

### Dedication

This lecture in its published form is dedicated to Mrs. Barbara Ebert, Pastor's Secretary, of Emmanuel Baptist Church, Enid, OK, who loves true poetry that stirs the heart and reveals to her the glories of Christ. (Dr. Ella is writing a book about this church. - Ed.)

# Christian Literature: An Introduction

by Dr. George M. Ella

## THEORIES OF LITERATURE

There are two major views regarding the birth, growth, and forms of literature. The first is an acquisition theory based on developments absorbed during the evolution of man and the second is the continuation view whereby man *qua* man was always a literary being and therefore literature is coeval with man.

### The continual ascent and diversification theory of literature

This theory is relatively new in the world. Its main protagonists, sad to say, came from the 18<sup>th</sup> century scholarly background represented by such professing Christian writers as Scotsmen James Beattie (1735-1803) and Hugh Blair (1718-1800). Their idea was that man, in his origin, was wordless and almost thoughtless. He communicated through grunts and groans and primitive signs. Literature at its birth was therefore scratches on rocks and finger marks in the sand meaning 'ug-ug' or 'gug-gug' or 'agug-agug' as the case may be.

Thus man developed from monosyllabic illiteracy to polysyllabic fluency. According to this view the literary genres which we know today developed gradually as man shook off the shackles of his primitive primate animal nature and created in himself a human soul. This led to that great day when suddenly a budding poet blossomed out, and cried out proudly, "I've got it! I've invented the first epic poem ever!"

Years later another pre-Homeric inventor of style and literary form, after laborious intellectual activity centred around the poem as the sole literary Gattung, suddenly gave a shout of joy as he discovered he had created the first hymn. This was succeeded by epoch-making discoveries of love stories, drama, detective stories, novels, romances and the like as man evolved and developed his literary capacities. Which brings us to modern times where we hear of New Wave and Scientology enthusiasts who claim they have discovered in Science Fiction the crown of all literary Gattungen and genres and man has at last become literally mature and as the gods. This is the successful speechless-rags-to-eloquent-riches story of the ascent of man.<sup>1</sup>

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See Cowper's excellent, witty criticism of these two men's theories, *Works*, vol. ii, Letter to William Unwin, pp. 231-233.

### **The theory of the practice and preservation of natural forms**

The other view rules out such a spectacular, though slow-motion, processes but is even more surprising, indeed mind-boggling in its claims. This view, which I will not describe as a theory as I hold to it and accept as fact, claims that no known significant development in literature has taken place since Biblical and Classical times.

It is further asserted that there is no knowledge or evidence of man *qua* man ever creating and developing anything in literature that was not part and parcel of his original human nature and thought process.

It is also stressed that when we trace the history of language and literature to its first known roots, man is discovered as master of highly inflected and complicated speech structures and fully able to record them, and record them he did, and that in every literary genre now known to man.

### **The pros and cons of these two basic views**

Now what speaks for the first view? The answer is "Nothing." Yes, I am quite serious. There are no proto-language forms; at least, that we know of. So-called evidence from animal speech thoroughly denounce this theory as they reveal complicated communication structures even in the presumed lowest forms of life and, anyway, man is obviously not a protozoan, an ant, a porpoise or even a gorilla.

No one has ever recorded pre-speech forms and pre-literary literature, again, we must add, as far as we know. In fact, apart from revealed religion, we do not know much about our origins at all so such theories remain modern speculation. To use the nomenclature of literary genre, I would say they are modern fairy stories if not myths and legends and show how modern man loves to speculate on problems which the Scriptures have already solved.

But you might protest and declare, "You are a new myth-builder, What about cave drawings?" Well, what about them? "They are signs of primitive pre-speech and pre-writing culture," you might argue, according to present day popular opinion. Well, most of the cave drawings I have seen, from pictures only, may I add, portray magnificent, colourful, action-filled drawings that most of our modern artists would give their best brushes to be able to imitate.

"But what about the primitive line drawings, stick-figures and symbols," you say. Well, we find line drawings and stick-figures on most toilet doors specifying for whom they are intended. I will not comment on the truly primitive lower primate drawings one often finds *inside* public toilets.

But what does this prove? It proves that though we are in possession of a wide range of great literary genres and artistic artefacts, we can lay the complex aside when a simple sign is necessary for clarity's sake or for didactic reasons. Furthermore, a symbol always reflects a more complicated thought structure behind it which the observer is presumed capable of interpreting. Such pictorial language as is seen on cave walls indicates a high cultural state, a high form of artistic representation and, though they may not have been the only methods such artists had of recording their thoughts, their sign language showed them to be

highly gifted story-tellers.

Remember, as good as all our alphabets are picture signs. Every letter you write is, in principle, a cave-wall painting. The only difference is that we have lost a pictorial view of our letters which Classical writers never did, they wrote knowingly painting pictures in words, as the Arabs, Chinese and Japanese still do, and yet they were in possession of all the literary genres we have today. Indeed, symbols and signs have always been literary genre, which is all I am attempting to say.

### **Nothing new under the sun**

Now what speaks for my pet conviction that there is nothing new under the sun in literature? Everything. Go back to the dawn of poetry. Homer and the ancient Greeks, before whom we know no one amongst extra-Biblical poets. They will give you all the verse forms you wish. You will not be able to think of any they did not use. I do not want to insult your capacities and must reveal that the very greatest poets have tried and failed to develop new kinds of versification. Apart from all the verse forms you can think of in Greek literature, you will find detective stories, agent thrillers, short stories, novels, comedies, tragedies, soliloquies, etc. You name it, they have it.

