

THE WRITER'S PREDICAMENT IN A SCIENTIFIC AGE*

HUGH DINWIDDY

THE power of the writer is a transforming power. It is in operation from the day he weaves fables round the play-things of his nursery, and it is the power which vitally penetrates, which re-incarnates the raw material of his world. And his world is that small part of creation which he knows, and which, in knowing, he manages to love. Today, as he looks out upon the expanding universe which science has prepared for him, he has to find a centre in himself round which he can wrap his belief in *human* values. Facing him is a world living numbly, automatically, on the sanitary, progressive, anti-theistic, hence anti-human, thinking of the recent scientific past. It is upon this mass-produced, disinfected world that the writer is called to exercise his transforming power. Here, amid the disguised cruelty of routine he must kindle the spark of life. Here, though every day he watches 'the dwarfing of man' in the perspective of machinery and light years, he must, no matter what his religion, affirm his faith in the uniqueness of man, 'heir to all the ages'. For, as St Thomas wrote, 'the soul of man is in the world, containing it, rather than being contained by it'. This, indeed, is the primal condition of man's transforming power, and it is from this that writers, whether we are thinking of Coleridge's 'esemplastic power' of the imagination or of Maritain's 'creative intuition', derive their inner power to unify experience.

This, too, is the very core of man's sense of wonder from which springs his need to inquire into and to make manifest to his generation his soul's inheritance. In one of Leonardo da Vinci's Notebooks, he describes an incident when he was hunting for prehistoric bones in a lonely mountain cave, and he wrote:

'There awakened in me two emotions, fear and desire, fear of the dark threatening cavern and desire to see whether there were within it any marvellous thing'.

His fervent desire to find the bones overcame his fear, and thus led him, by way of observed fact, to a deeper understanding of Natural Law. Here, for the moment, the scientific inquirer has

*A Paper read at the LIFE OF THE SPIRIT Conference, Spode House, September 1954.

freed the imaginative artist from his fears, and has provided him with further material to transform into art. Yet it is seldom, in an artist or writer, that the ghosts of 'the dark threatening cavern' can be laid to rest until they are made manifest in his work. No purely scientific demonstration or assurance is enough. From being dim fears, they come to be known, known because used creatively, and thus transformed. Though they may still be potent they are humanized, tamed even, by being given a 'local habitation and a name'. In this light we may think of the grotesque heads of Leonardo, and certainly of Graham Greene's treatment of Gagool, the witch in *King Solomon's Mines*, who waited for him 'in dreams every night in the passage by the linen cupboard, near the nursery door'. She has not yet been put to rest, and he writes of her:

'Wasn't it the incurable fascination of Gagool with her bare yellow skull, the wrinkled scalp that moved and contracted like the hood of the cobra, that led me to work all through 1942 in a little stuffy office in Freetown, Sierra Leone? . . . Once I came a little nearer to Gagool and her witch-hunters, one night at Zigita on the Liberian side of the French Guinea border, when my servants sat in their shattered hut with their hands over their eyes and someone beat a drum and a whole town stayed behind closed doors while the big bush devil—whom it would have been blindness to see—moved between the huts'.¹ Out of the nothingness of the night, this personification of fear arose and it protects itself from all observation by the curse of blindness. It is safer not to look. Yet the writer whose work is to make human even terror has to find a means of approaching this spectre of nothingness, which he knows to be not only in the jungle but in the factory, the offices and the homes of modern living. It is lurking behind the silent and impassive dynamos of applied science, and all the efficient apparatus of modern living is for ever cleaning away fear. *There is nothing here for the creative mind to rest in.* And this, quite simply, is the key to the writer's predicament. Quantity has made stale our sense of wonder, and the nothingness of comfort has stifled the poetry in us.

In the land of lobelias and tennis flannels

The rabbit shall burrow and the thorn revisit,

The nettle shall flourish on the gravel court,

¹ *The Lost Childhood*, pp. 14, 15.

And the wind shall say: 'Here were decent godless people
 Their only monument the asphalt road
 And a thousand lost golf balls'.²

In the face of this, and against the conspiracy of blindness, irony is the main approach to his subject that the writer is compelled to take. He stands, with mirror and with pen in hand, saying to all his readers, 'See what I see: This is the world you live in: Note well, in this age of progress, how idealism is married to scepticism, for there is the split which makes all significant living so difficult. Unless you can find a new relation to your world of people and machines you will continue to destroy innocence by *not* looking at the nothingness upon which it is being fed.'

