

THE HIDDEN GOD

*Studies in Hemingway, Faulkner,
Yeats, Eliot, and Warren*

By CLEANTH BROOKS

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THE HIDDEN GOD

*In memoriam patris qui cum libros
me docuit amare tum librum librorum.*

“ . . . every religion which does not affirm that God is hidden
is not true. . . . Vere tu es Deus absconditus.”

Pascal, *Pensées*

PREFACE

The five lectures included in this book represent substantially those that I gave in June 1955 at the Conference in Theology for College Faculty, held at Trinity College, Hartford. During the past year, I have completely rewritten the second and fifth lectures. This circumstance will account for the mention in the lecture on R. P. Warren of poetry and fiction published by him as recently as 1961. In rewriting the lecture, it seemed pointless to limit my discussion to work that was in print in 1955. In preparing this little book for publication, however, I have tried in general to preserve the quality of spoken utterance. These discussions were originally conceived as lectures and are here frankly presented as such.

I have quite deliberately included writers whose views of reality are not orthodox and may not even be Christian. It would not have been difficult to find other writers besides T. S. Eliot who are active churchmen and whose Christian position is a matter of record. But I thought it would be more useful to the audience for which these lectures were originally designed if I ranged more widely and dealt with some of the more interesting, if

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problematic, cases—cases sometimes the more interesting because problematic. But if the orthodoxy or even the minimal Christianity of any of my five authors is in question, there can be no question about his significance as an artist. For these writers, though they represent different literary generations, are, it would be generally agreed, among the best that our twentieth-century English-speaking world has produced. Their insights into the nature of that world are bound to be of moment to every reader, whether he be Christian or non-Christian or simply a seeker after truth.

In addition to their original presentation, these lectures have been given as a series at Notre Dame University and Earlham College, and some of them have been given as single lectures at Syracuse University, Dartmouth College, Drew University, Boston College, the Yale Divinity School, Rockhurst College, the College English Association of New England, Clark University, and the Louisiana State University, at New Orleans and at Baton Rouge. The second lecture has appeared in *The Massachusetts Review*; portions of the fifth lecture, in *The Centenary Review* and *The Georgia Review*. Grateful acknowledgment is made to the editors of these magazines for permission to reprint the material here.

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C.B.

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THE STATE OF MODERN LITERATURE

A PRELIMINARY NOTE

When the solid citizen of our time looks at modern literature—if he looks at it at all—he usually finds much to deplore. When a newspaper pundit like J. Donald Adams of the *New York Times* has looked at it, he has on occasion broken down into grumpy scolding. When *Time* magazine looks at it, it finds it gravely deficient for American morale-building. When the average liberal intellectual looks at it, he does find some things of which to approve—the honesty, the attacks on racism, the increasing comprehension of the dignity of the individual even among the poor and oppressed—but he also finds many of our best writers defective in their sympathies and hopelessly old-fashioned in their prejudices: T. S. Eliot is wedded to obscurantism; W. B. Yeats, great poet that he was, at one time flirted dangerously with Fascism; William Faulkner could never really qualify for membership in Americans for Democratic Action. But a Christian looking at modern literature ought to find a great deal that is heartening and hopeful.

Our modern literature represents a great achievement—the

more triumphant because it has been made under the very worst of conditions, and therefore testifies to real vitality. My more approving estimate of the situation calls for some qualifications and explanations. In the first place, I draw a careful distinction between the machine-made popular arts of our time and the work of our serious artists. An industrial civilization has undertaken the mass production of entertainment to fill up the leisure which it has created. And whereas there is much to be said for the mass production of refrigerators or automobiles, there is very little to be said for the mass production of art. The genuine artist presumably undertakes to set forth some vision of life—some imaginative apprehension of it which he hopes will engage our imagination. He gives us his own intuition—his own insight into the human situation. It may prove to be a paltry insight; it may constitute a trivial view; but it is at least one which the artist has had the faith to explore and to test by attempting to objectify it for us. But the worker on the mass-production line that is turning out prefabricated entertainment starts from a radically different assumption: he gives nothing and means to give nothing. Rather, he hopes to play upon the stock emotions and stereotyped attitudes already present in the minds of his audience, releasing them by applying the proper stimulus, giving the reader or the auditor the illusion of something new but actually making sure that he never departs from the limits of the sure-fire stereotypes.

In view of the situation, we have no right to expect that such art will be more than a time-killer or perhaps a pain-killer, a mild narcotic. But narcotics provide no nourishment, and constant indulgence in them can numb and deaden the faculties of apprehension. I am convinced that a deadening of the imagination has occurred. William Wordsworth in 1800 claimed that the imagination was being strangled by the more sensational popular arts, though few people, I think, then took, or now take,

seriously his analysis of the situation. I take it very seriously. I think that nineteenth-century literature bears the mark of serious injury occasioned by precisely the forces that he described. Be that as it may, the pressure of the popular arts today as exerted through cheap fiction, Tin Pan Alley, the movies, the radio, and now television makes what Wordsworth faced in 1800 seem very mild indeed.

