A CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO LITERATURE

by A. G. NEWELL

MR. NEWELL, who is a member of the staff of Liverpool University Library, considers in the following pages one important aspect of the question how Christians ought to "use the world" (1 Cor. 7 : 31), and introduces us to a writer who gave it earnest consideration in the early nineteenth century.

IN this paper I attempt, firstly, to give a brief account of the problem of the Christian approach to literature, and, secondly, to examine in some detail the distinctively evangelical attitude to literary art of an early nineteenth-century Christian, John Foster.

I

The problem of the gulf that exists between what writers say and what their readers believe to be true goes back as far as Plato. Of recent years it has again come to the fore and caused considerable discussion in critical circles. A. C. Bradley described the experience of poetry as an end in itself, and maintained that to appreciate it one must conform to its rules and leave behind the beliefs that one holds in the world of reality.[1] Others have expressed the same idea, while concurring with T. S. Eliot's assertion that " the problem of belief is very complicated and probably quite insoluble."[2] A recent collection of essays attempts to clarify (at least) the situation in the light of modern critical notions, and in the process some illuminating remarks are thrown out. One of the contributors to this symposium writes :

> It seems to me that our experience in reading serious literature, when uninhibited by theoretical prepossessions, engages the whole mind, including the complex of common sense and moral beliefs and values deriving from our experience in this world. Yet I also think it essential to save the basic insight of aesthetic theory since the eighteenth century: that a poem is a self-sufficient whole which is to be read for its own sake, independently of the truth it may communicate or the moral and social effects it may exert, and that its intrinsic value constitutes its reason for existing as a poem and not as something else.

[1] *Poetry for poetry's sake* (Oxford, 1901), p. 8.
[2] *Selected essays*, 1917-1932 (London, 1932), p. 138.

He feels it necessary to add that "this looks very much like an attempt to have art for art's sake and eat it too."[3]

Professor Abrams puts it well; later he asserts that a truly impassive reader, "all his beliefs suspended or anaesthetized", would render a poet helpless "to endow his work with interest and power."[4] Hence he concludes that although the poet "is entitled to his initial predication, or myth, or donnée, whether or not he is prepared to assert it outside the poem . . . [he] must still win our imaginative consent to the aspects of human experience he presents, and to do so he cannot evade his responsibility to the beliefs and prepossessions of our common experience, common sense, and common moral consciousness."[5] "There is no escaping the circumstance that a poet must submit to the conditions of human nature in order to be their master."[6] Both poet — creative writer — and reader are entitled to their beliefs, their schemes of moral values, but for the effective communication of artistic truth — indeed, for its very existence — a balance must be struck between them.

Such a conclusion would seem to be an acceptable basis for deeper consideration of the subject. The particular aspect with which we are concerned is precisely the opposite to that explored by Professor Bush in another essay in the collection already cited. His problem of belief is specifically religious. After sketching the history of the interpretation of religious myth from the adventures of Homer's gods to the medieval attempts to enjoy the pagan classics by reading them allegorically, he presents the twentieth-century version of the difficulty: "Whereas the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were concerned with making pagan literature not only safe but morally helpful for Christian readers, the problem now is to make Christian literature acceptable to predominantly pagan readers in what it has become fashionable to call the post-Christian era."[7]

[3] M. H. Abrams, "Belief and suspension of disbelief", in *Literature and belief*, ed. Abrams (English Institute Essays, New York, 1958), pp. 11-12. He quotes Bradley and Eliot as above.

[4] *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

[5] *Op. cit.*, p. 28.

[6] *Op. cit.*, p. 30.

[7] Douglas Bush, "Tradition and experience", in *ibid.*, p. 32 cf. C. L. Wrenn, "On the continuity of English poetry", *Anglia*, LXXVI, 1958, p.44. "The student of mediaeval literature . . . must . . . seek to acquire by imaginative effort or mental stimulation, for example, an actively sympathetic belief in the postulates and assumptions of that 'Catholic' faith which . . . dominated almost the whole of mediaeval poetry."