"Oh no!", you protest. "What did they know about Science Fiction and modern high-tech fantasies? Surely the New Wave and Scientologists and modern Sci-Fi-enthusiasts are correct here!" Who are you trying to kid? Never heard of Lucian of Samosata and his *Vera Historia* or True History? This ancient writer from the dawn of Christianity was a great parodist, satirist, inventor and scientist who decided to take the Mickey out of the tall stories and Science Fiction fantasies of his literary forefathers who had been respectable historians. He tells the story of the first James Bond who pays regular visits to the sun and the moon and gets himself terribly mixed up in inter-galactic warfare which he manages to sort out without dirtying his toga.

Believe you me. Modern Science Fiction as also the Fantasy genre are all mere footnotes to and scratched down mirror reflections of a perhaps even greater thought clarity of ancient times when high-tech was a pure figment of the imagination but nevertheless a real part of literature. Indeed literature and art have always displayed science before its time. This is the great benefit of hermeneutics over the natural sciences as a source of knowledge.

## **CHRISTIAN LITERATURE - BIBLICAL TIMES**

### **Scripture a cornucopia of literary genres**

Now that was literature in general. Let us come to Christian literature. In its origins it is easily as old as Homer and centuries older than Plato and his Science Fiction famous fantasy work *The Republic*. By the way, if you have read Huxley's *Brave New World*, you have read a modern version of Plato's ancient work. The Scriptures provide us with all the literary genres you can think of and they have one great advantage over other literary sources from the point of view of history

and revelation. Pagan Greek literature, great and comprehensive as it is, when faced with the task of describing reality - which has always been one of the great aims of literature - never proceeded further than exquisitely painting the shadows found in Plato's cave.

The ideals for which the Greeks longed in their world of dim reflections were shut up in a heaven of light which only released its True World secrets to the dead. One may not accept the Christian interpretation that the Greeks were using the language of fallen human nature which, as human nature continued in its fall, lost its illuminating powers. Nevertheless, one must admit the consequences that their philosophical hope was not backed by experimental knowledge of One who would show them the way to their Creator and Absolute of Absolutes.

The Bible is a different story completely. We Christians believe that it is an original source of literature and revelation. As such, i.e. because it is God given and not man-created, it has escaped the corruption of the fall and is as close as we need to know to the original, complete and pure language of God's Edenic creation Adam; the upright man who catalogued and classified creation with the words that were part of his blameless human nature. The language which was breathed into Adam at his creation was breathed into the authors of our Scripture canon which is why Peter tells us, "For the prophesy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." The true aim of literature, to the Christian writer, is therefore not merely for the edification of man but for his eternal welfare and salvation.

### **The genre Love Poetry**

Now let us look briefly at the literary genres in the Scriptures. If you look at an old lexicon of literary terms, you will find the genre Love Poetry. Here profound emotion, trust, personal sacrifice and a deep, deep selfless and unselfish love were usually depicted.

Looking at a modern lexicon of literary terms you will not find this genre, symptomatic of our retarding capacities for true literature. You will find the genre renamed Erotic Poetry and here the physical side, which was not absent in the old love poetry but placed in its proper devotional place, is emphasised in an almost loveless scenario. Believe me, this is only one symptom of the modern fact that we are not gaining new genres but losing old ones. We are not progressing from grunts and groans but regressing into them as the results of the peccability of man in thought, word, deed and their literary expression.

"But," you might say, "There are no love poems in the Bible." I have the pleasure to tell you that you are quite wrong. The Bible contains the sublimest of love poems as is to be expected from a Book which outlines the love story of Christ for His Bride from cover to cover. Listen to this - and I am using the sublimest of English language i.e. the King James' Version to put over the sublimest of thoughts of love. Here is the love poetry of a soul physically asleep but with thoughts wide awake as she dreams of the Man of her love.

"I sleep, but my heart waketh: *it is* the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head

is filled with dew, *and* my locks with the drops of the night. I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I defile them? My beloved put in his hand by the hole *of the door*, and my bowels were moved for him. I rose up to open to my beloved; and my hands dropped *with* myrrh, and my fingers *with* sweet smelling myrrh, upon the handles of the lock. I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself, *and* was gone: my soul failed when he spake: I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer. The watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me. I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if ye find my beloved, that ye tell him, that I *am* sick of love.

What *is* thy beloved more than *another* beloved, O thou fairest among women? what *is* thy beloved more than *another* beloved, that thou dost so charge us? My beloved *is* white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand. His head *is* as the most fine gold, his locks *are* bushy, *and* black as a raven. His eyes *are* as *the eyes* of doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk, *and* fitly set. His cheeks *are* as a bed of spices, as sweet flowers: his lips *like* lilies, dropping sweet smelling myrrh. His hands *are* as gold rings set with the beryl: his belly *is* as bright ivory overlaid *with* sapphires. His legs *are* as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold: his countenance *is* as Lebanon, excellent as the cedars. His mouth *is* most sweet: yea, he *is* altogether lovely. This *is* my beloved, and this *is* my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem."

