



Conversion in Literature

by Harold C. Gardiner, S.J.

Conversion may be thought of, I conceive, as a sort of discovery of life in the midst of death. One who has been ignorant of the reality of God, or, if conscious of that fact, insensitive to the actual influence of God on his personal life, awakes, through the working of the Holy Spirit, from the torpor, the quasi-death of spiritual insensitivity, to a new life of realization and conviction that there is indeed an Other to whom he is bound in the very depths of his being. Further, this new life, at whatever stages of its development, is always, at least virtually and potentially, a Christ-life. Even if one is stirred from so-called atheism or from more tangible agnosticism simply to a conviction of the reality of a personal God, that stirring is always the work of the Holy Spirit, Who is the Spirit of the Incarnate Word. (It may be worth reminding ourselves that no human being, not even a Bishop Fulton Sheen, has ever converted anyone—the human “convert-maker” is always and only the poor instrument through which the Spirit of Christ operates, and every priest, religious, or layman who may be granted the privilege of being such an instrument must always have in his soul and in his conscious prayer the humble praise of “*non mihi, Domine, sed nomini tuo sit gloria.*”)

A fuller awakening, a fuller discovery of life obviously occurs when one is converted not merely to a realization of the reality of a personal God, but when one comes to the full light that that God reveals Himself to His people in the person of His Incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, and

that that revelation is contained in its plenitude in the voice of the Church that is Christ continued—"This is my beloved Son, hear ye Him."

But what has literature to do with this awakening, this illumination, this new life?

The title proposed to me for this discussion, "Conversion in Literature," can, I conceive, be interpreted in two ways: first, accounts in literary works of the stages, psychological and other that may have led to conversion. I think it may be rather bluntly stated that relatively few books which recount such processes are at the same time truly literary works. They are generally rather pedestrian accounts that appear in anthologies entitled "Why I Became a Catholic," "How I Found God," and the like. Some of them may indeed be quite moving, as was Douglas Hyde's *I Believed* or Herbert Cory's *The Emancipation of a Freethinker*, C. S. Lewis' *Pilgrim's Regress* or Dag Hammerschold's recent *Markings*. Indeed, a select body of such conversion accounts may fall into the category of true literary masterpieces. Undoubtedly, the greatest of these is St. Augustine's *Confessions*, but perhaps we may add such books as Ronald Knox's *A Spiritual Aeneid*, Johannes Jorgensen's *Autobiography*, Chesterton's *Autobiography*, Bloy's *Pilgrim of the Absolute*, and Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*, not to mention a great book that recounts in superbly sustained allegory a journey back to Christ, if not to the Catholic Church, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. And there are others that will spring to your mind, I am sure.

I do not intend, however, to discuss this type of literature—what we may call a species of true spiritual confession. Nor do I wish to consider creative work—mainly the novel—in which the story hinges on the conversion of one of the characters. Again, there are some superb novels in which the whole trend of the story is *toward* spiritual enlightenment, *toward* a realization of the place of God in a human life and the working of His grace, even if a full awakening does not actually happen at the end of the story. Such books will come to your mind, I am sure, as Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* and Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. But all too often in the novel, at least at the hands of lesser artists, the story that hinges on conversion tends to be a preachment. I am sure that most of you have never heard the name of Isabel Clarke; she was a rather prominent and certainly prolific Catholic author back in the thirties, and in every one of her tales the non-Catholic partner in a mixed marriage, or the fallen-

away Catholic, inevitably saw the light before the end of the apostolically-tailored tale.

The reason why it is extremely difficult to handle conversion stories in creative literature is quite obvious, but it may be worth while to dwell on it a bit. The grace of God does indeed work in mysterious ways and no human influence, person, event, or circumstance is ever the *cause* of conversion. The Holy Spirit is the cause—though He may operate on the *occasion* of any one of the myriad influences that rise in our human condition—He may seize upon the occasion of sickness or failure or natural catastrophe—or anything at all—to stir the soul to a realization of God. But the artist cannot deal directly with the creative causality of the Holy Spirit; the artist can do no more than seize upon the human occasion and try to show the link between that and the movement within the soul. If he is not equipped by talent with profound psychological insight he will not be able to illuminate—he will never be able fully to explain—the mysterious link between the *occasion* of the conversion and the *cause*—the working of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the artist in these circumstances is faced with a really impossible task—he has to try to put into words, into dramatic situations, into convincing motivation, what is actually and literally ineffable, what cannot be expressed. The extent of his stammering success has to be measured by all his literary ability—his mastery of character delineation, his diction and rhythm, the verisimilitude of the situations, the convincing ring of the dialog, the psychological atmosphere with which he surrounds the whole—his success can never be gauged by any claim or pretention that he fully comprehends the mystery with which he is dealing.

But if this paper is not dealing with either autobiographical accounts of conversions nor with creative literature that has conversion as its main theme, what will it deal with? A good question, and one to which I can no longer fail to address myself.