The modern agnostic experiences difficulties with overtly Christian literature. In the same writer's words, "how far can the non-Christian reader appreciate and assimilate poetry more or less based on Christian belief, and belief of an older and more fundamentalist kind than that of modern liberal Protestantism?"[8] Of course, Professor Bush comes to the conclusion that "the great poetry of religious meditation, the poetry that really comes home to modern readers who do not share the beliefs it embodies, is that which extends beyond the particular creed and personality of its author, which grows out of and embraces general human experience. . . . Even if a reader views the Christian story and Christian symbols as no more than archetypal myths, his doing so is a recognition of their experiential validity, their truth to life."[9] How else can the agnostic appreciate a very large proportion of literature without making himself intellectually dishonest? Professor Bush recognizes the existence of the opposite problem — that of Christian readers troubled as to their appreciation of works based on non-Christian or anti-Christian beliefs — for, after asserting, on the evidence of his teaching experience, that neither Roman Catholics nor Protestants seem to encounter "serious" difficulties with either the writing of Roman Catholics or the literature of traditional Protestantism, he states: "Some problems do arise for Christian readers of non-Christian literature, which is a large part of the world's writing in prose and verse. Christians of critical sophistication, who are presumably not very numerous [*sic*], may study and aesthetically enjoy much that they regard as inadequate or erroneous."[10] He might have added that they may also convince themselves of the orthodoxy of what they aesthetically enjoy, as do C. S. Lewis[11] and Sister Miriam Joseph[12] (to whom Bush refers), where the heretical Milton is discovered to be firstly, an orthodox Christian, and secondly, the holder of unimpeachable Roman Catholic doctrines.[13]

[8] *Op. cit.*, p. 33.
[9] *Op. cit.*, pp. 40-41.
[10] *Op. cit.*, pp. 33-34.
[11] *A preface to Paradise Lost* (London, 1942).
[12] "Orthodoxy in Paradise Lost", in *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 8, no. 2, 1952.
[13] It is interesting, if unfair, to note in this connexion the attitude of Rev. Thomas Beverley, rector of Lilley (Herts), who predicted the end of the world for 1697 and, on surviving into 1698, "wrote a book to prove that the world *had* come to an end without anybody noticing it." See Christopher Hill, "John Mason and the end of the world", in *History Today*, November, 1957. Whatever the relationship of *De Doctrina Christiana* to *Paradise Lost* chronologically, Milton was never the orthodox puritan.

The Christian is the reader whose intellectual position is the most interesting and the most difficult. If he is not "critically sophisticated" he will, presumably, be unaware of the nature, if not the existence, of this problem. He will either like or dislike what he reads, influenced to some extent by any Christian or non-Christian attitude or content in the particular book. On the other hand, he may well reject anything patently anti-Christian without a reading, and, indeed, limit himself to literature of a definitely Christian nature. There remains a third possibility, that he experiences no problem whatever, enjoying but mentally discarding any work the contents of which directly or indirectly challenges his faith. But Bush posits the existence of a not very numerous band of critical Christian readers. They are able, he thinks, to enjoy aesthetically what they regard as inadequate or erroneous, because they do not read the works of unbelievers or heretics who are also poets or novelists or playwrights as theological treatises to be refuted. Again, the Christian reader does not give the same kind of attention to William Perkins' *A Discourse of Conscience* as he does to *The Holy War*; he reads the first as the theological and devotional work that it is intended to be, and he approaches Bunyan's narrative with that critical carefulness that a literary classic — even a minor one — deserves for its full appreciation.[14] But he can never abandon his beliefs for the purpose of enjoying something pagan or heretical; his appreciation of Bunyan, moreover, critical though it be, will be the deeper because of the author's overt Christianity in both attitude and material. This is to say that the Christian reader approaches literature as a Christian, and his response will be determined by his Christian beliefs which inform his whole mental attitude, consciously as well as unconsciously.

Another of the contributors to the volume of English Institute Essays puts it this way: "It is . . . the nature of literature itself that compels the critic finally to move beyond the level of verbal

[14] Lest any should suggest that these examples presuppose an historical interest beyond their intrinsic literary merit, I offer a modern pair: James Denney's *The death of Christ* and D. H. Lawrence's *The rainbow*. The Christian's critical appreciation of the latter cannot be heightened by its author's attitude. His nonconformist upbringing and what is often described as his religious feeling do not make him a Christian—*pace* Fr. Jarrett-Kerr, who follows Prof. Lewis and Sister Miriam Joseph by reading his author's views as a fairly close approximation to his own, in his pseudonymous *D. H. Lawrence and human existence* (London, 1951), by "Fr. William Tiverton."