Those who know their Bibles will recognize the source. *Song of Solomon*, Chapter 5, one of many sublime love poems recorded in the Scriptures and used to illustrate the love of Christ who comes to claim His own, saying, "Behold I stand at the door and knock." Anyone hearing that call of love and responding to it with the God-given counterpart, must let Jesus in.

You will find that Paul and John have both left us with exquisite love poetry. Think of 1 Corinthians 13:

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have *the gift of* prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

Charity suffereth long, *and* is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

Charity never faileth: but whether *there be* prophecies, they shall fail<sup>c</sup>; whether *there be* tongues, they shall cease; whether *there be* knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when

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that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly<sup>f</sup>; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these *is* charity."

## Drama

Going on to the other genres, you might ask for drama. Read the story of Job. You have the hero and the rogue or the goody and the baddy. You have the plot with its anti-climax and climax. You have the whole portrayal of man to woman, man to man relationships going through all the human categories and many a divine category to boot. And, God be praised, you have a happy ending. "So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning."

Have you noticed that modern drama has lost its climax? Like the pop songs they sing in play back, they taper out at the end and no one is the wiser. Not so original drama which not only portrayed all life including the kitchen sink but how to live and how to mount present problems and ride them to success. I am not saying that the genre known as *Stream of Conscience* where an action is taken up when encountered after its commencement and left whilst it is still in progress is not an old genre. I am saying that it was only one in very many and that one, almost the exception, is proving now the rule.

## Short Stories

"Where are the short stories and anecdotes in the Bible?" you might ask. Have you never read the story of the man who fell among thieves? Or, how about the following which I am quoting because it is rather shorter than other classical examples. Again in the sublime words of the Authorised Version:

"A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to *his* father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth *to me*. And he divided unto them *his* living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father

said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put *it* on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on *his* feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill *it*; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. And he answering said to *his* father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found."

Here again, this is not just a story with a happy ending but a story with a didactic moral, aimed not merely at entertainment but the instruction, edification and even transformation of the reader. It is a parable (another ancient genre) in a parable with an all round application to all sorts and conditions of men. The literature of the Bible is not only highly ambitious but also highly successful in its aims as all who have been converted by this story can testify.

### **Biblical Hymns**

Perhaps you would like a hymn from the Bible. Have you ever sung that great hymn "*O come, let us sing unto the Lord: let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our salvation?*" You will find it in Psalm 95. Or what about *Jubilate Deo*, "*O be joyful in the Lord, all ye lands: serve the Lord with gladness, and come before his presence with a song?*" You will find that in Psalm 100. Look at Luke 1:65 and you will find the oldest hymn of Christianity. And whilst you are at it, you might sing the magnificent *Magnificat* in the very same chapter. "*My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.*" Indeed, the Bible is as full of hymns as a wig is full of hair and I often wonder why people take the trouble to give us hymns of their own making only one in a thousand of which are really edifying and even singable.

Now you might say, "Those are religious bits and pieces which you expect to find in a religious book. But what about highly secular genres such as Historical Narrative and Science Fiction. You are not telling me that they also belong to the Biblical literary collection?" I am telling you just that and far more besides.

### **Historical Narrative**

You ask for historical narrative? That public British infidel Number One, Lord Bolingbroke wrote his notorious *Letters on the Study and Use of History*, to prove that non-Biblical ancient sources were historically more accurate than the religiously coloured and camouflaged supposed accounts of Moses, David, the

Wisdom Literature authors, the Prophets and New Testament writers. James Hervey, whose literary and Natural History works were averaging two to four editions per year, as they did for very many years afterwards, and who had more learning in his little finger than the famous lord in his whole body, refuted Bolingbroke's theories, point for point, date for date and source by source.

May I recommend Hervey's *Remarks on Bolingbroke's Letters* to anyone interested in the topic. Look at the accounts of the Israelites in Egypt, look at the descriptions of their wilderness wanderings, review the battles that were fought and sometimes lost but often won. Study the court intrigues the accounts of international trade and politics and study the finest historical writings ever penned by man. Examples are unnecessary. Open the Old Testament where you will and you have both history and *Heilsgeschichte* portrayed accurately before your very eyes.

### Science Fiction

Taking up your possible protests further, will you accept my word that Science-Fiction features strongly in both the Old Testament and the New? No? You doubt me? Then turn with me to an experience Ezekiel had. It makes Eric von Däniken's ideas seem like child's play indeed. Notice also the exact historical setting given in the matter-of-fact account.

"Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth *month*, in the fifth *day* of the month, as I was among the captives by the river of Chebar, *that* the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. In the fifth *day* of the month, which was the fifth year of king Jehoiachin's captivity, The word of the LORD came expressly unto Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the LORD was there upon him.

And I looked, and, behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself, and a brightness *was* about it, and out of the midst thereof as the colour of amber, out of the midst of the fire. Also out of the midst thereof *came* the likeness of four living creatures. And this *was* their appearance; they had the likeness of a man. And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings. And their feet *were* straight feet; and the sole of their feet *was* like the sole of a calf's foot: and they sparkled like the colour of burnished brass. And *they had* the hands of a man under their wings on their four sides; and they four had their faces and their wings. Their wings *were* joined one to another; they turned not when they went; they went every one straight forward. As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion, on the right side: and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle. Thus *were* their faces: and their wings *were* stretched upward; two *wings* of every one *were* joined one to another, and two covered their bodies.

