Directions In Contemporary Literature

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P. M. B.

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TO THE READER

THIS book was written during a vacation that took in most of the seven seas and all but one of the continents. To tell where the chapters were written would reveal some of the most interesting spots of the voyage, and in character the book may at first seem to resemble a pilgrimage quite as varied and without plan. It covers a region of even wider scope, some of it almost uncharted; in reality it was and is a far more interesting voyage, and a more dangerous one.

In the confusion of tongues that is our contemporary literature, it is not my adventure to pick immortals. To play the prophet and attempt to foretell whose voices will remain and whose already are on the way to the last silence is gratuitous folly. The danger is the greater in that we are living in an age of such swift change that a revolution every night and a new skyline every morning have become almost a commonplace. How quickly a book dies that yesterday promised to be something more than a best seller, its dust cover now its shroud. Yet some there are, there must be, that will persist and go down as the inner autobiography of our kaleidoscopic age.

To discover these is an adventure far more interesting and profitable, for it may offer a clue to some interesting questions. Is there any pattern in our confusion of tongues? Can one distinguish and define some of the main tendencies in the contemporary mind? Are there expressed by some of the more typical of our writers today philosophies of life that may serve

as clues to and possible solutions of what some have called the 'contemporary problem'? Is it possible to group the better-known authors of today into families of **(ix)** ideas, and then to select the most typical of each of the families so that, understanding them, we might have the clue to those that are of their kind? It was this interesting experiment that made a voyage to lesser known regions in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans a double adventure of discovery.

A book like this is a gesture of bravado, a piece of academic bravura, one might say: as though the author had assumed the mantle of prophecy, glanced with disinterested eyes at the evidence, and pronounced sentence on the ideas that are making an age. Only posterity can be enough disinterested to dare a judgment. There is more than a little truth in such a charge. The book, with the best motives in the world, is both partial and arbitrary. No other attitude is possible.

Even the authors selected are sometimes treated like reluctant witnesses, kept to a single issue--what have they to say that is of unique and pertinent significance to the present confusion. Of all their works--novels, dramas, essays--only those are selected that have a special bearing on this burning question. These are not essays on Hauptmann, Gide, Mann, *et al.*, but on their several wrestlings with the adversary as he came upon them in the night and offered no quarter. No, there have been books and essays aplenty that have had to do with the work of each, the genesis and exodus of his literary life, and there is a bibliography in the appendix for those who care to read further. Each of these, like Jacob of old, who, if any, lived a life of miscellaneous irrelevance, had a vision; for one it was intermittent and brief, for another periodic and long, a vision that gave pattern and meaning for them to the life of the present. It is to record these visions and to comment, where comment might be helpful, that has been the purpose of this book. In this way, perhaps, if in no other, this book is different.

It is different also in another particular. The authors, though contemporary, are not treated solely as contemporaries, **(x)** but are seen, if this is possible, in the tradition of European literature, where they will eventually belong. It should not be amiss, then, to talk about some of their great predecessors, to note resemblances and contrasts. It is this effort at a larger perspective, perhaps, that is the interest that was always closest to the theme of this book. This ought to have at least one valuable lesson--human nature and the human problem are not so kaleidoscopic as sometimes we are tempted to fancy.

There is one arbitrary omission that the reader, I hope, will understand and pardon. I have, except where it seemed absolutely necessary, left out all details about the private life of this author or that--interesting as these are to most readers. There seemed no room for a compromise. I am far from denying either their value or their interest. To fail to mention the vagaries of Gide's experience with sex, for example, is not because of any 'academic timidity.' The academic mind has, I imagine, outgrown this. Rather it is my conviction that his ideas, as those of all the others, are a *ding an sich*, and are good or irrelevant quite apart from the author's personal habits or life. Literary criticism that indulges in back-stairs gossip is always tending to obscure the real issue. There is a biography of ideas as well as one of people; this is a biography of ideas. It is ideas that are helping today to make history. It is enough, for this book, to attempt an understanding of their scope and significance.

