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## POPULAR FICTIONAL LITERATURE

by James B. Jordan

From time to time one picks up a certain hostility to popular fictional literature among Reformed and Reconstructionist writers and theologians. I believe that this is unfortunate, and I wish in this essay to explore some of the positive dimensions of fictional literature.

Man's task appointed by God involves two aspects, cultivating and guarding. Animals were brought to Adam to help him understand his kingly (cultivating) task, and the fact that he needed something to help with this task (a wife). Adam named (described, cataloged) the animals, using his imagination and powers of extrapolation to help him begin his kingly task of cultivation. Then God brought an animal to Adam to help him understand his priestly (guarding) task, and the fact that he needed something to help with this task (a robe of judicial authority). When Adam failed to guard the Garden, cherubim replaced him until the coming of the Second Adam. (I have dealt with this in my essay on the book of Genesis in *Christianity and Civilization* No. 3).

Everything that men do entails both a guarding and a cultivating aspect. Sometimes one or another is prominent, and we set aside some men to work most particularly in one area or another, but every human enterprise entails both to some degree. This is also and maybe especially true of the arts. The arts help us to understand the world, enhancing our ability to cultivate it, and the arts reinforce the boundaries of our life, which is their guarding function (or alternatively, the arts challenge us to change those boundaries). Most art, especially popular art, simply reinforces common mores and folkways, and is thus culturally conservative. (It may come as a shock to hear that "rock" music is culturally conservative, but it is. Rock music reinforces the basic standards and social drift of our culture, which is why it is so powerful in the minds of youth. I am using the term "conservative" in a social, not a moral sense, obviously.)

Our concern in this essay is not with "great" literature. Few have ever suggested that Shakespeare, Milton, Cervantes, and Dostoevski be removed from the shelves of Christians. What we want to explore in this essay are four of the more popular forms of fictional literature: detective stories, war stories, science fiction stories, and love stories.

Before doing so, let me make one observation. The danger in fictional literature lies in the manner in which it is approached. It is entirely possible to use fiction as a means of pure escape, and derive nothing further from it. This is not necessarily wrong in itself, provided the "escape" can be tied to the Christian sabbath concept. By this I mean that the "escape" serves to reinforce basic Christian values, and not undermine them. An escape into a pornographic novel works against the faith, but an escape into a Christian novel (say, *The Lord of the Rings*) can work to reinforce (guard) the faith. All the same, many have found that saturation in fiction is debilitating. I believe that this is because too much of any kind of rest and relaxation is bad. How many of us get into foul moods on vacation, or while reading a long novel? This is probably because we are not balancing rest and work.

My point is this: There is nothing wrong with "escapist" literature in itself. It can be misused, but it can also be used properly. To take time off, for rest, and spend time enjoying a fictional story or universe can be a good thing, if it serves to reinforce and refresh the faith, and provided it is done in moderation. With that in mind let us consider the four types of literature we mentioned above.

**Detective Stories** In this category we place all those stories

which revolve crime solving. It has often been observed that such stories have developed only in the Christian West. Why? It seems to me that there are two general reasons. First is the fact of a transcendent law. In all pagan cultures, the laws of the gods are either unknowable, or else they are kept a mystery by the priests. The functioning law or order in society, which defines right and wrong, is simply the power of the human overlords. In such a context, the moral drama of detective fiction cannot take place. To write and to enjoy detective fiction we have to realize that murder and rape are always wrong, whether committed by a lord or by a commoner. Detective fiction thus presupposes a Christian view of transcendent law, law which comes from a universal God, law which is known by every man.

Second, detective fiction depends on the regularity of cause and effect. No pagan culture has any real understanding of cause and effect. If we read Homer or any other pre-Christian writer, we find that all kinds of things happen without rhyme or reason. Magic pervades all. Only on the foundation of a doctrine of creation can we have a notion of genuine cause and effect. God caused the world to come into being. This undergirds causation. It also means that the world is intelligible, because the creation bears the imprint of the Creator, and so does man. Thus, the mind of man can understand the world and God.

Everything has to work out logically in a piece of detective fiction. When we finish the story, and find out who did it, we want to say "Of course. Why didn't I see that?" A good writer gives us all the clues beforehand, so that we feel stupid that we did not see it earlier, and we admire the hero the more for having figured it out.

Does reading detective fiction ("dime store trash") reinforce Christian values? Yes, obviously it does. It reinforces our moral standards, and our commitment to the intelligibility of cause and effect in the universe. It reinforces our belief that bad guys will eventually be caught and good guys rewarded. True, in real life this does not always happen before the Final Judgment, and perhaps detective fiction fails to reinforce this fact adequately, but no type of literature can be expected to do everything.