And they went every one straight forward: whither the spirit was to go, they went; *and* they turned not when they went. As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance *was* like burning coals of fire, *and* like the appearance of lamps: it went up and down among the living creatures; and



the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning. And the living creatures ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lightning.

Now as I beheld the living creatures, behold one wheel upon the earth by the living creatures, with his four faces. The appearance of the wheels and their work was like unto the colour of a beryl: and they four had one likeness: and their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel. When they went, they went upon their four sides: *and* they turned not when they went. As for their rings, they were so high that they were dreadful; and their rings were full of eyes round about them four. And when the living creatures went, the wheels went by them: and when the living creatures were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up. Whithersoever the spirit was to go, they went, thither was *their* spirit to go; and the wheels were lifted up over against them: for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels. When those went, *these* went; and when those stood, *these* stood; and when those were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up over against them: for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels. And the likeness of the firmament upon the heads of the living creature was as the colour of the terrible crystal, stretched forth over their heads above. And under the firmament were their wings straight, the one toward the other: every one had two, which covered on this side, and every one had two, which covered on that side, their bodies. And when they went, I heard the noise of their wings, like the noise of great waters, as the voice of the Almighty, the voice of speech, as the noise of an host: when they stood, they let down their wings.

And there was a voice from the firmament that was over their heads, when they stood, *and* had let down their wings. And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone: and upon the likeness of the throne was the likeness as the appearance of a man above upon it. And I saw as the colour of amber, as the appearance of fire round about within it, from the appearance of his loins even upward, and from the appearance of his loins even downward, I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and it had brightness round about. As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw *it*, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spake. And he said unto me, Son of man, stand upon thy feet and I will speak to thee."

As I prepared this talk, the miniature six-wheeled Sojourner on the surface of Mars was covering ten centimetres a day. The Americans, international financiers and scientists have spent millions on the project, hoping against hope that they would re-experience Ezekiel's vision there. Well, you may have it for free from Ezekiel himself. Please, when you rush home after this lecture, open your Bibles at Ezekiel 2 onwards and you will find out what kind of a commission God gave His servant and you may find out what kind of a commission God wishes to give you as you seek to serve Him.

**POST-BIBLICAL CHRISTIAN LITERATURE**

## **Drama**

Turning to post-Biblical Christian literature, especially those forms used in church life and worship, we find that one of the oldest genres used was drama. Unlike the theatricals which are put on in churches nowadays in lieu of sound gospel preaching, the roles in early church drama were true roles so that the participants were not actors but partakers. If you like, we could call it team-teaching or interactive preaching and fellowshiping. In the sixties, they would have called it 'Group Dynamics'. It was usually exercised in a dialogue, antiphonal or liturgical manner.

The litanies of our various churches reflect this kind of drama and are a dramatic presentation of the work of the Trinity in salvation, providence and the orderly government of a country. One sees how this form was corrupted, however, by the fall in standards of the old Mystery Plays down to the Miracle Plays and Morality Plays, ending in the silly Mummings Plays and thus leading on to our secular theatre. I must add that Greek drama almost disappeared from the scene of the so-called Christian world until the Renaissance and Christian drama took its place.

## **From Mystery to Mummings Plays and the decline of drama**

### **Mystery plays**

Looking at the Mystery Plays up to the Middle Ages, we find truly Biblical based drama, involving the entire scenario from the creation of the World to the Day of Judgment. They were enacted liturgies and litanies. They were performed *in fano*, that is in the temple. Gradually, however, they were degraded by popular opinion and happily then enacted not in the church but *pro fano*, i.e. before or outside of the temple. Thus we have the origin of our word 'profane'. To be 'profane' is to use language and action which is unworthy of the House of God.

### **Morality plays**

The Morality plays were often of a high moral standard but tended to focus on the war between evil and good on man alone and not on the doctrine of redemption as in the Mystery Plays.

### **Miracle plays**

The Miracle Plays preserved a pseudo-religious element but were taken up with legends and various presumed miracles of the Virgin.

### **Mummings plays**

The Mummings Plays that developed from these earlier plays became obsessed with crude, rather vulgar fertility cults performed at Easter. I remember during my childhood spent in Yorkshire, England, one of these Mummings Plays called *Pask Eggers*, (Middle English for Easter Eggs), was regularly performed and as a child I learnt huge chunks of St George's role in the play. It must have had something to do with my Christian name, George.

### **John Foxe and *Christus Triumphans***

The last well-known writer of Mystery Plays of the higher sort was John Foxe (1517-

1587) the Martyrologist who is revered by all evangelical and Reformed men. He was a great man of letters and his *Acts and Monuments* alias *Book of Martyrs*, an early work, was followed by many more in several languages. Foxe wrote a number of plays, mostly in Latin, *Christus Triumphans*, being the most well-known.

Foxe, however, did not write for church production but claimed that he had transferred, "from the sacred writings, to the theatre, what was most pertinent to ecclesiastical matters." He invented, if you like, Christian acting as opposed to Christian participation in reconstruction preaching. He wished to use the interest in *pro fano* plays to evangelize the unsaved.

*Christus Triumphans* opens with Eve and Mary weeping over the death of their children and out of this conversation, Foxe develops the entire story of damnation and redemption, presenting us with such characters as Diabolus, Nomocrates, Pornapolis, Ecclesia and, of course, Christus. Foxe closes the play with a vivid presentation of the Bride awaiting the coming of the Bridegroom. He tells his audience, "Meanwhile, I beseech you to be warned and to watch, with prudence; and utter acclamation."