analysis to the level of metaphysical and theological valuation. On this level, of course, he can establish the propriety of his judgments only by reference to his own insight, his own scale of values, his own sense of what is important in art and in life."[15] He goes on to quote S. L. Bethell's assertion that "there is no 'impartial criticism' . . . or rather there is no critical neutrality; there are only Christian critics and Marxist critics and Moslem critics — and critics who think themselves disinterested but who are really swayed unconsciously by the beliefs they have necessarily acquired by being members of a particular society in a particular place and time."[16]

This seems self-evident to a subscriber to a dogmatic faith. It leaves untouched, however, the actual experience — the considered critical judgment — of the Christian reader faced with a work of literature. Granted, he must be true to his own self, and he must honestly record the impression the work makes upon his Christian sensibility (we remember Lawrence's definition of the critic's task),[17] but what sort of result does this give in practice? What does he make of "that large part of the world's writing in prose and verse" that Bush proffers for the aesthetic contemplation of the small company of critically sophisticated Christian readers, if he is not prepared to take Bradley's advice and surrender the beliefs that he holds in the world of reality?

Professor Scott attempts to solve this crucial problem thus: "*In principle,* I should . . . expect the Christian reader at least — *all other things being equal* — more enthusiastically to give his suffrage to a literature that was Christianly *oriented* than to one which was not. But, now, not as a principle but as a matter of fact, the Christian reader lives in a period whose characteristic quality, at least ever since the Renaissance, has been defined . . . not merely by a dissociation of faith from knowledge but by what has been the profounder severance of faith from sensibility. 'It is this rift,' says [Erich] Heller, 'which has made it impossible for most Christians not to *feel,* or at least not to feel *also* as true

[15] N. A. Scott, Jr., "The collaboration of vision in the poetic act: the religious dimension", in *ibid.*, p. 135.

[16] *Essays on literary criticism and the English tradition* (London, 1948), pp. 24-25, quoted by Scott, *loc. cit.* Compare T. S. Eliot on the impossibility of drawing a line between aesthetic criticism and moral and social criticism, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

[17] "Literary criticism can be no more than a reasoned account of the feeling produced upon the critic by the book he is criticising" (from Lawrence's essay on John Galsworthy).

many "truths" which are incompatible with the truth of their faith."[18] . . . This being the case, the Christian reader will *actually* respond to the various beliefs which literature may present with much the same latitudinarianism that any other sensitive reader in our time will bring to bear upon his dealings with literary art: that is to say, what he will principally require is that the view of life that is conveyed by the given poem or novel commend itself as a *possible* view, as one to which an intelligent and sensitive observer of the human scene *might* be led by a sober consideration of the facts of experience. And, though he will agree with Eliot that to judge a work of art by artistic standards and to judge it by religious standards ought to 'come in the end to the same thing',[19] he will recognize, as Eliot does, that, in our time, this is an end at which none of us is likely to arrive."[20]

I have quoted Scott at such length because his description of the predicament and the reaction of the Christian reader in the modern world is one which is very probably true. To confine oneself to Christian literature is virtually to cut oneself off from contemporary creative writing; to view the literature of more recent times through Christian eyes is, in most cases, to reject it. Hence the Christian reader is driven to accept a compromise such as Scott suggests; he can, indeed, only agree with Eliot, while regretting the necessity of having to do so.

But the position to which it seems the Christian must retreat can hardly be called "Christian"; its very occupation indicates the surrender of certain principles, which, if held and applied, would have led to conclusions and judgments different from those implied by the compromise. It is legitimate for the Christian to appreciate the world-view of an unbeliever, but he cannot accept it as "true", and although he may admit it to be possible, he cannot receive it uncritically, setting aside his "prejudices". The Christian's outlook is essentially, radically, other; it is based on belief in God, who is revealed in the Scriptures and in Jesus Christ. For the Christian anything other than the Biblical world-view is wrong, is fundamentally perverted. The maintenance of dogmatic beliefs does not preclude intellectual activity or aesthetic appreciation, but such a position *does* exclude uncritical judgments, and it cannot produce an approbation of non-Christian literature which fails to mention what the Christian must see as a crippling deficiency in his author. Émile Caillet points out the overwhelming