I conceive that "Conversion in Literature" can also be taken to mean literature as a preparation, as a pedagogue, for those who are engaged in convert-making—or better, to avoid that pretentious phrase—those engaged in offering their puny human collaboration to the Holy Spirit in His work of bringing men to the life that pulses fully and completely only in the Church of Christ. For if our cooperation—in preaching, in teaching, in bearing witness in our daily lives—is to be consonant with that work of the Spirit, it must be an understanding cooperation. And it must be understanding in two ways:

first, it must be a cooperation that is docile to the Spirit we must bring the light to men as *He* wants it brought, not as *we* might think it should be brought to them (who today, for example, could presume to approach our separated brethren outside the atmosphere of, much less in contravention of, the ecumenicism that is obviously the desire of the Holy Spirit, outside or much less in contravention of the liturgical *rapprochement* that is as well the desire of the Holy Spirit?) Second, and as a consequence, this understanding means that we must know those with whom we deal—their problems, their tensions—and this means that we must know the world in which they live, the culture that shapes them, the atmosphere of belief or unbelief, of doubt and worry and fear and simple indecision in which literally millions today live their uncentered and rootless lives. And how better can we get to know all this than through literature?

It is a commonplace that literature mirrors the times that produce it. A hundred years ago, at least in English literature, every author could presume in his readers a central core of common Christian belief. A Dickens or a Jane Austen or a Thackeray could anticipate that their readers would make the common judgments as to the morality or immorality of acts and situations portrayed in their tales. God was not dead, morality was still given at least lip-service, life and the world was not absurd—except perhaps for a Thomas Hardy, and even his professed atheism was undergirded by a pervasive and persistent Christian nostalgia. But all that has changed. Today's literature—in the United States, in England, in France, and Germany, and Italy—is chaotic; it is filled with doubt and despair and apparently fruitless questions and questings; we have the Theater of the Absurd, the soul nausea of existentialism, the glorification of dishonesty and brutality (as in the work of the Frenchman Genet), the flamboyantly rhetorical adoration of sex without love (as in the works of Henry Miller), the ever-present doubt that God is alive and even the consistent assertion that He never was (in the works of a Sartre, a Camus). By way of another parenthesis, it may be pertinent to remark that some of these books may pose a problem of conscience for some readers, even professional preachers, counselors, and the like. I can only say that if such a problem arises, one is bound to seek individual guidance to resolve the seeming impasse between the imperatives of the natural moral law and professional preparation for dealing with souls.

But does this mean that modern literature is worthless? Far from it. Though I would be the last one to propose that literature is to be read

for what we can "learn" from it (the formal object of literature, as the philosophers used to say when philosophy was what I learned something about, is to afford pleasure, not to teach), it is still true that we inevitably do learn something from creative works. And what we learn is something about the culture and the civilization that is revealed in literature.

What, then, does modern literature tell us about man in today's world? Does it say only what I have itemized somewhat above—that man is absurd, lost, God-forsaken, floundering in doubt, despair, without moral or religious, or even cultural and political goals and aspirations? Even if modern literature says *only* this, it would still be worth our persual, if that is indeed the state of the world. We would still be well advised to make it part of our preparation for collaboration with the Holy Spirit in bringing the light of life to God's children.

But literature says much more than this. There is, of course, a vast body of contemporary literature that is by no means negative in attitude, that is indeed quite Christian in conception and achievement; I may mention such authors as Flannery O'Connor and Paul Horgan, Edwin O'Connor and J. F. Powers here in the U.S.; Murial Spark and Joyce Cary in England; Luc Estang in France; Ugo Betti, the playwright, in Italy; Sven Stolpe in Sweden; Rumer Godden in India; Boris Pasternak in Russia—and many more.

Further, even in the darker literature that seems more systematic of our times there are, as the critic Charles Moeller has said: "despite the atheism which seems to dominate modern writing, . . . for whoever knows how to recognize them, faint as footsteps in the sand, traces of the living God." How and where do we see these traces?

First, if many modern writers seem to turn away from God, they also do turn, because they must, *toward something*. This will usually be found to be a human love, whether sexual or other. If a Henry Miller debases the very notion of sex in sundering it from any redemptive value through love, dozens of authors see in love (even, perhaps especially, in unmarried love) a means by which man may find a way out of the meaninglessness of human existence. Archibald MacLeish's play *J. B.* is perhaps a classic example of how a modern-day Job finds the answer to the riddle of human existence in the fulfillment that comes through the love of man for woman. And many of our contemporary books, such as the bitter impeachments of the white man by James Baldwin, barely mute under their cries of anguish a plea for love as between brothers.

A second idol, if we may call it that, that takes the place of God in the works of many contemporary writers, is man himself—his self-sufficiency, his ideals and power and achievement. Hemingway is perhaps the prototype of this kind of search for something to fill the void left by the absence of God.