After Foxe, many Christian writers used drama as a literary genre for putting over the gospel but usually not for stage presentation. William Huntington's work *Universal Charity Tried and Condemned*, would have made quite a stir if enacted but Huntington wrote merely for his readership. Nevertheless, it was not uncommon for 18<sup>th</sup> century Evangelicals such as John Wesley to be seen at the theatre, especially if a play of Terence was being shown. Hannah More wrote plays for presentation when there was obviously a work of grace in her life but by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Evangelicals, on the whole, neither resorted to the stage for their spiritual edification nor as a means of entertainment.

## Christian Poetry

When we turn to the genre of poetry, I suppose the average educated Christian can think of half a dozen to a dozen true Christian poets who have gained national, if not international, fame. John Donne, George Herbert, John Milton, John Bunyan, Edward Young, William Cowper, Charles Wesley and Augustus Toplady are outstanding examples. Others, such as Tennyson, Elizabeth Browning and Whittier show deep Christian insight.

### Dutch Delights

I am being linguistically insular here, reserving my judgment for English speaking authors I know best, but I can inform my friends present who are of Dutch descent that Willem Bilderdijk is a favourite poet of mine and because of his *van den Ondergang der eerste wereld* has been compared to Cowper and Milton. I have read the long poem in Dutch and just managed to grasp something of its greatness but dare not recite it because of my terrible pronunciation but permit me to reproduce a fragment relating to the flood story translated into English by W. R. Thompson which is not half as good as the Dutch:

"I sing the doom of the primeval world,  
And of that race, with hell and devils leagued  
In deeds iniquitous, which dared to tempt  
Heav'ns Majesty, and, impious, sought to scale  
The battlements of Paradise; till God,  
Weary of wrestling with sin-ruin'd man,  
Crush'd and o'turn'd the guilty world, in wrath  
Hurling creation into chaos back;  
But - in His mercy - from the gen'ral wreck  
One man preserving, to re-people earth  
And raise up the ruins of the world  
A mortal race, seed for eternity."

### German gems

Those of German descent will be thrilled along with me at the poems and hymns of Novalis. When I first peered into his *Hymnen an die Nacht*, I entered such raptures that my wife tried to communicate with me for two long hours and I was insensible to her and had no idea she was talking to me. I was not there. I was in at least one of the lower heavens. He taught me the importance of personal evangelism. By the way, when Novalis speaks of his Vaterland, he is talking about the Kingdom of God as many other Romantic poets have taught who are now wrongly interpreted by critics of German culture as having being fanatic nationalists.

Ich sag' es jedem, daß er lebt  
Und Auferstanden ist,  
Daß er in unsrer Mitte schwebt  
Und ewig bei uns ist.

Ich sag' es jedem, jeder sagt  
Es seinen Freunden gleich,  
Daß bald an allen Orten tagt  
Das neue Himmelreich.

Jetzt scheint die Welt dem neuen Sinn  
Erst wie ein Vaterland;  
Ein neues Leben nimmt man hin  
Enzückt aus seiner Hand.

I must add here that all the fantasy works of George MacDonald and C. S. Lewis are mere footnotes on Novalis.

### Swedish rhapsodies

And what shall I say to my friends here who are of Scandinavian descent? I have read with interest the literature of Denmark and devoured with delight the works of the Norwegians but my favourite Scandinavian author must be Selma Lagerlöf. The Swedes claim with the Welsh that theirs is the pure language of Eden and anyone reading *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige* will half believe them.

This book, originally planned as a mere geography book for schools, is a

literary master-piece designed to show the beauties of God's creation as an act of grace for man. Who but Lagerlöf would combine a scientific account with a rattling good story and a tribute to God's goodness and have it become a best-seller still? Who but Lagerlöf would prefix her great Swedish work with that fine Norwegian hymn from the early Middle Ages asking God's blessing on the reader and deliverance from sin and evil. Forgive me if I read a few verses. They might catch the ear of a soul who will allow his mother tongue to speak where English has failed:

#### DEN KRISTLIGA DAGVISAN.

Den signade dag, som vi nu här se  
av himmelen till oss nedkomma,  
han blive oss säll, han låte sig te  
oss alla till glädje och fromma!  
Ja, Herren, den högste, oss alla i dag  
för synder och sorger bevarer!

Men sasom en fågel mot himmelens höjd  
sig lyfter på lediga vingar, han lovar sin Gud, är glad och förnöjd,  
när han över jorden sig svingar:  
så lyfter sig själen i hjärtelig fröjd  
till himlen med lovsång och böner.

Ack, låtom oss lova och bedja vår Gud, när stunderna växla och skrida,  
så skola vi stärkas att hålla hans bud  
och vaka och tåligen lida.  
Ja, låtom oss verka med allvar och flit,  
så länge oss dagen förunnas!

Sv. Ps. 424: 1, 5, 6.

#### Language at its lowest ebb

By the time of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, the Greek maxim that all poets are liars had been generally accepted as true so that the famous father of literary critics Dr. Samuel Johnson could affirm that religion was no topic whatsoever for poetry. It was no wonder that John Bunyan and John Milton were still little known in England. The Restoration morality of the playboy king, Charles II had so corrupted public manners and literature that it was a common saying that if you wanted to change your daughter into a prostitute, you only needed to allow her to borrow books from the local lending-library.