Indeed, every writer who goes out to meet the modern mechanical civilization, as genuine novelists and dramatists must do who hope for a hearing by the workaday world, unavoidably uses the weapon of irony to communicate and to transform his material. It is interesting to consider, in contrast, writing that is, for the most part, without the transformation into significance, but which is highly successful in the modern situation. It is the kind of reportage that has so hugely increased the sales of the *Daily Mirror* which began life by being 'the first daily newspaper for gentlewomen' on 2nd November, 1903.

'The relation between reader and newspaper became more intimate', Hugh Cudlipp writes in *Publish And Be Damned!* 'tantalizing problems of the heart were much in favour.' And here follow two examples from two correspondents:

'My wife sometimes complains that I leave unfinished some splendidly cooked meals. It would no doubt surprise her to know that she is the cause by continually smacking her lips while masticating food. It nearly drives me to distraction.'

He signs himself 'Worried', and the other is from 'Dismayed'.

'While courting I was very dissatisfied by the shape of my nose. I drew out my savings for a 25-guinea facial operation. Not a word of this did I breathe to my lover. To my horror he did not notice the difference.'

The irony is there in both instances but the 'thing hidden' is only fully visible to an observer, perhaps a writer, for whom this kind of thing, so puny yet so pathetic, is the raw material upon which his transforming dramatic power has to work. We are told

² T. S. Eliot: *The Rock*, p. 30.

frequently by Mr Cudlipp and others that this is the century of the common man who has a right to be told the truth. Journalists have to get down to his level; thus Cyril James, one of the paper's provocative writers, contributed a piece entitled 'And When I Die' with an illustration showing a tombstone with the inscription:

Here lies Cyril James—He never
knowingly harmed another, but
died in the firm belief that he had
not mattered.

Here, in strict parody form, is the ultimate picture of the writer 'identifying himself with his subject'. . . in a world of anonymous power.

Yet, behind all that is written of the common man, lies the supreme irony that he is made in the image of God and does *not* know it. The blind spot in him makes him amenable to fact but not to value, or perhaps what we should say is that he turns his values into facts. The oft repeated: 'It's not right: That's a fact', reveals this tendency. The disinclination of the common man to have any other criterion of judgment *beyond* the self-enclosing fact is the chief problem the writer has to face in his approach to him. The apparent value judgment: 'It does, or it does not pay', is in origin, and more often than not in use, a factual monetary judgment. The common man is closed in by a chain of facts which he can quote but does not understand, and, in this unsatisfying mental climate, the only relation a fact has is to the one that follows it. Fact follows fact: event follows event, and London is the 'time-kept city'. And this is the outcome of the experimental scientific method which, on the practical social level, is governed by the evolving laws of supply and demand, and on the human level, by a slowly changing state of mind whose unreflective judgment is loaded by the experience of 'what pays'. Yet like Joseph Pieper, neither I, nor any writer, has any intention whatsoever to denigrate this world as though from some supposedly superior 'philosophical' standpoint . . . it is indeed 'part of man's world, being the very ground of his physical existence—without which, obviously, no one could philosophize!'³ It is that which is the raw material for modern literature.

The writer has to transform these facts and events into meaning,

³ 'Leisure the Basis of Culture': *The Philosophical Act*, p. 93.

but he is nowadays faced with so many facts and events that he must find a point of detachment from which he can escape being overwhelmed by them . . . from which he can make his selection. Though he may not be as sensitive as Keats, yet, in a heightened degree, he suffers the pain of the pressure of identity, and he may find that he, like James Joyce, and others cannot come to terms with his subject unless he is living in exile from it. In all ages, this point of detachment is a difficult one for the writer to find, but at no time has it been more difficult to hold than in the present age. I have spoken of the writer finding 'a centre in himself round which he can wrap his belief in human values', and so strongly does he now have to hold on to this that either it, or its opposite, may become an obsession to him. Thus we can speak of Graham Greene's obsession about the seediness of modern life and the lost innocence of childhood.