And if a deification of man does not succeed in filling the void, something else inevitably rushes in to stop the gap—and that is a sense of guilt. Faulkner's novels are saturated with it, and it is a guilt that has its roots in an inarticulate realization of the reality of original sin. John Updike's characters are beset by this sense of guilt; witness the main character in his significantly-titled *Rabbit, Run*. I believe that John O'Hara's novels and short stories are rather unique in contemporary literature in their blank unawareness of any sense of guilt in their morally illiterate characters.

Further, man is everywhere in contemporary literature either searching for something or himself the object of a pursuit. He is searching for a meaning to life—see the superbly poignant portrayal of this in Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, one of the key books to an understanding of our times, for all that it deals with an adolescent; but perhaps all the more *because* it deals with an adolescent, for are we not all children seeking our Father's house? Or man is himself being pursued—either by demons of doubt and despair or by the Hound of Heaven—and who, reader or author or counselor, can always tell the one from the other? It is surely not merely coincidental that precisely in this age the most widely-read creative work is the spy story, the detective story.

In Victorian drama there was frequently on the play-bill a character named The Walking Gentleman; all he did was walk onto the stage to deliver a letter or wind the clock or something else that required no speaking part. I believe that on the stage of the world today every one of us, and especially those of us who get our likenesses sketched by the creative writers, can properly be called The Running Man. We—and our brothers the authors and the characters they create—are all running away from something or toward something. Please God, our own running is not on a treadmill, but on the narrow road that leads through the straight gate that in turn opens on the fulness of life. But of many, many others, as literature depicts them today, are running with panting breath and laboring heart on a monotonous treadmill, and the more clearly we recognize just what their treadmill is, the more surely we may be able to help them break their stride, get down from

the treadmill and start crawling—in order to run later—on the Way Who is also Truth and Life.

Two somewhat long quotations and I shall have done.

The first quote is from *The New Orpheus*, “Religion and the Mission of the Artist,” by David Jones, p. 68 :

I think that an artist . . . fulfills his mission in proportion as his work elicits in the spectators, readers, or hearers a sense of liberation; manifests the true, that is to say, renders a truth sensible; evokes the order of the world, of the laws of man's destiny; builds or reveals the structure in the sensations, imagination, ideas; and finally, induces to greater love. . . .

It is evident that a classical work of art, a work of Bach, for example, creates order in man, evokes the order of the world, renders its laws comprehensible and even lovable. But some entirely different works, which seem to have no purpose other than that of evoking the present disorder, chaos, and absurdity, the “sound and fury” of a tale “signifying nothing”—I am thinking of certain parts of Joyce's work, or *The Waste Land* of T. S. Eliot, or the stories of Faulkner, the painting of Picasso—these works, dialectically, nostalgically in revolt and defiance, carry still a witness to the lost order of the world because art, all art worthy of the name, never has had and never can have any other object.

My second quotation is from *The Meaning of Man*, by Jean Mouroux (published by Sheed and Ward in 1948, and since reprinted as a paperback) :

Man is a mystery first because he is a kind of limit or horizon between two worlds. He is immersed in the flesh, but constituted by the spirit; occupied with matter, but drawn toward God; growing in time, but already breathing the air of eternity; a being of nature and of the world, but also transcending the universe in virtue of his liberty and capacity for union with God. . . . But if man is two-fold, he is also one . . . [he is] susceptible of a full unity and, on the other hand, of a full disaggregation; [he] has to acquire a significance of his own, and is tossed about meanwhile in all the whirlpools of the flesh and of the world. We live out this drama, we suffer from it and bleed, but remain for the most part inwardly withdrawn from it because [we are] without an acute sense of it. On the day when, by some flash of intellectual enlightenment, or some effort at spiritual progress, we come to realize what we really are, we are seized with a kind of shiver. . . . Man then is radically a “mystery” that refuses to be degraded into a “problem.” (p. 268)

A problem is set before us to be solved; when faced with a mystery all we can do ultimately is to reverence it, and if it is the mystery of

mysteries, the Almighty and Infinite God Himself, all we can do is adore.

Those who cooperate with the Holy Spirit in enlightening human souls must realize that they are dealing with a twofold mystery: the mystery of God and the mystery of man, and if only God is to be adored, man is certainly to be revered. I am sure that a deeper knowledge of the mystery of man, as literature reveals it in our time, is a splendid and almost essential instrument in bringing a weary, doubtful, despairing, unbelieving world back to adoration of the mystery of God.

South of the Khyber Pass, Christmas '67

*—In the basti, love and death fight for souls
reduced to the substance of an ache upon the body—*

What is more real?

For a man to die at your feet,

Or the kiss of your lover's lips?

Which gives more life?

There are many kisses;

That one life dying before your feet is mostly yours.

—Timothy Mahoney, O.P.