages of Philip Wylie's *Opus 21*. Others may point to the rambling "novels" of Jack Kerouac (*The Dharma Bums*, *On the Road*), although it is questionable whether such writing should be dignified by including it in a discussion of "literature." Or browse through John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. Tom Driver, drama critic for *The Christian Century*, describes the blasts of venom and irrationality of a character we might just as aptly label animalist man:

He rants at her like a wounded adolescent, shrieking until the world shall listen to his story of pain, anger and unfocused frustration.²⁶

Here man is portrayed as incapable of

love and reason. Here in blatant bestiality and degradation is the antithesis of God's intended purpose in the creation of man.²⁷

The works of the modern dramatist and author Tennessee Williams (*Suddenly Last Summer*, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, *Baby Doll*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, etc.) come to mind at once.²⁸ The skill of Williams as a playwright is beyond question. He describes the intention of his writing in the stage directions for *Sweet Bird of Youth*. It is to be a "snare for the truth of human experience." Elsewhere he describes the nonverbal or nonideational character of this dramatic expression of truth:

The color, the grace and levitation, the structural pattern in motion, and quick interplay of live beings, suspended like fitful lightnings in a cloud, these things are the play, not words on paper, nor thoughts and ideas of an author, those shabby things snatched off basement counters at Gimbel's.²⁹

And the ranting, defiant creature in many of Williams' plays is a hideous Dorian Gray, whose portrayal has telling shock value. Fitch describes the colors on the canvas as the portrait comes into focus in Williams' "drama of defiance," *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*:

The one irreducible value is life, which you must cling to as you can, and use for the pursuit of pleasure and power. The

²⁷ In this connection cf. Edmund Fuller, *Man in Modern Fiction* (New York: Random House, 1958), pp. 11, 12.

²⁸ Cf. works in appended bibliography by Robert E. Fitch and Richard H. Luecke.

²⁹ Richard H. Luecke, "The 'Atheology' of Tennessee Williams," *Present Day Issues in the Light of Faith* (Chicago: Commission on College and University Work, 77 W. Washington St., 1960—1961), p. 1.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 138.

²⁶ Fitch, p. 87.

specific ends of life are sex and money. The great passions are lust and rapacity. . . . It is not a tragedy because it has not the dignity of a tragedy. The man who plays his role in it has on himself the marks of a total depravity. And as for the ultimate and irreducible value, life, that in the end is also a lie.³⁰

A final example of defiant man is seen in still another and quite different work. Sales of this volume have soared particularly in the paperback store on campus corner. Young Holden Caulfield has been kicked out of prep school and spends a kaleidoscopic 48 hours in New York City. The portrait which emerges as he muses back on the life at school, and soliloquizes on the strange events which transpire in the city, is both tragic and comical. But underneath is the bitter and sardonic current of defiance toward the artificial world around him.

For Holden life seems a farce. Everyone is putting on a "big act." They're all phonies, hypocrites — like the actors on the stage of Radio City Music Hall carrying crucifixes all over the place, who he feels really can't wait to get outside and take a drag on a cigarette.

The church and religion receive the jaundiced eye from Holden, too, especially the disciples of Jesus Christ.

I'm sort of an atheist. I like Jesus and all, but I don't care too much for most of the other stuff in the Bible. Take the Disciples . . . while He was alive, they were about as much use to Him as a hole in the head. All they did was to keep letting Him down.³¹

³⁰ Fitch, pp. 87, 88.

³¹ J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, Signet Book D1667 (New York: Signet Books, 1960), p. 91.

Young Holden rambles on, lancing and scoring the sham and deceit of life around him. The only thing he would really like to be, he muses, is a "catcher in the rye." He imagines thousands of children playing in a rye field near a "crazy cliff." There's the chance some might run near the edge and Holden would be there to catch them.

That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy.³²

Some critics have suggested the rather implausible analogy of a Christ figure in this brief vignette. More credibly one might see this defiant man rejecting all around him as frauds and phonies and attempting to be his own savior or a (strange) type of self-styled savior for others.

Whatever the analogy, "Catcher" offers a vivid picture of "defiant man."

THE "NEW HUMANIST"

A fourth significant image of modern man in contemporary literature is that of the person who has faith in man in spite of all the things which cause complacency and despair and defiance in others! Nederhood denotes this type of individual as a representative of what he calls the "New Humanism."³³

William Faulkner in his dramatic Nobel prize acceptance speech spells out the tenets of this "secular faith." He states that in our society today there is such

³² Ibid., p. 156.