[18] *The disinherited mind* (Philadelphia, 1952), p. 125.
[19] *Notes towards the definition of culture*, p. 29.
[20] *Op. cit.*, pp. 137-138. Scott's italics.

sense of frustration and fear in contemporary novelists, and cites Maupassant, Dostoievsky, Dos Passos, Koestler and Hemingway, among others. He directs attention to the vacuum produced by the widespread intellectual abandonment of Biblical Christianity during the eighteenth century, and to the rise of the novel of the supernatural, the spread of secretive cults and interest in witchcraft and similar subjects which contrived to fill the gap.[21] This situation has not disappeared; creative writers and their critics are still endeavouring to satisfy themselves and their readers with work embodying essentially non-Christian beliefs, whether overtly, as in *The Plumed Serpent*, or implicitly, as in *A Passage to India* and similar work informed by "humanist" principles. Such principles, of course, are not confined to the literature of the past two hundred years; in English, essentially un-Christian beliefs pervade poetry as far back as *Beowulf*,[22] and the efforts of medieval and Renaissance Christianity to reconcile the classics with revealed religion are well enough known. If the Christian reader is to remain true to his faith, to be ready to show his colours at all times, to use Cailliet's phrase, he cannot accept the psychologically convincing, but too comfortable, compromise expressed by Scott.

It seems, then, that the Christian critic is caught at a disadvantage. Opponents will be eager to resurrect the old charges about Calvin's lack of aesthetic appreciation[23] and the iconoclastic

[21] *The Christian approach to culture* (New York, 1953), chap. 14.

[22] The problem of the Christian elements in *Beowulf* has been discussed often enough. R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf and the heroic age in England* (London, 1939) admits the Christian and heathen elements are sometimes incongruous, but asserts that the poem's whole spirit is Christian. C. L. Wrenn in his edition (1953) agrees. W. W. Lawrence, *Beowulf and epic tradition* (London, 1930) recognizes that the poem's Christianity, though ever present, is superficial, and that its real vitality lies in its paganism. D. Whitelock, *The audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1950), suggests that the poem is free from Christian polemic because its audience was accustomed to accept Christian dogma. J. R. R. Tolkien, *Beowulf, the monsters and the critics* (British Academy Lecture, 1936), maintains that the absence of all definitely Christian names and terms is intentional, and that Christian colouring occurs only in the poet's comments. Ritchie Girvan, *Beowulf and the seventh century* (London, 1935), thinks that the author's mental attitude is certainly Christian. In his edition of the poem (Manchester, 1935) F. Sedgefield sees the poet as a Christian without much doctrinal knowledge. There is an exhaustive bibliography in F. Klaeber's edition. It will be seen that no unanimity exists on this question. Cf. D. Fanger, "Three aspects of Beowulf and his God", *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, LIX, 1958, pp. 172-179.

[23] But cf. A. M. Hunter, *The teaching of Calvin*, 2nd ed. (London, 1950), pp. 272-294; J. T. McNeill, *The history and character of Calvinism* (New York, 1954), pp. 231-233, 167-168.

activities of the English and continental Reformed Churches, imagining the Christian critic to resemble Macaulay's savage and unjust caricature of the puritan.[24] On the one hand, the Christian reader, assuming him to be critically sophisticated, has to recognize the literary and artistic validity and greatness of certain work, while on the other his Christian beliefs disable him from expressing unqualified approbation of many masterpieces because he cannot agree with the evident viewpoint of the author. He cannot, being intelligent, read uncritically, nor can he ignore the bulk of creative literature; he cannot surrender his beliefs temporarily, as some advise.

Our Christian reader finds himself more or less back where he started, although he sees the issues more clearly. He is ready to assert with Bethell that there cannot be impartial criticism; he agrees with the view that the Christian, privileged to judge with the perspective of truth, must abandon neither his critical discipline nor his beliefs, and that if he fails to win the respect (if not the agreement) of other critics it is his criticism that is wrong, and not any disabling orthodoxy.[25] He remains uninstructed as to what he must do. Guidance must, it seems to me, be sought in this important matter. For it *is* important. If the agnostic finds difficulty in appreciating Christian work, how much more difficult it should be for the holder of a dogmatic faith to approach explicitly un-Christian art. The critics already mentioned have difficulty in rationalizing their appreciation of work which does not accord with their beliefs, and avoid expression of it by making the work correspond as nearly to their convictions as renders it safely acceptable, Sister Miriam Joseph and C. S. Lewis as

[24] *History of England*, 4th ed. (1849), I, pp. 79-81, 160-163. Cf. P. A. Scholes, *The puritans and music* (London, 1934), p. 103 for an outspoken criticism of Macaulay. Cf. also Horton Davies, *The worship of the English puritans* (Westminster, 1948), pp. 268-272.

