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LITERATURE AND WESTERN MAN

BY

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FOR JACQUETTA

Introduction

THE TERM 'Western' in my title has nothing to do with our being outside iron curtains; it is used in the old geographical and cultural senses, to show that Russia is included as well as America, and that all Asia is excluded. Had it not made the title too unwieldy, I would have qualified 'Western Man' with 'Modern', for our story here begins in the second half of the fifteenth century, after the invention, or at least the first use in Europe, of movable types for printing, a device that has given us the book as we know it. Medieval literature, therefore, is outside this record; nevertheless, it includes nearly five centuries of literature in every form, more than enough, however broad the scanning method, for one author and his reader to look at together.

We should remember, however, that these centuries represent less than a fifth of the time for which we possess some historical and literary records; and not a fiftieth part of the time when our remote ancestors, with one brief unrecorded generation following another, gradually shaped and coloured the human psyche that they bequeathed to us as surely as they did our muscular and nervous systems. The men who figure in this chronicle of five centuries are not merely the product of those centuries; they have behind them thousands of generations of human beings who acquired, and handed on, certain patterns of behaviour, feeling, thought, that find their way into literature, either emerging from the unconscious or coming from various conscious modifications of culture itself. Though a great deal has happened during these centuries—and the increasing tempo of change in our own age seems terrifying—we must still remember that the procession we lead in time is very long indeed, winding back into the remote dusk of pre-history, or, to change the image, that the men who

did those wonderful cave paintings, say, at Lascaux, so highly charged with vitality and magical feeling, might be said to be still alive in us today. These centuries we know best are so crammed with history and artifacts that we are apt to forget that they represent a very short section of the life of Man. And in writing this book at least I have tried, somewhere at the back of it all, to keep something like a long view.

This is not a work of scholarship. If it had been, my name would not have been attached to it, for among my dwindling pretensions there is no pretence of scholarship. I have said of this book: "A young man couldn't write it, because he wouldn't have the necessary reading; and an elderly man, who might have the reading, would have more sense than to attempt such a book." And if I have not had more sense, undertaking, at a time when most men begin to slacken off, to sit in the sun, a most formidable task, often both laborious and irritating (I possess about 10,000 books and can hardly find any of them without a search), this was not because I was tempted to make some use of nearly half a century of wide if desultory reading, together with much experience, not to be despised for this task, of the writing and publishing and criticism of books and the writing of plays and the managing of theatrical enterprises, experience that has taken me, so to speak, out of the dining-room, where many critics and most literary historians may be found, into the kitchen where the dinners are cooked. What really tempted me, so that I fell, was my conviction that ours is an age of supreme crisis, when the most desperate decisions have to be made, and that some account of Western Man, in terms of the literature he has created and enjoyed, might help us to understand ourselves (and doing the work has certainly helped *me*), and to realise where we are and how we have arrived here.

So, strictly speaking, this is not a literary history, although at a pinch it could be used as one, and because they might be useful to some readers, I have added the forty pages of brief biographies as an appendix. The final emphasis here, as the title suggests, is not on Literature but on Western Man. I have never had in mind a purely literary study; but if a twenty-volume history of Western Man were being issued, then this might be the volume devoted to his literature; and indeed, throughout, I think I have had a vague notion of a sort of composite Western Man, to

whom everything has been related. The appalling business of deciding which writers should not be merely mentioned but given some critical consideration, decisions that could not be made on any national basis, has had to be settled from the standpoint of this Western Man. (If it is objected that it is really I, in the last resort, who must make the choice, my reply is that I am the Western Man I know best.) I have also tried to keep in mind the sort of people who might be best served by a study of this kind: neither critics and literary scholars at one extreme (though I hope some of them will read it), nor at the other the very large public that asks only for digests, rough outlines, bottled and packaged culture (though I hope some of them will read it too); but chiefly the considerable numbers of people, in many different countries, who are sufficiently intelligent and sensitive to enjoy most good literature but are, for various good reasons, rather wary of it, especially the literature of our own age to which I have devoted the largest section of this book. Much contemporary literary criticism is intended for a small minority of persons intensely concerned with literature or for students who are required to read such criticism; and this leaves outside, wondering what it is all about, all these other people, who may well be more valuable and influential members of our modern world community, helping to make the decisions on which the fate of Western Man now depends. Except where I felt it to be absolutely essential, however, I have avoided any discussion of criticism and critics: dog should not eat dog.