Thanks to the work of Samuel Richardson (1689-1761) who re-introduced the Christian hero into literature as in *Sir Charles Grandison* and Joseph Addison (1672-1719), who began to clean up the English language in the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, the way to an acceptance of Herbert's, Bunyan's and Milton's works was paved and Shakespeare was re-introduced in a Bowdlerised<sup>ff</sup> version. Foremost in

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After Thomas Bowdler (1754-1825) who issued his *Family Shakespeare* in 1818 omitting "whatever is unfit to be

this literary clean-up was William Cowper author of *God moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform*.

Cowper (1731-1800)

In Cowper's magnificent long poem *Table Talk* which is a history of poetry from Edenic times and the spread of the gospel, the poet says:

Pity! Religion has so seldom found  
A skilful guide into poetic ground,  
The flow'rs would spring where'er she deign'd to stray,  
And ev'ry muse attend her in her way.  
Virtue indeed meets many a rhiming friend,  
And many a compliment politely penn'd,  
But unattir'd in that becoming vest  
Religion weaves for her, and half undress'd,  
Stands in the desert shiv'ring and forlorn,  
A wint'ry figure, like a wither'd thorn<sup>fff</sup>.

But then he goes on to proclaim:

'Twere new indeed, to see a bard all fire,  
Touch'd with a coal from heav'n assume the Lyre,  
And tell the world, still kindling as he sung,  
With more than mortal music on his tongue,  
That he who died below, and reigns above  
Inspires the song, and that his name is love<sup>fff</sup>.

Such thoughts caused Cowper to break with perverted poetic traditions and, arguing that all Christians are true poets of the Language of Eden. On experiencing the call to write poetry professionally, he prayed:

Prosper (I press thee with a pow'rful plea)  
A task I venture on, impell'd by thee:  
Oh never seen but in thy blest effects,  
Nor felt but in the soul that heav'n selects,  
Who seeks to praise thee, and to make thee known  
To other hearts, must have thee in his own.  
Come, prompt me with benevolent desires,  
Teach me to kindle at thy gentle fires,  
And though disgrac'd and slighted, to redeem  
A poet's name, by making thee the theme<sup>ffff</sup>.

Happily, Cowper has never been out of print for the past 200 years and his works are readily available both in new editions and second-hand. There are also

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read aloud by gentlemen to a company." Shakespeare was greatly popularised by Bowlder and without him, the Bard of Avon might have been relatively unknown today.

*Table Talk*, lines 716-7725.

Lines 734-739.

Lines 5-14.

some forty-five biographies of his life, several still in print. Dear friends, sell your classical wordless and gospel-less CDs and buy Cowper's poetry. In doing so - providing you read his volumes - you will not only educate your head, you will renew your heart.

Cowper, seeing that Christian poetry was now becoming acceptable and assisted by his friend and biographer William Hayley re-published Milton's works and Cowper wrote a commentary to *Paradise Lost*, summarising their joint view of the history of salvation in the words:

"Man, in the beginning, is placed in a probationary state and made the arbiter of his own destiny. By his own fault he forfeits happiness both for himself and for his descendants. But Mercy interposes for his restoration. That Mercy is represented as perfectly free, as vouchsafed to the most unworthy; to creatures so entirely dead in sin, as to be destitute even of a sense of their need of it, and consequently too stupid ever to ask it. They are also as poor as they are unfeeling, and were it possible that they could affect themselves with a just sense and apprehension of their lapsed condition, have no compensation to offer to their offended Maker, nothing with which they can satisfy the demands of his justice, in short, no atonement. In this ruinous state of their affairs, and when all hope of reconciliation seems lost for ever, the Son of God voluntarily undertakes for them; undertakes to become the Son of Man also, and to suffer in Man's stead the penalty annexed to his transgression. In consequence of this self-substitution Christ becomes the Federal head of his church, and the sole Author of salvation to his people. As Adam's sin was imputed to his posterity, so the faultless obedience of the second Adam is imputed to all, who, in the great concern of Justification, shall renounce their own obedience as imperfect, and therefore incompetent.

The sentence is thus reversed as to all Believers, 'Death is swallowed up in Victory', the Saviour presents the redeemed before the throne of the Eternal Father, in whose countenance no longer any symptom of displeasure appears against them, but their joy and peace are thenceforth perfect. The General Resurrection takes place, the Saints are made assessors with Christ in the judgment both of Men and Angels, the new heaven and earth, the destined habitation of the Just, succeed, the Son of God, his whole undertaking accomplished, surrenders the Kingdom to his Father, and God becomes All in All<sup>fffff</sup>."