³³ J. H. Nederhood, *The Church's Mission to the Educated American* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1960). One of the most significant recent books on the church and the "educated."

a general and universal physical fear that for many the problems of the spirit no longer exist. The only question is: "When will I be blown up?" In this setting the poet — the literary artist — he feels, must teach himself that "the basest of all things is to be afraid." That fear he must "forget forever" and return to the "old verities and truths" — writing not of the glands but of the heart.

Unlike the merchants of despair, Faulkner declines to accept the end of man as inevitable. He feels that when the final ding-dong of doom has sounded, the last thing to be heard will not simply be "man's puny inexhaustible voice, still talking."

I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.³⁴

It is the duty of the poet and the writer, evangelizes Faulkner, to write about these things. His voice is not to be merely the record of man, but "it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail."³⁵

Consonant with this virile and secular faith, but also in a class by himself and presenting perhaps the greatest challenge to the Christian Gospel, is the "theology" and the person of Albert Camus. The type here displayed is not only suggested in his writings but also lived out by this late French author, killed in an "absurd" automobile accident in early 1960 while speeding on his way to Paris. The unique-

ness of Camus is that he rises above the despair and defiance of most "prophetic voices," admits *nostra culpa*, but clings firmly to a humanistic credo of hope in man in spite of life's ultimate absurdity, even while "professing vociferously his own infamy."

Camus is not a nihilist, nor an existentialist, nor an atheist — in the common sense of the term. Rather he accepts the irrationality of life, going on to say:

In the lowest depths of our nihilism, I have searched only for reasons to transcend it. . . . I believe I entertain a just notion of the greatness of Christianity. But there are some of us in this persecuted world who feel that if Christ died for certain men, He did not die for us. And at the same time we refuse to despair of man. . . . If we consent to do without God and without hope, we are not resigned to do without man.³⁶

Proclaiming such a "faith," Jean-Baptiste Clemence steps forth as its protagonist in the autobiographical-confessional work of Camus, *The Fall*. It is the chilling story of a retired Parisian lawyer emoting to an acquaintance "on a bench out of the rain" aside the canals of Amsterdam. "The Fall" of this masterful man, as the story spins out, was his ultimate, ghastly realization that he was a hypocrite par excellence, a fraud-hero of the first rank. The dream of his supreme dominance and intrinsic worth as an exceptional person was shattered by a series of circumstances which revealed the true nature of his inner infamy. He speaks of "keeping people in the refrigerator," bringing them out, and using them when best it suited himself.

³⁴ Quoted in *Six Great Modern Short Novels* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1954), p. 326.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Quoted in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Jan. 17, 1960.

He even had the luck of seeing membership in the Legion of Honor offered to him two or three times and of experiencing the privilege of turning it down!

I am not hardhearted, far from it — full of pity on the contrary, and with a ready tear to boot. Only, my emotional impulses always turn toward me, my feelings of pity concern me. It is not true, after all, that I never loved. I conceived at least one great love in my life, of which I was always the object.³⁷

But the grisly confession, though it admits personal guilt, subtly shifts over to the self-centered guilt of us all.³⁸ And when the very thought of redemption flickers to mind, he muses:

"O young woman, throw yourself into the water again so that I may a second time have the chance of saving both of us!" A second time, eh, what a risky suggestion! Just suppose, *cher maître*, that we should be taken literally? We'd have to go through with it. Brr . . . ! The water's so cold! But let's not worry! It's too late now. It will always be too late. Fortunately!³⁹

This is the voice of the "New Humanism"! After repeated, horrendous world conflicts, unparalleled bestiality of man against man, a not so thin voice still remains — not only enduring but prevailing and calling for renewed hope in man without God!

OTHER PORTRAITS

There are other images of which we might speak. We could make out "scien-

tific man," committed to the ideology of scientism as a *modus vivendi*. We could see "neurotic man" emerging from such a work as Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*. There might be a "compartmentalized man" or the "isolated man" of David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*. T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* gives us a shocking portrait of "self-centered man."

We could outline "bewildered man," man in the midst of mechanized, specialized society, overwhelmed by the complexity of modern existence and wondering which way to turn. Or again there is "determinist man," created by Communist ideology or depth psychology, who indulges in a sense of self-justification and abdication of responsibility. "I *had* to do this. . . ." "Someone or something did this to me. . . ." "I cannot do other than what I have done," etc.

Through many of these portraits also runs the interplaying image of the "man of anxiety,"⁴⁰ to use W. H. Auden's phrase about the inhabitants (or inmates?) of the "age of anxiety," who are "children lost in a haunted wood." The anxious bankruptcy of men's hopes is expressed in a similar vein in A. E. Housman's *Last Poems*:

And how am I to face the odds
Of man's bedevilment and God's?
I, a stranger and afraid,
In a world I never made.