Finally, I ask the reader to accept the limitations that have made this task possible at all. Too often our progress together will be uncertain, here too fast, there too slow, over roads that are too rough. The comment along the way will sometimes be too scanty, sometimes too wordy, often arbitrary, insensitive, unjust. Nevertheless, with the reader's goodwill and co-operation, together we may learn something about what Western Man—haunted, bedevilled, inspired, by ideas and feelings that often seem new just because they are very old—has made out of his literature.

Literature and Western Man

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PART ONE

The Golden Globe

CHAPTER ONE

Movable Types

THE EARLIEST PRINTED BOOKS are Chinese. One of them, printed from blocks, dates back to the ninth century. Only two hundred years later the Chinese were experimenting with movable types, but their written language demands so many characters that this method of printing was thought to be too laborious. Pictorial wood-blocks had been used in Europe before the middle of the fifteenth century, but 'block books', in which each page had first been engraved or cut out of a solid wood-block, were contemporary with books first printed from movable types. Both the date and the original place of origin of movable types have been sharply disputed between the Germans, Dutch, French and Italians. General opinion has favoured the German claim, represented by the Vulgate Bible (known as 'the Mazarin Bible' because a copy of it was found in Cardinal Mazarin's library in the seventeenth century), printed by Johann Gutenberg at Mainz. And what is certain is that most of the first printers in other countries arrived there from Germany. Before the century was out, books were being printed in the Low Countries, Italy, France, Spain and England. They were mostly of fine quality, far better than the books produced during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The first English printer, William Caxton, learnt the art in Cologne and practised it in the Low Countries, where he had been living for many years as head of a company of English merchants. He founded his press in Westminster in 1476, and before his death in 1491 he had published about a hundred volumes. These were not in Latin, like those printed abroad, but in his own native language, and many of them he wrote and translated himself. He also printed from type faces that were neither

Gothic nor Roman in design, and altogether was an industrious innovator, to whom English letters owe much.

It is wrong to imagine, however, that this invention of printing from movable types arrived, like rain on a desert, in an age when the copying of books was the work of a few devoted monks. That age had passed. Professional copyists and students had long been furnishing whole libraries, especially in Italy, where wealthy scholars, often writing a beautiful hand themselves, were in the habit of commissioning the most exquisitely written and decorated books. Indeed, for some years these patrons of literature laughed at the barbarous German invention and refused to own a printed book. But students and the poorer scholars, who had only been able to acquire the most modest little library at the cost of much travel, aching hands and smarting eyes, turned eagerly to these printed pages, which soon offered them Greek and even Hebrew. And as more and more books were published, towards the end of the century, there was one consequence that should not surprise us: in Rome, under Alexander VI, the censor got to work. Power, which has its intuitions, soon recognised its enemy. The book had arrived.

That other age, when learning and literature were transcribed by the monk in his cell, was further away both in time and in spirit than is generally realised. The two to three centuries of the true Middle or Gothic Age were gone for ever. With them vanished a truly religious basis and framework for the life of Western Man. As Carlyle wrote, placing himself and his readers squarely in the twelfth century:

> . . . Our Religion is not yet a horrible restless doubt, still less a far horribler composed Cant; but a great heaven-high Unquestionability, encompassing, inter-penetrating the whole of Life. Imperfect as we may be, we are here, with our litanies, shaven crowns, vows of poverty, to testify incessantly and indisputably to every heart, That this Earthly Life and *its* riches and possessions, and good and evil hap, are not intrinsically a reality at all, but are a shadow of realities eternal, infinite; that this Time-world, as an air-image, fearfully emblematic, plays and flickers in the grand still mirror of Eternity; and man's little Life has Duties that are great, that are alone great, and go up to Heaven and down to Hell. . . .

To all of which the great Gothic cathedrals, vast, communal, and anony-

mous, deeply symbolic structures, still grandly testify. It was an age that from one point of view seems narrow, ignorant, brutal—and we could no more return to it than we could divide ourselves between cells, castles and hovels—but the Western mind, in both its conscious and unconscious aspects, found a home in it and was for a little time at peace with itself, related and integrated as it has never been since. If this age produced little literature, perhaps it needed none; certainly it would never have understood so much that has been written since out of men's divided minds, their feeling of loneliness and despair, their homeless spirit. The world of these nameless designers, carvers and builders of cathedrals, was not one more spinning globe lost among the stars; it was a green platform fixed between paradise and hell; and most of it was Christendom, where the wars were feudal and dynastic and the armed nations had not yet arrived, where a man might be given authority because he was a saint, where scholars speaking a common language wandered from one seat of learning to another, where goodness was goodness and evil was evil and there was no tormenting confusion of values. It was this age, not considered as a political-economic system nor a social hierarchy, but as a period when the mind achieved a harmony and a feeling of relatedness, that began to haunt men of other ages like some half-remembered dream. Western Man never left it entirely behind—and in his moments of easy escape could never resist playing with its more picturesque trappings—so that much of his literature faintly echoes its solemn chanting, and one man of genius after another, long afterwards, asked himself how and when this unity with God and His universe could be achieved again, cried out his hope, thundered his rage and despair. For man has come down the eons a religious being, who must needs worship something, and the Gothic, its consciousness soaring with its towers and steeples, was for the West the last truly religious age.