As Christian faith declines in our society, we can expect detective fiction to disappear. It will make less and less sense, and become more morally nebulous. Moreover, even classic detective fiction could use improvement. All the same, there is no reason to damn detective fiction as a whole, and every reason for Christians to get busy and reform it more fully. So, don't feel guilty if you like Sherlock Holmes, or Agatha Christie, or Dorothy Sayers. Have a good time escaping with them.

**War Stories.** War is bad. The only reason Christians engage in war is for some overriding moral purpose. Among the pagans, war is fought for pride and honor, or sheer rapine. The great Cossack hero, Stenka Razin, was celebrated precisely for his blood-thirstiness. The oft-sung Song of Stenka Razin tells how Razin was spending too much time with a captured Persian Princess. His men are dismayed. "No more war and rapine," they mourn. "All he does all day long is spend time with that girl." Overhearing his men, Razin comes to his senses, and swearing never again to depart from the true Cossack way, he throws the girl overboard to drown in the Volga.

Is this what Western war stories are like? No. Why? Because of Christian influence. Here again, tales focussing on conflict, whether war stories, spy novels, tales of intrigue, historical adventure, or wild west stories, require a firm moral basis in order to be acceptable to us. The Scarlet Pimpernel delivers the helpless poor from the machinations of evil powers. Gunslinging lawmen bring outlaws to justice. Nazis are evil, and the men fighting them are heroes. The thrill that comes from this kind of literature comes from the defeat of evil by good.

Here again, we have to say that in real life the defeat of evil does not happen so swiftly and easily. Moreover, those who fight evil can themselves become corrupt (as Dumas shows in *The Count of Monte Christo*); after all, "vengeance is Mine, says the Lord." All the same, the "just war" is a distinctively Christian notion, and in most war literature it plays the basic role.

When the good guys are not all that good, it becomes more difficult to write spy or war novels. I doubt if there will be much war literature coming out based on the Viet-Nam war. The situation was morally too ambiguous. Le Carre has done a good job of pointing out this modern problem in his series of "Smiley" novels. Smiley, at some points a clear Arthur figure, is continually cuckolded by his whoring wife Ann, who signifies the bride of Arthur, England. It turns out (in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*) that Ann has actually had an affair with a Russian agent. How are Smiley (Arthur) and his lieutenant

Peter Guillam (Peter the Protector, the Church) going to defend or protect England in such a morally ambiguous situation? Does England even deserve to be protected? In the final novel, *Smiley's People*, Smiley renounces Ann (England) and devotes his energies to protecting the poor refugees of communist tyranny. They at least are (semi-) deserving of his attentions. LeCarre has been criticized for not giving us heroic heroes, but his point is that such men cannot live in times like ours. Perhaps he goes too far, but his indictment of the modern, corrupt, post-Christian West is damning and profound. His major theme is betrayal, and who can stand for what is right when there is betrayal on every side?

**Science Fiction Stories.** Science fiction is a form of fantasy literature which depends on technology to provide it credibility. It is distinctively Christian in its presuppositions, even though very few Christians have ever written science fiction (C. S. Lewis and Cordwainer Smith being the two tremendously great exceptions). Technology is a purely Christian thing. It is impossible to take a technological view of the world in a pagan culture, partly because the world is seen as inhabited by spirits who will be offended if we manipulate the world, and partly because the means of manipulation is seen as magical, the use of mental and/or ritual occult powers.

It is Christian faith which pronounces the world free of demons and spirits, and which encourages men to manipulate it. It is Christian faith which says that men cannot and must not try to play god (via magic), and which directs men to the use of tools (technology) as a means of dominion. In fine, the development of tools (technology) is exclusively Christian, and has happened beyond a very marginal degree only in the West. Indeed, the two great eras for technological development were the Christian Middle Ages, and the protestant Industrial Revolution.

What makes a story science fiction rather than fantasy is that the writer tries to make his world credible in terms of technological devices rather than in terms of magic. Thus, science fiction tends to reinforce the Christian conception that progress is linked partially to the development of technology, the expansion of dominion under the cultural mandate.

Of course, most science fiction stories are actually war stories, or detective stories, or love stories which are set in some future time. The "pure" science fiction story, however, revolves around the implications of some new technological device. There is a classic story, for instance, by Robert Sheckley, "The Gun Without a Bang," which explores the possibilities of a laser pistol. Landing on a new planet, the hero cannot wait to use the laser gun. Attacked by local beasts, he ray-guns them to death. Right away, however, he notices that since the gun does not make a bang, the animals that remain are not scared off. Indeed, the simple disappearance (disintegration) of their fellow beasts does not seem to register with them at all. Thus, they continue to harass him.