Yet when we speak of human values, it is important to say we are speaking entirely subjectively and thinking of the array of values a man attaches to what fills or does not fill his life. These and what others think of them is the very pith of literature. Indeed, it is only now that the term 'value' has been isolated from truth, from metaphysical reality, and stands in danger of being inundated by quantity that writers speak about it so tensely. It is in the face of a freedom lost to the machine that the writer clings to his faith in human value. All activities of town life conspire to rate man as a machine. One of the highest compliments that can be paid to a football team is to record that it played like a beautiful machine.

'The modern wife and mother', writes Margaret Mead, 'lives alone, with a husband who comes home in the evening, and children, who as little children are on her hands twenty-four hours out of twenty-four, in a house that she is expected to run with the efficiency of a factory—for hasn't she a washing-machine and a vacuum cleaner? . . . As our factories move towards the ideal of eliminating human labour, our home ideals have paralleled them; the successful home-maker today should always look as if she had neither done any work nor would have to do any; she should produce a finished effect effortlessly . . . the creativity that is expected of her is a creativity of management of an assembly-line, not of materials lovingly fashioned into food for children. She shops, she markets, she chooses, she transports, she integrates, she

co-ordinates, she fits little bits of time together so as "to get through the week", and her proudest boast often has to be "It was a good week. Nothing went wrong."⁴

'If man is thought of on the model of a machine', writes Marcel, 'it is quite according to the rules and it conforms to the principles of a healthy economy that when his output falls below the cost of his maintenance and when he is "not worth repairing" (that is, not worth sending to hospital) because the cost of patching him up would be too much of a burden in proportion to any result to be expected from it, it is quite logical that he should be sent to the scrap heap like a worn out car.'⁵

He is writing of the insane logic of the Nazi's occupation, and it is against this, on its many levels, that the genuine writer would protect man, and it is from these cold depths that the Christian must begin to help forward the work of creative redemption in the world. For man's two chief modern temptations away from being human are to become either an animal or a machine, and frequently the one will have a compulsive effect upon the other. In half a sentence from *The Heart of the Matter* we find Scobie steeling himself against becoming an animal, by becoming in the eyes of the author machine-like, in a situation in which he can not be truly human.

'[Scobie] lay coiled like a watch-spring on the outside of the bed, trying to keep his body away from Louise's'. . .

It is difficult to realize how much of modern life goes on between these two extremes and how the one affects the other. Freud is thought to be the apostle of instinctive living and Marx the apostle of the machine and of mass living—and both have preached their doctrine in the name of man's freedom. To both it is the lower kinds of freedom that matter. Yet the Christian cry for redemption is always, at all times, 'out of the depths', and these are the twentieth-century depths. It is for the Christian writer to tune his ear to hear that cry, and it comes, if it comes, from the hidden, distorted, undeveloped and shrivelled heart of man.

'The man kept on speaking of his heart, but it seemed to Scobie that a long deep surgical operation would have been required to find it.'

⁴ *Male and Female*, p. 333.

⁵ *Men Against Humanity: The Crisis of Values*, p. 136.

'The heart', said Gerard Manley Hopkins, in a sermon on the Sacred Heart, 'expresses what goes on within the soul', and if a priest is doctor to the soul of man, the writer is doctor to his heart. He knows, as Mauriac writes of Rose Revolou in *The Unknown Sea*, 'The heart's despair is boundless as the sea.' The writer is the man with the gift of life to impart, and his way of imparting it is by transforming fact into what David Jones has called 'a valid sign'. Yet, in a scientific age, the many extensions of man's hand can not be known and felt directly by an author. In the preface to *In Parenthesis* he writes:

'It is not easy in considering a trench mortar barrage to give praise for the action proper to chemicals—full though it may be of beauty. . . . We doubt the decency of our own inventions and are certainly in terror of their possibilities. That our culture has accelerated every line of advance into the territory of physical science is well appreciated—but not so well understood are the unforeseen, subsidiary effects of this achievement . . . all requiring a new and strange direction of the mind, a new sensitivity certainly, but at a considerable cost.

'We who are of the same world of sense with hairy ass and furry wolf and who presume to other and more radiant affinities, are finding it difficult, as yet, to recognize these creatures of chemicals as true extensions of ourselves' . . .

