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The Christ-Figure in Contemporary Literature

By DONALD L. DEFFNER

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The terms "Christ-figure," or "Christ-image," or "Christ-symbol" with respect to literature are commonly understood to designate a motif, or, more specifically, a person whereby something analogous to our blessed Lord's personality and work is played out.

That such a leitmotiv in secular literature (indeed, interest in the whole field of literature itself) is a valid concern of the Christian theologian is supported by the words of Dr. Martin Luther, who in his letter to Eoban Hess in 1523 stated:

I am persuaded that without knowledge of literature pure theology cannot at all endure, just as heretofore, when letters have declined and lain prostrate, theology, too, has wretchedly fallen and lain prostrate; nay, I see that there has never been a great revelation of the Word of God unless He has first prepared the way by the rise and prosperity of languages and letters, as though they were forerunner [John the] Baptists . . . Certainly it is my desire that there shall be as many poets and rhetoricians as possible, because I see that by these studies, as by no other means, people are wonderfully fitted for the grasping of sacred truth and for handling it skillfully and happily. . . . Therefore I beg of you that at my request (if that has any weight) you will urge your young people to be diligent in the study of poetry and rhetoric."—*D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Her-

mann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883—), *Briefwechsel* III, 50

And that literature may not only deepen our insight and understanding into the nature of man, but also provide a rich, aesthetic context within which the kerygma may be enhanced and illumined for many individuals is strongly affirmed by Professor Charles G. Osgood in his Stone Lectures for 1940:

Secular literature cannot equal Holy Writ in power or authority or efficacy as a means of grace. Yet it may illustrate, reinforce, verify, and illuminate Holy Writ. . . . It may serve us as the sycamore tree served Zacchaeus, to gain a clearer sight of the Incarnate Truth."—Charles G. Osgood, *Poetry as a Means of Grace* (Princeton University Press, 1946), p. 8

What one sees of a Christ-figure from such a perspective would involve such possible elements as innocence, strangeness and mystery, lowly birth, selflessness and marked humility, rejection by peers, unjust treatment, reconciliation, redemptive suffering, etc. The individual may accept severe mental or physical pain, perhaps death, in the service of a high and worthy goal. And to a greater or lesser degree the basic elements of the Passion story are evident in sequence as the character plays out the Christ-like role.

However, the use of a Christ-figure at once involves paradox. This is the case, to begin with, because the literary artist himself, in structuring a parallel to the Christ of the Gospels, must first interpret

the complex and paradoxical God-man. (Cf. Amos Wilder, *Theology and Modern Literature* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958], p. 93.) The second problem involved is the paradox of using "finite, fallible, and sinful man to represent the infinite and Holy God." (Horton Davies, *A Mirror of the Ministry in Modern Novels* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1959], p. 4.) For although there may be various fantasy-references to the person and work of our blessed Lord in a literary prototype, the analogy can go only so far. It might often be more fitting to speak of an Adam-figure than a Christ-figure.

Further, to be art, the Passion of our Lord cannot be symbolized in a character *directly*. For to portray His person other than obliquely would be, as stated, to give presumptuous interpretation, and secondly, to do no credit to the tension in the paradoxical divine-human nature of the Master. (In this connection it should be noted that the present discussion is limited to works with *symbolic* reference to Christ, and does not treat literature in which Christ Himself appears — significant as some of those works might be, e. g., Lew Wallace's *Ben Hur*, Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis*, Sholem Asch's *Mary*, Lloyd C. Douglas' *The Robe*, Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, etc.)

The writers who fail to take the above factors into account often end up with Christ-figures which are sticky-sweet, self-debasing, absorbed in suffering, introspection, and endless contemplation, which depict a tender and puzzled individual, a compassionate counselor, a social reformer, or a commentator on the world's ills who utters judgments less than profound!

The task of formulating a Christ-figure is therefore an avowedly difficult literary endeavor. Indeed, there are those critics who contend that the attempt to create a character reminiscent of man's prototype (even more so, the attempt to tell a story of the momentary reappearance of Christ or a Christ-figure), has been an unsuccessful venture in both the literary and theological sense. For in line with the problems noted above there can be no resurrection as in the Christ of the Gospels. Whatever the treatment,

if emphasis is on the supernatural, the story quickly becomes implausible. If it is on the human and ethical aspect, the Christ-figure can easily deteriorate into a sentimentalist or moralist, teaching Victorian manners or socialist politics or simple human kindness.—Alan Paton and Liston Pope, "The Novelist and Christ," *Saturday Review*, XXXVII, 49 (Dec. 4, 1954), 59

An examination of the various examples of supposed Christ-figures in literature, therefore, and the attempts of literary critics to assess their significance, seem to indicate a general confusion as to just what a Christ-figure might be. Alan Paton and Liston Pope hold that "the modern world has such a nostalgia for innocence and compassion, which virtues it believes itself to have lost, that it confuses them with the Divine Nature" (op. cit., p. 58). And they go on to ask the compelling question as to *whether a supposed symbol of Christ is actually a Christ-figure or just a Christ-hungry individual. Only a Christ-hungry world would be capable of confusing them.*