#### **Milton (1608-1674)**

Cowper ends his commentary by saying that there are many scoffers who claim that these views are merely the invention of contemporary evangelicals but Milton's testimony from the previous century show that they have been held by Christians of all ages. Notice, that Milton wrote his poem for what he called "a fit audience though few." In other words, he did not expect very many, even in those Puritan hey-days, to accept his gospel. Through the work of Hervey, Cowper, Hayley and William Blake and later Christian poets, Milton is now viewed as the

greatest British poet of all times and even the Italians, not forgetting Dante, say they have no equal. As the curtains are drawn back to reveal his great pageant of salvation in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, we hear those famous opening words as the Narrator outlines the poet's argument to come:

"Of Man's first disobedience and the fruit  
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste  
Brought death into the world and all our woe,  
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man  
Restore us and regain the blissful seat,"

and then read on you unconverted if you dare for here is the sublimest of this world's poetry which will pivot you to heaven before you know what is happening to you. You Christians may also read this poem at great risk because you will find yourselves lost in wonder love and praise that this one poet has been given such heavenly insight into the great salvation which you share with him. Milton will open your eyes to untold blessing. If you are still blind to such sublimity, read Milton's great tragedy *Samsom Agonistes* and if that is too tough to chew, delight your soul with his *Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity*:

"This is the month, and this the happy morn,  
Wherein the Son of heaven's eternal king,  
Of wedded Maid, and Virgin Mother born,  
Our great redemption from above did bring;  
For so the holy sages once did sing,  
That He our deadly forfeit should release,  
And with His Father work us a perpetual peace."

If all that leaves you cold, you have a cold heart indeed. Leave me your address, dear friend, so that I can ply you with further works of literary and poetic testimony to the glory of God until the cockles of your heart begin to warm to the theme, too.

## Christian Prose

James Hervey (1714-1758)

Leaving Cowper and Milton unwillingly, we come to the great Christian prose writers. Samuel Richardson's works such as *Clarissa* and *Pamela* were so popular in Germany that they said only an Angel could do better. This led Richardson to publish James Hervey's works and soon both English and Continental readers from the Royal and Napoleonic courts downwards were reading the words of one they claimed was a veritable angel in human form. Hervey, who received the name *The Prose Poet* for his lyrical stories, declined all praise, modestly confessing what greater benefits a saved soul has over the arch-angel Gabriel himself.

You have now sold your CDs, so what could you part with to buy *Theron and Aspasio* and *Aspasio Vindicated*, two of Hervey's major works? They are still



readily available in at least four languages. I noticed that Lindenberg's in Rotterdam have Dutch copies for sale. Sell all your Whodunits, Frankensteins, Draculas and Edgar Allan Poes and buy at least Hervey's *Meditations on the Tombs*. In this book, you will have all of Poe but much more of Christ. Writing to a friend, requesting him to look through Hervey's manuscript, the Prose Poet said:

"I hope, sir, my end in venturing to publish is an hearty desire to serve, in some little degree, the interests of Christianity by endeavouring to set some of its most important truths in a light that may both entertain and edify. As I profess this view, I am certain your affectionate regard for the most excellent religion imaginable will incline you to be concerned for the issue of such an attempt, and therefore to contribute to its success, both by bestowing your animadversions upon these small parts, and by speaking of the whole (when it shall come abroad) with all that candour which is natural to the Christian, and will be so greatly needed by this new adventurer in letters." ffffff

Speaking of the great stone edifices of the world, Hervey's thoughts would delight the heart of any architect, when suddenly we find the author speaking of God not disdain to dwell in our souls by His Holy Spirit and making them His temple. Hervey goes on to discuss the plights of those lying under the grave stones, the young and old, rich and poor only to come time and time back to the word of God and find heavenly solutions to the sorrows, illnesses, accidents and age that drove the people to their various graves. The law comes heavy on Hervey's readers as he informs them of the sin that takes them to the grave. Crystal clear is the clarion call of the gospel as Hervey points to hope beyond.

Though Hervey's language is flowery, his message is designed to cut to the quick in order to remove Satan's arrows. As the bells toll to lead the dead to the grave, Hervey reminds his readers that in the midst of life they are in death and they should be redeeming the time, taking heed, watching and praying because the final summons might come at any time.

**Man's death as a forfeit and Christ's death as a security**  
As Hervey turns his gaze on the grave of a soldier who gave his life in defence of his King, we see him paving the way for the greater love of the Prince of Peace and King of Kings who gave his life as a ransom for many. Hervey tells us:

"The one died being a mortal, and only yielded up a life which was long before forfeited to divine justice; which must soon have been surrendered as a debt to nature, if it had not fallen prey to war - But Christ took flesh and gave up the ghost, though he was the great I AM; the fountain of existence, who calls happiness and immortality all his own. He who thought it no robbery to be equal with God, he, whose outgoings were from everlasting; even he was made in the likeness of man, and cut off out of the land of the living. Wonder, O heavens! be astonished, O earth! He died the death, of whom it is witnessed, that he is 'the true God, and eternal life.' (1 John 5:20).

The one exposed himself to peril in the service of his sovereign and his country; which, though it was glorious to do, yet would have been ignominious, in such circumstances to have declined. - But Christ took the field, though he was the blessed and only potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords. Christ took the field, though he was sure to drop in the engagement; and put on the harness, though he knew beforehand that it must reek with his blood. That prince of heaven resigned his royal person, not barely to hazard but to the inevitable stroke; to death, certain in its approach, and armed with all its horrors. - And for whom? Not for those who were in any way deserving: but for his own disobedient creatures; for the pardon of condemned malefactors, for a band of rebels, a race of traitors, the most obnoxious and inexcusable of all criminals; whom he might have left to perish in their iniquities, without the least impeachment of his goodness, and to the display of his avenging justice."