This difference will answer friends who have insisted that I ought not overlook such stalwarts as Hamson and Steinbeck, or Joyce, or Thomas Wolfe, or many others. Steinbeck, with all his excellence and power to give eloquence to a class now foot-loose and a crying scandal, is dated. His is a specific problem now very much in the mind of all who contribute to or minister relief. His issues, important as they are, are partial, and affect first the economic life and fortunes of the flotsam and jetsam, that are a disgrace to any self-respecting people. The theme of this collection of studies is **(xi)** the large issues of the meaning of life, and its panorama, not the Great Plains of America or the slums and factories of any one city, but life

today, and a renewal, if wisdom prevail, of its sweetness and zest, and light. Losing these, and there are many who live in fear, what is there to which we can turn? So a number of most excellent authors and books, but partial pleaders and concerned with secondary issues, had perforce to be overlooked.

The exclusion of Knut Hamson had a motive that differed only slightly, and there were many others not unlike him. Power, charm, enthusiasm, all this there is in his excellent novels, and something more that is rare in these days of our disillusionment, a belief in the fundamentally heroic in human nature. He is of the race of Vikings, a peasant Homer, not to be daunted by toil or danger, though a Norwegian friend tells me that he does not know the sea and its part in the life of Norway. Perhaps I should have included him for the reason, extraordinary today, that he can see life on the soil but not down on all fours, narrow in routine but not narrow in humanity, sordid in its daily task but steadfast in faith and courage. Of such stuff are his heroes and heroines, universal and heroic human nature in Norwegian homespun. Yet with all his excellence Hamson does not seem to belong in this collection. He is a contemporary, but seems untouched by the chief contemporary problem. The issues that again have divided the world are not in his books. Beside the bitterness and disillusion and growing fear that is the story of the past twenty years, his villages and inns and fields have the aura of a stoic Paradise, but a flaming sword seems to guard its gates. And there are many who cannot be convinced that Paradise, even a stoic one, is not all a nostalgic dream. The sequel should answer why some of the others were not included.

In this day when the crescendo of fear and discouragement of the past twenty years seems no longer bearable, when malignant furies have torn off the mask and the issue **(xii)** for humanity is in the balance, it is doubly pertinent that there be calm and disinterested understanding. The hysteria of guns and torpedoes will have its day; but will the reawakening of peace be any more fortunate than the armistice of November 1918, when one almost heard the Angel's song? The answers to this question, and to many like it, have puzzled the thinkers who are the theme of this book. Out of them perhaps the final answer will be selected. It should be interesting to pass them in review, ponder and understand. But if it is to be an answer that humanity can respect, it must also have respect for a full human nature. Anything short of this will in its aftermath invite a repetition of tragedy.

How much toward such an answer may be revealed in the works of these authors? Again, a very pertinent question. To attempt to set this forth in the most typical of our present-day novelists, essayists, or dramatists is a task that is something more than an academic gesture, partial and arbitrary. It is the motive also of every intelligent reader. One word more, and a personal one: a picture like this of the contemporary mind has, to me, one enormous consequence. Rather than feeling oppressed by a sense of meaningless confusion, one comes away--I came away--with a glow of respect and hope. Respect, because the best minds of the age are at work at the practical and necessary task of understanding. Hope, because there can be no hope unless there first be understanding.

Hope until hope creates, Out of its own wreck, the thing it contemplates. **(xiii)**

I. INTRODUCTION

FEAR

'What must we have to keep us safe from fear?'

Jules Romains, *MEN OF GOOD WILL*

IN AN early volume of Jules Romains *Men of Good Will* there is a sentence that will awaken reverberations of memory in all who have lived during the climax of crises that has been the story of the past twenty years. The two youths Jerphanion and Jallez, one of them Romains himself, are talking of the future, which even in the years before the first Great War was none too hopeful. They are talking of the future and some faith to which they can dedicate themselves: where can they find a motive to which they can dedicate their throbbing lives? 'What must we have to keep us safe from fear?'