The world into which the movable types found their way, to multiply books and scholars, had long emerged from that age. Except in Italy, which as we shall see was staring already at the brilliant sunlight and murderous shadows of the Renaissance, Western Europe in the fifteenth century was living in the twilight and ruin of the Middle Ages. It was a strange time. Shakespeare catches the tone of it in his historical plays,

brutal and turbulent, stiff and heavy with death. (Charles Reade caught much of it too in his historical novel, *The Cloister and the Hearth.*) The Dukes of Burgundy, with their ostentation, violence and half-mad pride, are perhaps its representative rulers. It was at their Court that the *Dance of Death* was performed. The true and living symbolism of the Gothic Age had declined and hardened into pedantic allegory. Universal religious belief and feeling, like a shattered glass, had broken into fanatically held creeds, superstition and a despairing atheism. People of a sort that had once steadily worshipped now wept with the wandering preacher one week and the next week planned murder. There is something overheated and theatrical in both the pageantry and violence of these years, which smelt, as someone said, "of blood and roses". (In England the long ferocious duel between the Houses of York and Lancaster, which wasted the country and brought it close to ruin, came to be called The Wars of the Roses.) The man of this age was neither the religious hierarchic man of the true Middle Ages nor the sharply individualised man of the Renaissance. He was between two worlds, in a time without apparent foundations, probably heading for doomsday. He was divided between a new and often cynical realism, acquiring or sharing the wealth of the rapidly growing cities, and mad pride and violence, wild superstition and fantasy, an unending *danse macabre.*

In the literature of the time there was a similar division, a widening gap, between what was rooted in observation and actuality and what was essentially fanciful and fantastical. As the cities grew and the castles fell before the cannon, as war itself lost its knightly character and became grimly professional, an affair of money and strategy, heavier weapons and gunpowder, more and more people were fascinated by the romances of chivalry, by invincible swords and enchanted forests and castles in the air. So on one side, as in France for example, there were the new satirical tales that mocked the ideals of chivalry, there were the strictly realistic political memoirs of a Commynes; and on the other side, created as much for the wives and daughters of the new merchant class as they were for the gallants and ladies of the nobility, there were the elaborate romances of Charlemagne and his paladins, Arthur and his knights, adventuring in some dream of chivalry. The stories on which these romances were based,

especially those of ancient Celtic origin, were deeply symbolic and often profound interpretations of life, belonging in essence to myth and folklore. (Of these *Gawaine and the Green Knight* is an excellent example. And indeed not all the old symbolism and the mythical element have vanished from Malory's version of the Arthurian legends, which was finished in 1469 but not published until 1485.) But what had been once an imaginative penetration into the deeper levels of man's being was now, in its guise of romance, floated far above earth and the roots of our existence into the airy kingdoms of fancy and allegory. So there was now already that division we have come to know only too well, a split only closed by great art, a division between a sardonic 'realism', cynically taking the worst for granted, and 'romance' that deliberately loses all contact with actuality, a dream life that tries to reject even the psychological responsibilities of our actual dreams. Such a division, a sort of schizophrenic condition of art, is characteristic of an age of transition, a bewildered passage between two worlds. The fifteenth century knew it; and today, with all our fiction, movies and television programmes, we know it again.

The age, however, was changing fast. The movable types were finding their way to one expanding city after another, to keep the great wooden presses hard at work. Books of many kinds were now being printed and distributed. The Greek scholars who had fled before the Turks had long been teaching in the Italian academies; but it is easy to exaggerate the contribution made by classical learning to the new age, the Renaissance, already existing in Italy. After all, Italy, where the ruins of the Roman Empire could be seen everywhere, had never really been outside classical influences. And north and west of the Mediterranean a great deal that was new was happening, and much of it was at least as important as the revival of classical scholarship. The interminable wars had to be financed, and most of the money had to be found in the cities, among merchants and burghers who could not be fitted into any feudal pattern and equally could not be ignored. (It was not only for the sake of their pretty wives that Edward IV flattered and knighted his London merchants.) This new powerful class, which rapidly developed its own ideas, became the patron of arts and letters. In its world of wharves and warehouses and counting-