To put it another way, the question could be raised as to whether a given protagonist or fictional character is primarily walking in the *imitatio Christi* (cf. Zos-

sima and Aloysha in *The Brothers Karamazov*) or whether the actions of such an individual actually constitute a "redemption" from the author's point of view? Is the person *consciously* imitating Christ, or does the character become a substitute for Christ? Does he reflect certain Christ-like qualities (such as compassion) or does he *replace* the need for Christ and His work? There is a profound theological difference between the Christ-follower and the Christ-substitute. And the great heresy in modern literature is that a man is saved (apart from Christ and the church) by his *own* love — by his own actions and choices.

With all these problems in mind, however, a perusal of secular literature may still involve *encounter*, and we may see in a character a trace or at least a hint of the person and work of our blessed Lord. To that end several representative works should be cited to illustrate the difficulties and the possibilities of speaking of a Christ-figure in contemporary literature.

Writers who come to mind in discussing Christian meanings and possibly Christ-figures include such names (from earlier years) as Henrik Ibsen, Fyodor Dostoevski, Leo Tolstoi, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville; and more recently, T. S. Eliot, William Faulkner, Willa Cather, Graham Greene, Morris L. West, Georges Bernanos, Nikos Kazantzakis, Alan Paton, Thornton Wilder, W. H. Auden, Christopher Fry, Evelyn Waugh, and some suggest Ernest Hemingway.

The list is by no means exhaustive, only indicative. Most of those cited are known primarily as novelists, and additional artists could be suggested in the area of the drama and poetry. Nor are the authors themselves necessarily "Christian" writers. The exami-

nation of such a question must be left to another study, as must the question of any distinction between "Christian" and "religious" or "spiritual" values in an author's works. ("Religious" themes may even be evident in the work of an atheist, as, for example, in Ignazio Silone's *Bread and Wine*.)

But in this selection of authors one can find examples of works which bear the imprint of the Passion story, and some characters which call to mind the divine prototype.

Billy Budd is an oft-cited illustration. The suggestion of an archetypal image of Christ in this character of Melville is hard to resist. The Handsome Sailor comes of mysterious background, is noble, yet unknown. He is comely, heroic, humble, intelligent. True, he has a physical blemish, a vocal defect. And he is almost too innocent in his purity and grace. But he is held forth by many critics as a classic example of the Christ-figure.

But the difficulty presents itself in pressing for such a judgment in the ultimate nature of Billy Budd's death. Billy had been unjustly accused of disloyalty, could not express his defense because he was tongue-tied, in one agonizing, involuntary blow had struck his false accuser dead, and now had to hang for a mortal offense. But it should be noted that his death is a *pointless* death. (Further, many critics feel that Captain Vere is the real sufferer in the drama.) And the contrast between viewing the alleged Christ-figure in Billy Budd and the Christ of the Passion is markedly one of *pity* rather than of *awe*.

This illustrates the difficulty cited earlier of using *finite* man to represent *infinite* God.

William Faulkner is also a key writer to whom critics turn for examples of the Christ-symbol. His work *A Fable* bears special mention because of its striking analogy to the events of our Lord's last week before His crucifixion and resurrection. (The story is treated in Hyatt H. Waggoner's essay "William Faulkner's Passion Week of the Heart" in the symposium *The Tragic Vision and the Christian Faith*, Nathan A. Scott, Jr., ed., and in R. W. B. Lewis's work *The Picaresque Saint*.)

The setting is the last days of World War I. The plot involves a corporal and 12 soldiers accused of strange, mutinous activities on the Western Front. Characters with such names as Marya, Marthe, Magda, etc., people the story which (one critic says) resembles a film scenario collaborated on by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Dostoevski. *A Fable* has even been called "the most ambitious attempt by any contemporary novelist to bring the Christian myth or allegory or history . . . into the very texture of the life of twentieth-century man."—F. W. Dillistone, *The Novelist and the Passion Story* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), p. 95.

The corporal is the apparent Christ-figure in the story. He even dies crowned with thorns—a strand of barbed wire looping around his head as his body falls backwards towards a pit after a volley from the firing squad. But there is no suggestion of a resurrection—only a disinterment—and the final touch of the corporal's body being placed in the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. And the debate continues to rage over this puzzling, yet intriguing novel.

Faulkner's *Light in August* is also heralded for its many analogies to the life

of our blessed Lord in the character of Joe Christmas. But to sum up, as critic Denham Sutcliff has stated, Faulkner's Christ-figures "are either destroyed, like Joe Christmas, or they are ineffectuals like Benjy (in *The Sound and the Fury*) and even Ike McCaslin (in *The Bear*)."—Denham Sutcliff, "Christian Themes in American Fiction," *The Christian Scholar*, XLIV, 4 (Winter, 1961—62), p. 303.