Safety from fear--is not this after all the motive behind every projected new deal, whether it be the gospel of Fascism proclaimed by Mussolini and his Black Shirts in '22 when they marched on Rome to rid Italy of the specter of Communism, or the motive earlier that blew up the Tsar and gave Russia the dictatorship of the Proletariat and the purges of Stalin? Something secure and tangible, a creed and a personality that will restore confidence and security in a world that seems devoted to chaos? Even Hitlerism, with its central doctrine of pride and hate, caught the imagination of Germany because it offered a motto and a motive to German youth when no other motive seemed at hand to exorcise fear. It is significant that all these revolutions have been accomplished by militant youth inflamed by a new hope in a crusade against fear. **(3)**

Paradoxical as it may seem, they have also been an assertion of the worth of human nature and of freedom. For the security these revolutions offered made their appeal to the imagination in the name of freedom. Their accomplishment was greeted with the same lyric abandon with which Shelley in anticipation celebrated the downfall of all tyranny and the dawn of a new age of gold. 'The world's great age begins anew, the golden years return.' How often has this refrain been

chanted in these two decades by millions. It is only a comment on the vanity of human wishes that these high ideals have somehow miscarried.

The same desire for security and freedom--now the one in the spotlight, now the other--is the story of the more significant figures in contemporary literature. If we may use the much despised word 'modernism,' most of it has been devoted to the quest of some motive that can subdue fear or furnish some refuge from its clamor. For this terror, this sense of insecurity, has been our ever-present guest since the Great War shocked us out of a fancied trust in civilization and the conviction that, in a world cushioned with all the comforts of science, the banishment of brutality and evil was already an accomplished fact. How remote that Victorian and Edwardian sense of security seems now. China, Ethiopia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Finland; Norway, Holland, Belgium, France, Yugoslavia and Greece--who will be next--have taught us the lesson. Odets, Steinbeck, Wolfe--to name only American authors--are just another of its aspects. The veneer of civilization today looks thin and fragile, and its blessings none too secure, when overnight its resources can be used for destruction and humanity can become the victim of its own ingenuity. 'What must we have to keep us safe from fear?' The quest has become the most important motive in life. To it have been devoted the best efforts of statesmen and publicists, scientists and men of letters. The 'modernism' of today, then, wears its novelty with a difference. The malady of fear is more widespread, more openly **(4)** malignant, and more justified in its fruits than at any time in the world's history.

It should be no wonder, then, that there is a seriousness in contemporary literature that perhaps never before prevailed in the literature of Europe. Superficially the change in purpose and attitude is almost revolutionary. The old novelist or dramatist, no matter how serious, felt himself obligated to entertain; he told a good story, whether it was of an Alceste, a Don Juan, or a David Copperfield. If he had a serious purpose it was well hidden by layers of sweetness and interest. He was an entertainer before he was an evangelist. Even Tolstoi and Dostoevsky at times almost forgot that literature has a serious mission in life when they wrote *Anna Karenina*, and *The*

Brothers Karamazov; so far had humor transformed and etherealized seriousness.

But who of our significant ones of today has this disarming gift of humor? Satire there is today, perhaps more than is wholesome in any age; but that genial gift of intimate entry into the very consciousness of the reader, overpowering him by the charm of entertainment, until for the moment the reader forgets his own personality in the larger world into which he has been introduced--all this who of our moderns possesses in a high degree? Who reads a novel today to be entertained? Who writes first for entertainment, outside of Hollywood and the class of the pulps? In the history of literature again there has never been anything quite like it-- the desire of writer to instruct and reader to be instructed, so obsessed are both with the contemporary problem, our fatal insecurity.

For the same reason there has never been a class of writers so prodigiously learned. To be sure there had been the scholar poets of nearly every generation--Dante, Goethe, Milton, and the list might be extended--but even the scholarship of a Goethe seems an easy burden beside the miscellaneous pack of science, philosophy, economics, and anthropology carried by several whom we shall meet in the sequel. **(5)**

The load is not an easy one, and the shoulders of the reader will groan in sympathy with the writer. But it is a load both willingly assume. Before one can understand the human panorama one must study the making and the manner of the new institutions, and all this is a matter of learning and labor.