In time, while protecting himself against beasts, he happens to shoot the laser pistol in the direction of his spaceship, thereby riddling it with holes. In time, his ship comes to look like swiss cheese, and he is stuck on the planet. When a rescue team arrives, they find him using the pistol for the only thing it is good for—using the butt to drive nails. So much for laser pistols. (Perhaps Lucas had this story in mind when he developed the laser sword for *Star Wars*, a weapon without the complications pointed out by Sheckley.)

Science fiction, since it involves projections of the future, utilizes the Biblical view of a progressive (non-cyclical) future, and also gives a greater play to the imagination in some ways than does other kinds of popular literature. On the one hand, the belief in an intelligible and progressive future is distinctively Christian, but on the other hand, the future portrayed is almost always non-Christian (except in Cordwainer Smith's stories). Thus, at one level, science fiction reinforces Christian values, while at another, it tends not to.

I might also add that many SF writers eventually stop writing technological stories and turn to fantasy (for instance, Jack Chalker, Robert Heinlein, Andre Norton). I believe that this is because their presuppositions eventually overtake them, and they lose interest in the Christian technological worldview. Well, a lot more could be said about science fiction, its problems and possibilities, but we must

move on.

**Love Stories.** For some odd reason, the notion circulates around in Reconstructionist circles that arranged marriages are preferable to marriages based on romance. This supposedly is more Christian. After all, love is *nothing but* obeying the law, or *nothing but* a principled attitude of concern.

Actually, these ideas come from pagan, not from Biblical sources. The practice of arranging marriages comes from the belief that when two children marry, their families are also coming into covenant with one another. The Bible, however, states from the outset, "for this cause a man shall *leave* his father and mother, and cleave to his wife" (Gen. 2:24). What happens in marriage is not the joining of two families, but the creation of a new third one. Pagan cultures try to obscure this, and tie the new marriage to the old ones by a variety of means.

Now, it is true that Abraham arranged Isaac's marriage, but is it also true that the text calls attention to the fact that Isaac loved Rebekah (Gen. 24:67). Arranging marriages apart from the desires of the young man and woman involved has no place in Biblical society. Marriage should be for love, and be romantic.

We see plenty of vignettes of this in Scripture. We can think right away of Jacob and Rachel, or of Othniel and Achsah. The foundation for this is God's love for His bride. Don't we resonate to stories of mighty princes who fall in love with humble peasant girls, and bring them to the palace, and they live happily ever after? Why do we like that story? Because it is nothing but the gospel. (It is the story of the Song of Solomon as well.) Maybe the humble girl is like Cinderella, a princess unawares. Maybe not. The foundation of such stories, however, is in the way God seeks and woos His bride.

Romantic literature (love stories) developed only in the Christian West under the influence of the Gospel. Love stories maybe tragic in tone (as in courtly love and unrequited love), or they may be joyous (when the boy and girl finally get to marry in the end). All of these various themes have their foundation in the relationship between Christ and the Church.

I am not trying to justify everything found in Harlequin romances, but I am saying that there is a fundamentally Christian foundation to such stories. If they delight a portion of the population of the post-Christian West, it is because a general Christian consciousness about romantic love still pervades our society to some extent. Romances replaced pornography during the Christian Middle Ages, and nowadays pornography is supplanting the traditional romance which culminates in marriage. Deplorable as this is, and cheap as many fictional romances are, we should not be blind to the fact that the subcultural literature of love romances serves to reinforce a Christian view of the world, albeit in shallow and popular form.

A Christian marriage should be romantic, and if it is not, the medicine to restore it is a strong dose of the greatest of all romances, that of Christ and His bride, for this romance is the foundation of all human love.

**Summary.** My purpose in this brief survey has not been to discuss all the ins and outs of popular literature. We have seen that four of the most popular forms of cheap fiction in our society were produced by Christian faith, and cannot exist apart from Christian faith. Even though such literature has fallen on hard and perverse times, and much housecleaning is needed, the fact remains that Christians can appreciate much of what is there, and need not be ashamed for saying so.

After all, what greater detective story is there than the Biblical story of judgment and restoration? And what greater war story is there than the Biblical story of God versus His enemies? And what greater story of technology, dominion, and future expectation is there than the Biblical story of dominion and apocalypse? And what greater love story is there than the Biblical story of Christ and the Church? Modern popular fiction may be a cheap copy, but if we enjoy the original, we may also find delight in the copies (provided they are not degraded). Copying God is, after all, what being His *image* is all about.

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