And John C. Cooper sums up the por-

⁴⁰ Note the studies made on why adults like "westerns." Cf. Alexander Miller, "The 'Western' — A Theological Note," *The Christian Century*, LXXIV (Nov. 27, 1957), 1409. Also cf. the curious analogy of the Lone Ranger as a Christ figure, for example, in Joseph Sittler, "Christianity and Mass Communication," *Frontiers*, XII (December 1960), 19.

³⁷ Camus, p. 58.

³⁸ Nederhood (supra) also points out the refusal of modern man to admit responsibility for individual guilt, i.e., in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*.

³⁹ Camus, p. 147.

traits we have seen on the literary canvases in his poem "Soul Searching":

A soldier with no zest for fighting,
A poet with no zeal for writing,
An architect without a plan:
The prototype of modern man.

INTERPRETATION AND CRITICISM

In retrospect several points should be kept in mind in interpreting all this literature.

First of all, from the Christian perspective, the question should always be asked as to whether the writer portrays the true nature of man. Does he depict man as more base than he is, as no more than an animal?⁴¹ Or, conversely, is man depicted as better than he really is in his depraved state after the Fall?

Secondly the reader should remember that the novelist's "law diagnosis" is not to be equated with the full Law of God found in the Scripture. It is that latter Law which must be spelled out, followed of course by the lively "good news," to those who know only the "law affirmation" of man's entrapment found in secular literature.

And thirdly, a reader must not introduce meanings into a work which are not really there. In setting up categories, as has been done here, there is always the danger of an artificial systematization, of forcing conclusions from the observer's *a priori*. No "measuring rod" should be imposed upon something apart from itself.

⁴¹ A prime reference here is Edmund Fuller's *Man in Modern Fiction* (New York: Random House, 1958). Fuller decries the spate of novels which view man as an ironic, biological accident, clasped in the vise of determinisms, economic or biological. Cf. also his "Doctrines of Man in American Literature," *Religious Education*, LVI (March-April 1961), 83.

What was the writer's purpose and intention? Can this work be experienced outside itself? Is the critic guilty of the "heresy of paraphrase"?

Some analysts, in examining this imaginative literature, have not been content to let the literary artist "speak for himself."⁴² In William Inge's *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, for example, some commentators see portrayed the principles of Christian atonement and the presence of a Christ figure in the death of a young Jewish boy, when the analogy was not originally intended by the author at all.

Sidney Lanier scores this type of interpretation in *Christianity and Crisis*, in an article titled "The Gospel According to Freud." In discussing *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, he not only points up the danger in audiences "accepting unknowingly and uncritically the view of man offered in what purports to be a homely 'slice of life'" — ergo, a possible *false* prophetic voice. He also assails the philosophy implicit in the play, which he feels is "Latter-Day Freudianity." In such a Freudian homily fractured relationships are healed simply by accepting and recognizing the needs of others and by setting aright the male-female relationships between father and mother.

But even more significant — and this is the key concern — is the tendency of Christians to use such a play uncritically to illustrate the Gospel of Christ. Is there Christian reconciliation without our blessed Lord Himself? Superimposing a definitively Christian redemption motif upon drama which should be viewed on its own grounds, Lanier implies, is "a dis-

⁴² Cf. Finley Eversole, "Art in the Pulpit," *The Pulpit*, XXXI (Dec. 1960).

honest kind of hitchhiking and like hitchhiking, it is dangerous."⁴³

The fuzziness of such thinking and its resultant implications immediately point up a danger also for contemporary preachers. Today's homiletician who is struggling for "relevance" can be subtly seduced into these "questionable equations" in his desire to establish live contact. But in simple terms "it depends upon who's seeing the play!" The Christian seeing Macleish's *J.B.* may read into it far different insights and values than the "good agnostic" who remarks to the spouse: "Darling, we must get that book." Lanier sums up:

It is all very well to point to *Dark at the Top of the Stairs* as an example of the reconciling power of God's love and the efficacy of forgiveness if you are speaking from within Christian experience. It is quite a different thing if you are speaking to the uncommitted, the seeking who now number a large proportion of our congregations. . . . There is no equivalent for the saving truth in Christ. It is dangerously misleading to marshal contemporary artists as witnesses to a God whom they do not yet acknowledge. We must take care that we do not unwittingly lead our flocks into an alien and sterile land.⁴⁴

CHRISTIAN ARTISANS

One further point needs mention here. In alluding to the preacher's dilemma, Lanier comments on the preacher's reluctance to use Biblical illustrations exclusively because of the appalling Biblical illiteracy. But does Lanier press his point too far when he says that "unhappily, there

is a marked dearth of compelling contemporary depictions of Christian experience in current plays, films, and novels?"