To be sure the Christ-figure is *there* in such cases. For what it is worth, it is even hinted at in *nada-ist* Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*: the death struggle with the fish; the cross-like mast on the shoulder, while homeward bound; the spread-eagle arms of Santiago, lying on his couch—all are suggestively Passion-oriented. And to greater or lesser degree this is true in the character of *Brand*, by Henrik Ibsen; Xavier, in Mauriac's *The Lamb*; the dyspeptic priest in Bernanos' *Diary of a Country Priest*; Giacomo Nerone, in West's *The Devil's Advocate*; and some critics point to certain characters in some of Graham Greene's novels—like Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter*, or the whiskey priest in *The Power and the Glory*. Others mention Holden Caulfield in Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, or the fat lady in his *Franny and Zooey*. Characters in other types of literary works could also be cited, e.g., in some of Kafka's short stories, etc. But in each case, there is the all-too-human character of the Christ-figure, and the failure, understandably, to catch the precise, paradoxical nature of our Lord, and the culminating glory of His resurrection.

Then there is author Nikos Kazantzakis, whose works have commanded increasing attention in recent years. The protagonist in his novel *The Greek Passion* bears close resemblance to the Christ-image. Manolios

is a shepherd chosen to be the Christ in a Greek village Passion play. As he dons the role, he postpones his betrothal until the end of the year, although he subsequently is tempted by a beguiling widow who seeks to seduce him. Indeed, much of the Passion *is* the temptation which assails the divine hero.

The greater part of the story, however, involves Manolios' and his friends' taking upon themselves the burden of aiding a cholera-ridden band of starving peasants nearby who have been threatened with extinction because of the selfishness of Manolios's own villagers. In urging his neighbors to share their goods with the destitute band he is at first successful, for the people are moved to compassion. Later the sentiments of the villagers change, he is accused of sedition, and in the strife which follows, as he sides with the starving crusaders, Manolios is killed by the very man who originally accepted the role of Judas in the Passion play.

Now a critic may well opine that Manolios's death is less that of a Christ-figure than the inevitable penalty of social revolution. But Manolios himself was not vengeful; and even our Lord Himself bore the whip and sat in *righteous* judgment upon evil men.

What, then, is to be concluded? The depiction of a Christ-figure in modern literature is a complex, if not unsuccessful task. That Christ-like roles and apparent similes to the Passion story emerge cannot be gainsaid. But the problems appear in the attempt, first of all, to *interpret* the paradoxical nature of the God-man; and secondly, in the limitations of portraying divine nature in human clay.

That the attempt is made by the literary artist is in itself significant and commend-

able. But perhaps still more helpful contributions can be made—since we already have our blessed Lord Himself in the non-fictional record of the Gospels—in the literary portrayal of the true *Adam-figure*. For so often the nature of man is portrayed in the writings of our day as that of a creature merely wounded or deprived of his supernature, or conversely, as that of a totally depraved individual, having nothing whatsoever left to distinguish him from animals.

The balance must be found somewhere between the admission of man's radical, personal perversion and rebellion against God, and the God-given knowledge that natural man is still a creature of the Almighty. It must come somewhere between an extreme, extra-Biblical doctrine of "total depravity," and an overly optimistic view of what "good" there is left in man. It must deal with the confessional principle that sin is not the substance but *accidens* of man's nature, that man and sin are to be distinguished from each other. It must deal with the distinction between the loss of righteousness before God and the remaining remnants of God-like reflection or reproduction.

For though much of modern literature fails to deal adequately with man's *personal* rebellion against and alienation from God (shifting the burden rather to a corporate, and therefore less onerous *culpa*), the proper depiction of the true contemporary Adam-figure does not lie simply in an extended depiction of man's base depravity, but in a capturing of the balance inherent in his own paradoxical nature—in the tensions cited above.

For Adam-man today is lost, yet he is a creature of God. He cannot be saved without Christ, yet the Passion story of

his own existence is incomplete without the crashing-through of the overwhelming *gratia* of the Father. For the Lamb of God continues to come to bear away the sins of the world.

While the literature on this subject is very limited, the following books will prove helpful:

- Frye, Roland Mushat. *Perspective on Man: Literature and the Christian Tradition*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961.
- Fuller, Edmund. *Man in Modern Fiction*. New York: Random House, 1958.
- Hopper, Stanley Romaine. *Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature*. New York: Harper Torchbooks TB21, 1957.
- Mueller, William. *The Prophetic Voice in Modern Fiction*. New York: Association Press, 1959.
- Scott, Nathan A., Jr. *Modern Literature and the Religious Frontier*. New York: Harper and Bros., 1958.
- Stewart, Randall. *American Literature and Christian Doctrine*. Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 1958. St. Louis, Mo.