Every day that science makes available new power to governments increases the difficulty of the writer. The signs of the times are valid for man, but only so that they bring the dwarfing shadow of death to him who has, for the most part, separated himself from his more radiant affinities, and wants merely to crawl into his grave 'in the firm belief that he had not mattered'.

On the level at which we have been speaking Henry Miller is a writer who brings out the bleeding tension between the natural animal in man and his machine-made existence. In a dream he sees man as a clam; closed-tight in mute uncomprehending anguish. But the writer has to do more than merely make a statement that man is a clam on the shore of the world, or a 'beetle' in a concentration camp; he has to make the sign valid, by making the depths of man's predicament real. Here is Henry Miller:

'Where is the warm summer's day when first I saw the green-carpeted earth revolving and men and women moving like panthers? Where is the soft gurgling music which I heard welling

up from the sappy roots of the earth? Where am I to go if everywhere there are trap-doors and grinning skeletons, a world turned inside out and all the flesh peeled off? . . . Everything is a lie, a fake. Paste-board. I walk along the ocean front. The sand is strewn with human clams waiting for someone to pry their shells apart. In the roar and hubbub their anguish goes unnoticed. The breakers club them. They lie behind the pasteboard street in the onyx-coloured night and they listen to the hamburgers sizzling.

'Jabber, jabber, a sneezing and a wheezing, balls rolling down the long smooth troughs into tiny little holes filled with bric-à-brac, with chinaware and spittoons and flower-pots and stuffed dolls. Greasy Japs wiping the rubber plants with wet rags, Armenians chopping onions into microcosmic particles, Macedonians throwing the lassos with molasses arms. Every man, woman and child in a mackintosh has adenoids, spreads catarrh, diabetes, whooping cough, meningitis. Everything that stands upright, that slides, rolls, tumbles, spins, shoots, teeters, sways and crumbles is made of nuts and bolts. The monarch of the mind is a monkey-wrench. Sovereign pasteboard power.⁶

Between the extremities of machine living and of purely natural living is to be found all the inherent violence in modern writing. For man, a pilgrim upon the earth anyhow, and restless for eternity, must remain utterly unsatisfied by what he finds in modern Civilization. His lack of ease makes him almost desperate, so that escape into violence seems the *only* way of release. While the writer asks; 'Where am I to go if everywhere there are trap-doors and grinning skeletons, a world turned inside out and all the flesh peeled off?'

We have said that the writer is the life-bringer and that his problem is to find a position from which he can know and love mankind. There must be some reality, 'a beyond' from which he can observe and write, and the Christian writer, though he may search the depths, as other writers, is saved by his faith from the insanity of being seized and swallowed by them. Yet the writer stands in danger of being overwhelmed, swallowed up, not only by facts and events outside himself, but by the fears in his own mind, by the untamed images that prowl in his thoughts. For, as Walter de la Mare has written:

. . . In the forests of the mind

⁶ *The Cosmological Eye*, pp. 240, 241.

Lurk beasts as fierce as those that tread
 Earth's rock-strewn wilds, to night resigned. . . .

And so whether we think of a tiger prowling in the forests of the night, or of Gagool, we know that the writer has, in some measure, to tame his material before he can use it, hence his power to transform presupposes a power to tame the apparently wild and intractable. From the day when he writes a story about the playthings in his nursery, thus saving them from oblivion, his work is one of creative redemption. He is redeeming fact by giving it significance, and by making it live he is affirming William Blake's principle that 'All life is holy'. In affirming this he is helping to protect man from himself and from the impersonal and voracious jaws of the machine. In the poem 'Eureka', Walter de la Mare has a dream that he is taken to the promised land of the machine:

Here God, the mechanist, reveals,
 As only mechanism can,
 Mansions to match the new ideals
 Of his co-worker Man.

On strict probation, you are now
 To toil with yonder bloodless moles—
 These skiagrams will tell you how—
 On mechanizing human souls. . . .

And he wakens in thankfulness from this absurdity to the creaturely world he knows.