As necessarily, too, it is a frank literature. To be sure there is the naked frankness at times of those that have rebelled against old restraints. The orthodox of a former age would label it 'naughtiness' and think of the fruit of that forbidden tree that brought sin into this world and of the moralist whose duty is to detect and damn. Of such frankness in an effort to escape from the banal and once forbidden and romp in a nudist paradise there is its share. But frankness that is due to the desire to understand, and to leave nothing unsaid that may contribute to understanding, of this there is not a little that may be said in way of excuse. Our new sciences have revealed to us many things about human nature. The new fiction is not going to allow this

knowledge to go by default, even if in some the enthusiasm of new discovery and newer liberty may seem an intoxication.

It is to this 'new' literature that the search which has become this book was dedicated, to see what the new knowledge of our age has given us in answer to the eternal problems, the meaning of life. Where, if anywhere, can we discover freedom? What is the good life and can it again be rescued from the debris of revolution and war? Can the voice of conscience be heard amid the shoutings of dictators and the marshalled chorus of partisans? Will this new war, like the old one, be one more tragic interlude of man's fatal incompetence? These questions all of us ask and re-ask in intimate conversations at the fireside, in wakeful hours when alone with conscience. Do our leading writers offer any pertinent promise of aid to distress? **(6)**

It is impossible to study the present with the same detachment as one studies the past. There we have a panorama complete and unchanging, foothills and mountain peaks range on range, as unalterable as a Himalayan landscape. For them time has ceased to flow and their calm majesty early or late can indifferently await our coming. Their pattern is of infinity. Not so the poets or novelists of today and their readers. For us time is in full flux, and a point of view as full of change and bewilderment as the moving center of a whirlwind. Or better, perhaps, both he that writes and he that reads are explorers in a new and ever-changing world and the adventure not yet complete. The reader is not unlike the sailor companion of a Columbus whom the shipmaster allows access to his log. There have been interesting points of call, some apparently quite novel, some not greatly different from many explored on previous voyages. But what is the journey's end? And what new worlds shall we discover?

But though yet uncompleted and its end perhaps yet shrouded in mists, this new age of our literature has been at times exciting, serious, and always full of the explorer's daring. It is this unexpectedness that to most comes to mind when one uses that hideous word of many implications, 'modernism.' In poetry and prose, as in all the arts, the age has been one of daring experiment. At its beginning, just after the Great War, a young Italian poet, as uncompromising as a revolutionary machine gun, shouted the new battle cry:

Morto e il Passato e con baionette
Stiamo uccidendo il Presente
Per mettere in trono il Futuro.

The Past is dead, let us stand
With bayonets slaying the Present,
That we may enthrone the Future.

The Future is the only reality, the Present is worthless, the Past is dead, such was the new and daring revolutionary (7) gospel. It was a gesture exactly parallel to the revolutions in government and society, first in Soviet Russia, then in Italy, and again in Germany. A new regime that would ignore the past and all tradition and history, mutilate the present with liquidations and bloody purges, that the future may be secure and without fear.

But these writers are not maniacs. It is that our times seem to them so topsy turvy, that only by a complete revolution can they forget the past, slay the indecent present, and set on the throne the secure and only real future. There has been a break with the past, the reverence to tradition has given place to distrust, and the present with its confusions and insecurity and fear seems incurable. Dislike them as we may, the revolutions of the past twenty and more years are only the more critical symptoms of the unrest and fear that is the attitude of all our contemporaries. Why, then, this battle cry of the new revolutionaries, though all may not be willing to join in the chorus? Why this willingness to gamble the present, as do soldiers in an assault? And by what means may the future be made sure and set upon the throne? The answer will doubtless reveal many of the causes of the fear that besets all. 'What must we have to keep us safe from fear?' But first we must know what causes the fear. Then, and only then will we be able to discuss the recipes for safety that are offered by the more typical of our contemporary thinkers.

I think we can put the answer into one word--we are living today in a world that seems to have dropped a familiar mask and stands before us for our acceptance bewilderingly and shockingly new: a new, unhuman, and menacing world.

How am I to face the odds
Of man's bedevilment and God's;
I a stranger and afraid,
In a world I never made.
(A. E. Housman, *Last Poems*. By permission.) **(8)**

A stranger and afraid, in a world I never made--this is the new and fearsome attitude that consciously or unconsciously is shared by all today.