I do not intend to enlarge on the damage done by the powerful and continuous impact of cheap art—*kitsch*. But in talking about contemporary literature, I feel obliged to indicate that I am taking it into account. After all, for more than half of our citizens it is the only contemporary literature that exists. Furthermore, the tremendous chasm that exists between our best literature and our popular literature is itself one of the most significant phenomena of our present cultural situation. And let no one protest that we have always had shoddy art alongside the great art of the age. That is true enough. There has always been hill and dale, mountain and plain. But the present situation gives us the towering height of the Andes separated by only a relatively few miles from the depths of the Atacama Trench of the South Pacific; and if I may press the geological analogy a little further, great height and great depth so narrowly separated always signify a critical imbalance—a pattern of stresses and strains that portends earthquakes and violent convulsions of the earth's crust.

Lastly, and principally, I have called attention to the all-pervading pressure of contemporary popular art because of its effect upon our ability to recognize and respond to the genuine literature of our day. We confuse a William Faulkner with a Tennessee Williams, for do they not both emphasize sex and violence? We can see no real difference between a novel by Robert Penn Warren and one by Frank Yerby or Mrs. Keyes, for all of them are historical novels, aren't they? Or, having become so habituated to *kitsch* that we have forgotten what the true nature

of art is, we conclude that the only thing really wrong with popular art is that it has no serious message, and so we demand that our serious writers begin to insert serious messages, plainly labeled as such and calculated to sell the idea in question to the wayfaring reader. That is, we tend to confuse poetics with poetical rhetoric; we talk of literature as if it were a pure work of the will, not an effect of the imagination; and in our modern mythology the muse becomes not a willful and capricious goddess who bestows her favors unpredictably and as an act of grace but the neat and efficient rewrite girl in a high-powered advertising office, who may occasionally make a bright suggestion and who can be counted upon to work up the specific job assigned.

This is why some newspaper pundits are perpetually scolding the modern poet for being a willful obscurantist. This is why some professors and editors, alarmed at the state of the nation, can with straight faces request the production of a novel that will strengthen American morale. This is why so many people, including some of our brighter liberal critics, persist in demanding an "affirmative" literature—as if any true work of the imagination were not already affirmative in the only sense in which we can ask it to be. The only really negative literature that I know of is bad or defective literature. I suspect, further, that the only affirmative literature that will actually satisfy the quarters most vocal in demanding it is a literature that finally argues for the passage of a particular bill or for the election of a specific political party.

In any case, it is for something else that one looks when he comes to estimate the achievement of the serious writers of our times—something more inward than a tract—something deeper and more resonant than a tirade against a particular abuse. One looks for an image of man, attempting in a world increasingly dehumanized to realize himself as a man—to act like a responsible moral being, not to drift like a mere thing.

All that I have said bears very directly, of course, upon the problem of Christian literature. We have today many able writers who are specifically and committedly Christian, but some of our literature that is most significant for the Christian reader has been written by authors who are not members of any church and by some who frankly put themselves down as agnostics or atheists. If we demand of our serious literature that it make overt preachments of Christianity, we shall certainly exclude some of the most spiritually nourishing literature of our time. But I shall press this warning further still. If we read such Christian writers as T. S. Eliot or W. H. Auden merely for the sake of the overt preachments that their works may be felt to make, we shall probably miss their significance as Christian artists. For if we cannot apprehend their art, we have lost the element that makes their work significant to us; they might as well be journalists or pamphleteers.

2.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

MAN ON HIS MORAL UPPERS

It is in a general context of the sort described in the preceding note that I wish to discuss the work of Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway is a writer who, through most of his mature life, seems to have had no religious commitment. Indeed, his work is regarded by some people as hostile to religion and perhaps as subversive to Christian morals. (I am aware that Mr. Carlos Baker in his book on Hemingway published a few years ago averred that the Book of Common Prayer was seldom out of Hemingway's reach. Mr. Baker may have been familiar with the appointments of Hemingway's writing desk and therefore have known specifically whereof he spoke. But I wonder whether Hemingway's closeness to the Prayer Book could be inferred from Hemingway's fiction.) I am not, therefore, relying upon a presumed Christianity when I say that the Christian reader may derive something very important from Hemingway's work. For Hemingway at his best depicts brilliantly the struggle of man to be a human being in a world which increasingly seeks to reduce him to a mechanism, a mere thing.