The pure gospel becomes a best-seller

But you will say, "Who was willing to read such a strong evangelical revelation of the absolute unworthiness of man compared to the absolute worthiness of the Saviour?" Did Hervey ever sell any books? Surely not! My dear friends, in those days of greater Christian awareness combined with a greater longing for sound literature, people flocked and queued to buy Hervey's books. Between 6,000 to 12,000 copies of his various books were sold per year for two generations. This, although Hervey had particularly written for pagan intellectuals! Even a hundred years later, Luke Tyerman, a critic of Hervey because of Hervey's Calvinism, admitted that his works were still best-sellers. Think, too, of Hannah More (1745-1833) who mass-produced Christian books. Her new editions were sold out before even printed and the godly lady found that even her works sold by subscription were bought by up to four million readers per edition. Sell your edition of Thomas More's *Utopia* and buy Hannah More's *Village Politics*. It will serve you far better, good as *Utopia* is.

George MacDonald (1824-1905)

Speaking of Utopias, we must come sometime or other to the works of George MacDonald. He is, of course, the true literary and spiritual father of Charles Williams, J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, and, I suspect, G. K. Chesterton. MacDonald, of course, was fathered as a literary figure by Novalis; a fact he was always proud to establish. What shall I say about *Lilith*? Read it to the end and the end will knock you flat and drive you to the Bible for the rest of the story. *Lilith and Phantastes* give you the very best of the Romantic Age's feelings and *The Princess and Curdie* books, *The Golden Key*, *The Grey Wolf* and the *Wise Woman* the wisest and best of fantasy fairy-tales. My favourite is and will always be *At the Back of the North Wind*. I read it for the first three times in German and shed tears of joy as I read it. I then opened the pages of the book in English and even the opening words were so sublime, I had to shut the book. I could not contain the blessings. I still have never read it in English. I have it in English and could quote it to you, but what is the use? I would not be able to repeat a word without forgetting that you were there and going into tearful raptures. This brings me a little down to earth, to the

works of C. S. Lewis who looked to MacDonald as his chief mentor.

**C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)**

Perhaps the modern writer who comes nearest the success of Hervey, Venn, More, Cowper, Newton and other Christian prose writers of the past is C. S. Lewis; and here we remain in the realms of Science Fiction and Fantasy literature. Personally, I do not rank Lewis with the best but we must be thankful to God that he is there as he has caused millions to think again about gospel truths. He is truly a writer to the masses. We can also sympathize with his disgust at the way modern theologians have lost touch with the people for whom Christ died.

What shall I say about the Narnia books? I have taken them out almost yearly for thirty years; not just to be dusted but to be read with delight as I discover new gems every time. I must have read pretty near everything Lewis has written and I find that the deeper one delves under his rather collegey, stiff-upper lip, churchy surface, one finds a truly reformed heart. His Anglicanism, therefore, does not put me off one bit as, until Laud drenched the Reformed Church of England in Arminianism, it was, in my opinion the truest visible Reformed church on earth and one blest with the very best of Christian writers, some of whom were highly influential in getting the findings of Dort under way.

Listen to Lewis telling us what fools we are to believe Satan's lie that we shall become like the gods. It is the language which Everyman understands, couched in the hum-drum words of our scientific age, but most effective:

"The reason why it can never succeed is this. God made us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on petrol, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing. That is the key to history. Terrific energy is expended - civilizations are built up - excellent institutions devised; but each time something goes wrong. Some fatal flaw always brings the selfish and cruel people to the top and it all slides back into misery and ruin. In fact, the machine conks. It seems to start up all right and runs a few yards, and then it breaks down. They are trying to run it on the wrong juice. That is what Satan has done to us humans."<sup>ffffff</sup>

Lewis is the only author I have ever read that can extend a dialogue between two people over several chapters, without dropping the tension and losing the interest of his readers as he outlines the adventures of Dr Ransom in his Science Fiction trilogy. *The Voyage to Venus*, *Out of the Silent Planet* and his most frightening book *That Hideous Strength*, helped me to see the sinfulness of sin and the plight of mankind without a Saviour. However, in trying to show that salvation will be revealed before the eyes of chummy neighbours in the retreat of the kitchen

in a friend's isolated house, Lewis loses the global nature of the eschatological dawn when God shall come and rescue His own and judge the quick and the dead. Here Dante, Milton, Jonathan Edwards and Cowper beat him hollow.

### **Paving the way to revival blessings**

Lewis did for the 20<sup>th</sup> century what Richardson, Steele and Addison did for the 18<sup>th</sup> century when they paved the way for the Evangelical Revival in literature and with it the Great Awakening. I look upon you dear sirs and ladies as the new generation of Miltons, Herveys, Cowpers and Mores who will take advantage of this new interest in Christian literature and provide it with salvation's food for thought served up in the best of literary dishes and available to all. In this way, you as academics will be obedient to the Great Commission. Let me not discourage you, however, if you are called to "the trivial round, the common task." Since retirement from the hustle and bustle of the world I know for certain that the Lord looks after His own no matter in what circumstances they are. There are no wall-flowers in God's garden. Remember what Cowper wrote in Book VI of his didactic poem *The Task*:

"He is the happy man, whose life ev'n now  
Shows somewhat of that happier life to come;  
Who, doom'd to an obscure but tranquil state,  
Is pleas'd with it, and, were he free to choose,  
Would make his fate his choice."

So whether you will become a Milton or a Hervey or pass your days as I do, far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife, in my loop-hole of retreat, I trust that my lecture has shown that you are never far from heaven when reading the best of Christian literature and that, however many blessings you have received in this way, there are still many to come.