Admittedly, the gross weight of writing that gluts the market is "non-Christian." And much of purportedly Christian literature is titillating, mawkish, and flabby, as William Mueller has pointed out. But what of T. S. Eliot, Dorothy Sayers, Charles Williams, W. H. Auden, Morris L. West (just read his *The Devil's Advocate!*), not to mention the works of J. B. Phillips and C. S. Lewis? Here indeed is rich lore in which to see the image of the Christ man and the Christ woman, which we shall consider in conclusion.⁴⁵

CHRIST MAN AND CHRIST WOMAN: THE BIBLICAL PORTRAIT

"What, then, shall we say?" In much contemporary literature man by and of himself is stalemated because man as man has failed to solve his most basic problem, his estrangement from God — his Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. He is a stranger to the self he was intended to be in God's creation. The types we have considered point to man's foremost need: life with and in God. To quote Mueller again:

The serious student of modern fiction may discover that his reading eventuates in a self-knowledge alerting him to Biblical

⁴⁵ Canon Standrod Tucker Carmichael (Thompson House, St. Louis, Mo.) tells of a large church in Corpus Christi, Tex., on a busy thoroughfare, with the following large sign on its bulletin board: "CHRIST IS THE ANSWER!!" An agnostic walking by asked: "What's the question?" Happily, writers such as those named are asking pagan man's questions, eliminating the old criticism that "the church has the answers, but is asking the wrong questions."

⁴³ Sidney Lanier, "The Gospel According to Freud," *Christianity and Crisis*, XVIII (April 14, 1958), 51.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 52.

affirmations previously unnoticed. . . . The novelist will not save us, but he may well bring us to the knowledge that we are in need of salvation.⁴⁶

Turning to the Gospel, we find the "true man," the "new man," in our blessed Lord and Savior. For He is at once the Man we are to be and the Power to become such a "new creature."⁴⁷

The apostle Paul spells out the process of cleaning the begrimed, painted-over canvas and letting the originally intended portrait begin to "come through":

This is my instruction, then, which I give you from God. Do not live any longer as the Gentiles live. For they live blindfold in a world of illusion, and are cut off from the life of God through ignorance and insensitiveness. They have stifled their consciences and then surrendered themselves to sensuality, practicing any form of impurity which lust can suggest. But you have learned nothing like that from Christ, if you have really heard His voice and understood the truth that He has taught you. No, what you learned was to fling off the dirty clothes of the old way of living, which were rotted through and through with lust's illusions, and, with yourselves mentally and spiritually remade, to put on the clean fresh clothes of the new life which was made by God's design for righteousness — and the holiness which is no illusion. (Eph. 4:17-27 Phillips)

This man, the Christ man — the Christ woman — does not make the error of

1. *The man of complacency*, for he has

⁴⁶ William Mueller, p. 14.

⁴⁷ Cf. 2 Cor. 5:17. Living out the "Christ man" is no mere *imitatio Christi*, but being plunged into death with Him and rising with the resurrected Christ, who now lives within the Christ man. Cf. Col. 3:11b (Goodspeed): "Christ is everything and in us all," and Rom. 6:3-9.

become "aware" in the fullest, truest sense, of life's values — of what God has done in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. He cannot be apathetic, for there is a new "self" inside him, the Christ within! And he "cannot but speak of the things which he has seen and heard." (Acts 4:20)

The Christ man does not make the error of

2. *The man of despair*, for he has a whole new life to rejoice in, now that he is living "in God." He says:

Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God. — If God be for us, who can be against us? — All things are yours. (Ps. 42:5; Rom. 8:31; 1 Cor. 3:21)

The Christ man does not make the error of

3. *The man of defiance*, for he is overwhelmed by the love of the Father, a love so great, that "while we were yet sinners ["angry men!"], Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8)

4. Nor can he be a stubborn *hope-in-man*, for having come face to face with the great God of redemption, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, he can only say: "It is God that hath made us and not we ourselves" (Ps. 100:3), and can only affirm with Paul:

He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. . . . He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is the Head of the body, the church; He is the Beginning, the First-born from the dead, that in everything He might be pre-eminent. For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or

in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross. (Col. 1:13, 14, 17-20 RSV)

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord, or who hath been His counselor? Or who hath first given to Him that it shall be recompensed to Him again? For of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33-36 KJV)

Yes, this is the Christ man, the purpose of whose life is to glorify God . . . and to enjoy Him forever. This is the image of man that we must bring to the man in the pew and to modern man everywhere.

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