It isn't the external changes that terrify--though these have been more rapid and more revolutionary than at any period of human history. And their speed, like that of an unbraked car on a steep hill, is accelerated every bewildering moment. No, it is not this, for human nature has in its long career learned to accommodate itself to the new and unexpected. But the universe itself has gone back on us, tricked us out of all conscience, and now with a malicious irony mocks our pained bedevilment. The old universe of the nineteenth century, in the good days of faith, was a human universe, man-made, it seemed, and fitted for a background of human life and human ideals. Its God, if it needed a God, was humane and in the ideal human image. It seemed, in its then supposed orderly processes, to encourage human faith and be eloquent of human dignity. It was man's reason, and its instrument human science, that made this world of man and nature a familiar and even a domestic intimate. How completely, as all consciously or unconsciously are aware, this dream--if it was a dream--has been exploded.

The new science speaks far more cautiously of the orderly processes of nature, admits chaos as easily as order, and looks forward to an end of meaningless night far more readily than to the glory of God and the edification of man. What consistency with the fate of man, and his idea of human excellence, has any of the new sciences, from astronomy to psychology?

Is human nature any the more worthy? The new psychology, since Freud gave it wide currency, has made much of a new domain as irritatingly alluring as the unknowns and the unknowables in physics or biology; the abyss of the subconscious. Is this the ultimate reality in human nature? Is it here that one must look for the secret of human

personality? Is the life of conscious motive and reflected action **(9)** only a mask that the elusive real personality puts on, that it may play the better its hidden role of inconsistency, paradox, and unreasonable confusion?

In this break with the tradition of the past there is one more influence that science has had upon our outlook on human progress in history. Progress in science and the technique of comfort, yes; but is human nature any better or any happier? And are human institutions any better calculated to promote the human desire for well-being? In most parts of the world, or at least in Europe and America, it is true that people are better housed and protected against the inclemencies of the weather. But are they any happier? Is human nature any less vindictive and cruel? In a word, is human history the record of progress? Does it exhibit a design, as the evolutionist of a century ago dreamed?

> Yet I doubt not through the ages one enduring purpose runs.
> And the minds of men are broadened by the progress of the suns.
> Doesn't this pious hope of the poet seem a trifle musty today, as does also the pious faith of Emerson?
> Striving to be man the worm
> Mounts through all the spires of form.

As some historians and thinkers read history today--in this day of wars and their preparation, with their callous cruelties, cruelties that those who are not engaged contemplate not with horror, but with cold and sheathed indifference--is it not true that it is sometimes easier to think of history and human institutions as having the aimlessness of nature?

The good tendencies have been inextricably mixed with the sinister. The same malicious destiny, that in a century, like an advancing glacier, wiped out the excellence of classical Greece and substituted the decline of Alexander and his successors, may be at work today in Europe, a plague ripe and eager to destroy excellence just when it seemed on the point of bursting into full flower. There have been good **(10)** and great men in the past, the benefactors of humanity, but how rare in the morass of stupid incompetence. Is there any

certainty that the present and the future can rear a more bountiful harvest? Is the present any more congenial to the man of good will; or is polite indifference any less cruel than active persecution? Will the future, to which many a youthful enthusiast of today devotes his genius, be any more cordial?

Is public opinion, in spite of its cultivation and education, any more attracted by the good than by the sinister? Have not revolutions inspired by an inflamed public opinion been as destructive in the past as beneficent? Is there any ground for feeling that public opinion may be more uniformly beneficent today? A glance at what is going on in the world is by no means reassuring. Are massed people any the less liable to respond actively to the skilful mover of man? Science has put at his disposal resources undreamed of by the demagogue of the past: the press, whose control is easier than the optimistic nineteenth century fancied; the radio, that blaring immediacy from which there is no escape; and next television. And behind it all is the education of youth, and its easy manipulation, as country after country too easily shows. It is only too easy, seeing these things, for the thoughtful to grow sceptical of the benefits of our so-called scientific civilization, and even to look back with a nostalgic longing to the simpler past.