The writer knows and cares for the heart of man, but we have been trying to show that there is much in modern life to prevent its natural, deep-rooted growth. All that inhibits this growth stands in the way of positive, hopeful writing, and we find that much that is difficult to understand in modern writing is difficult because it is trying, by devious and intricate ways, to penetrate to the heart, to touch the heart into life, to break through the defences which this traveller upon the earth has erected round himself. For Kafka, the dwarfing and unapproachable Castle is a pyramid of rationalization, in reality non-existent, but founded upon man's baseless sense of guilt. Modern psychology has given precision to the 'labyrinthine mind' of man, and the writer seeks to present it in its operation in the modern setting. Thus Mr Bloom, the common man, walking the streets of Dublin, is for

James Joyce a labyrinth walking in a labyrinth. Yet, while the writer is speaking of the 'levels of reality', of 'inner and outer reality', of the irony of having all things and yet possessing nothing, the journalist, missing the tragedy and the irony of triviality simplifies everything. The journalist knows only that he has a tough crust of resistance—the castle defences—to break through, and that man still responds to an appeal to his heart. And what he writes *may* bring out courageous action; it may bring a reverence for life. With picture and headline he knows, at least, how to get a hearing, for he has studied the mind of his reader. But the approach is so violent, like a pneumatic drill, that it shudders the heart stirring it towards the confusion of revenge. Under the heading 'WE DO NOT APOLOGISE' the *Daily Mirror* printed the following:

'Our picture of the starved and dying greyhound shocked you. Maybe it made some of you sick. If it did we are glad. It was good for you. We intended to shock you, and we shall shock you again and again if by doing so we can help to stamp out the wanton cruelty—so often born of thoughtlessness—that lives in Britain today. . . .

'Forty-six people wrote to complain about it. But only 4,800 letters of praise were received. It is pitiful to think that only 4,800 people were roused sufficiently out of their apathy to write to support us. We want you to join us in a great crusade to end cruelty.' This is a product of the much vaunted 'expanding sense of reality', of 'mass education', and is part of the campaign to show things up, which is a necessary corrective in society. Yet this is writing on a sub-human level, and is the kind of bludgeoning, simplified education some people give to animals. Aiming, as the present editor of the *Daily Mirror* writes, at making an 'impact on the mind of the reader', its effect is to stun him into further unconsciousness.

'By 2050', says Syme, in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 'the whole climate of thought will be different. In fact there will be no thought, as we understand it now. Orthodoxy means not thinking—not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconsciousness.'

The writer knows that if 'reverence for life', the ordinary human sympathy between man and man and the creatures that serve him, is lost, it can only be regained by a slow revaluation of the processes of thought and feeling which have previously been

taken for granted. He perceives that the 'new sensitivity' deriving 'from the subsidiary effects of scientific achievement', of which David Jones wrote, while promising happiness and expanding consciousness, have, in truth, enclosed man in a labyrinthine self-consciousness, making him unobservant of reality and egotistical. Herein, on the human level, lies the irony behind all so-called 'democratic responsibility'. Meanwhile, against the uncomprehending stream, the writer pursues his transforming work of restoring and redeeming human values. His work is a cry from the depths, from the heart, 'expressing what goes on within the soul'; it is life-bringing, a work of love and preparative to the redemption of Christ himself, the new Adam. As Edith Sitwell wrote, prophetically, to modern man in her poem 'The Shadow of Cain':

There are no thunders, there are no fires, no suns,
 no earthquakes
 Left in our blood. . . . But yet like the rolling thunders
 of all the fires in the world, we cry
 To Dives: 'You are the shadow of Cain. Your shade is
 the primal Hunger.'
 'I lie under what condemnation?'
 'The same as Adam, the same as Cain, the same as Sodom,
 the same as Judas.'

And the fires of your Hell shall not be quenched by
 the rain
 From these torn and parti-coloured garments of Christ,
 those rags
 That once were Men. Each wound, each stripe,
 Cries out more loudly than the voice of Cain—
 Saying 'Am I my brother's keeper?' Think! When the
 last clamour of the Bought and Sold
 The agony of Gold
 Is hushed. . . . When the last Judas-kiss
 Has died upon the cheek of the Starved Man Christ,
 these ashes that were Men
 Will rise again
 To be our Fires upon the Judgment Day,
 And yet—who dreamed that Christ has died in vain?
 He walks again on the Seas of Blood, He comes in the
 terrible Rain.