A distrust of science? Is all of science a gain? The scientist may be never so disinterested, but are his gifts not somewhat like those of the Greeks, to be feared in their aftermath? Has not science given war its engines of destruction, more cruel than a natural cataclysm? But this is only a lesser issue. Has it not by directing its gaze more obviously at technique and technology tended to cultivate only the one side of human nature--the more obvious because the external? It has given conveniences and comforts and relaxations, and banished solitude. But is man's life no more than his meat **(11)** and raiment and his distractions? If something essential in human nature has been overlooked, the oversight may truly be tragic. And there are many who not only ponder, but are giving the answer of tragedy.

It is not difficult to summarize. The triumphs of science have been followed by the reflection on the part of many that its application is not wholly a thing of pride, nor has it promoted any sense of security. On the contrary, it is only too easy, and to some inevitable, to feel that it has somehow led to a growing estrangement between man and

nature, and between man as he is sometimes revealed and man as he fancied himself.

Where in this ceaseless revolution may one discover security and peace? It is the old question, anticipated and faced three hundred years ago by Pascal. 'Whatever the bourne where we think to find rest and a firm refuge, it gives way and eludes us; if we follow it evades our grasp, and slipping from us, escapes in an eternal flight. Nothing for us is ever at rest.'

Is there a way out? There are those, and not a few, that despair. The contradictions in the world and savage disappointments have been too much for the tender of spirit. They have lost faith in the world and humanity, stand aloof or turn their backs, and look within or without for some substitute. Gifted with a sensitiveness above their fellows, the greater is their pain, and the greater their nostalgic longing for the security of a fancied past. On seeing the ever- widening abyss that separates man's intellectual accomplishments and his moral discipline, they seek a refuge where this dualism in human nature can be ignored. Or convinced, naively or philosophically, of the human need for happiness and peace, and seeing no means for its attainment in the way of the world, they take a path apart, a lonely one for most and its venture dubious. It will be interesting, I hope, to follow some of these contemporary pilgrims' progresses, **(12)** and behold the vanity fairs, castles of doubt, and valleys of the shadow of death in which they too find only banality and grotesque tragedy. The story of these becomes an elegy of disappointment, and their promised land an illusion.

There are on the other hand those who look beyond the confusion to a promise of faith. To some it may not yet have become manifest, but they have seen the star and follow the quest. For this new journey of the wise men has all the sanction of religion, with all its hope of a new dispensation. Some have discovered its formula, become its apostles or disciples, and in imagination or in fact have set about putting their house in order. For there have been among them men like Saint John the Baptist, who have proclaimed the new day, and also one like a false Messiah, whose book became an inspiration to many, and his acts, for a reproach or worse, re-created a people. There have been others who have called for a return to the ancient highway of the humane tradition and to the religion that once gave power to

Christendom. The counsels of hope are as interesting and varied as the elegies of despair.

In these two contrasting types of the contemporary mind I think we can see most of the leading issues today. The pattern may not be complete, but it ought to reveal its significance. Many times the pieces of this mosaic will be seen to overlap. Some it will be impossible to approve, but even these deserve a sympathetic hearing and understanding. For we are trying to pass in review the ideas that are making or undoing our Europe and America; each represents a concrete philosophy of life, and each is convinced of its mission. Many centuries ago when a new faith was proclaimed to a waiting world, and its first evangelists were filled with a new eloquence, to the stranger their varied expression of living faith seemed 'a confusion of tongues.' In the medley today of fresh evangelists there is again a new confusion. Will this new confusion of tongues, like the old, be followed by a rebirth of the world and a better understanding of man **(13)** and his destiny? And above all, will it restore man's faith in himself? For without this faith all human work will be in vain. Is the story of human nature a record only of change and decay? Or beyond the flux and above its noisy brawl, like the silent peak of the Himalayas, is there something for human nature that abides, that can restore flagging faith and bring peace? **(14)**

II. THE SEARCH FOR BEAUTY
GEORGE SANTAYANA

> 'Understanding too much to be ever imprisoned, loving too much ever to be in love.'

'The world is not respectable; it is mortal, tormented, confused, deluded for ever; but it is shot through with beauty, with love, with glints of courage and laughter; and in these the spirit blooms timidly, and struggles to the light among the thorns.'

PLATONISM AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

A SENSITIVE, refined, fastidious spirit that can find its home only in a world of pure beauty; and the gross, noisy, and unashamed banality of

Originally published in 1913.

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