[25] W. Stein, "Christianity and the common pursuit", *The Northern Miscellany*, I, 1953. I find it difficult to agree with the statements that "the Christian approaching a non-Christian work has merely to hold part of himself in reserve," and that the finest liberal critics are very nearly Christian. See D. J. Enright's criticism of Stein in "Literature, criticism and belief", in *The apothecary's shop* (London, 1957), where he points out that Leavis is *just* a moralist and not a metaphysician or a theologian. Enright agrees with Stein that a critic must show his beliefs, as do Johnson and Leavis. But he writes from the liberal standpoint and so cannot see the fundamental cleavage between Christian truth and "immunity from belief", which Stein, while recognising its existence, was endeavouring to bridge by suggesting that the best critics practise their art from what amounts to an essentially Christian viewpoint.

Christians, Douglas Bush as an agnostic. Walter Stein has trouble in making his obvious appreciation of the work of liberal critics like F. R. Leavis square with his beliefs; Dr. Leavis himself experiences some uneasiness in evaluating Bunyan's work precisely on account of his author's "narrow Calvinistic" creed: his finely discriminating essay expresses his appreciation of the Christian writer *in spite of* what he sees as a belief containing ugly and petty aspects.[26] There is, then, a problem which stands in the way of Christian and agnostic alike, of the believer in any religious creed and the unbeliever. It is particularly severe for the Christian. A starting point for a Christian critique can be sought in the writings of sincere exponents of dogmatic Christianity, and a body of such work lies ready in the volumes of the English Puritans. But it is to the writings of a much later Christian that I wish to draw attention — John Foster.[27]

II

That great English Puritan William Perkins describes theology as "the science of living blessedlie for ever,"[28] and John Foster is as practical. Born in 1770, something of a failure as a Baptist minister,[29] he devoted himself in later life to the writing of essays. Two volumes of his contributions to the *Eclectic Review* were published, one year after his death, in 1844. But his reputation rested on the popular *Essays in a series of letters.* These were published in two volumes in 1805 while Foster was minister of a congregation at Sheppard's Barton, Frome, and were addressed to Miss Maria Snooke, whom he afterwards married. Within four months a second edition was called for, and a third in 1806. The book, with a new preface to the ninth edition, went into twenty-nine editions at least.[30] Apart from the articles mentioned, Foster

[26] *The common pursuit* (London, 1952), p. 206.

[27] I was directed to him by H. J. C. Grierson, *Cross-currents in English literature of the XVIIth century* (London, 1948), pp. 1-4, etc.

[28] *A Golden Chaine, or The Description of Theologie,* 2nd ed. (1597), p.9.

[29] Thomas Hamilton in *D.N.B.* says that the congregations in his care always diminished in size. His fortnightly lectures at the Broadmead Chapel, Bristol, however, were successfully continued to a voluntary audience (as Foster called it) from 1822 to 1825, when Foster's health deteriorated and the advent of Hall rendered it less imperative for him to maintain a testimony in Bristol. Two volumes of these lectures were published in 1846.

[30] The Library of Congress Catalogue mentions the 29th ed. (1861) published by Bohn, and contains entries also for a "new ed." of 1865, another in 1873 and the latest in 1894 (published by Bell and Sons). The

[*Continued at foot of next page*

wrote also some lectures, letters on political matters, an introduction to Doddridge's *Rise and progress of religion in the soul* (1825), "Observations on Mr. Hall's character as a preacher" in Hall's *Works* (1832), a *Discourse on missions* (1818) and an *Essay on the evils of popular ignorance* (1820), which went into a second edition in the following year. These, with some other short pieces, comprise Foster's literary output. The quality of his mind is evident in the lucidity of his writing and the depth of his thought on the subject which occupies two hundred pages of the *Essays* — "On some of the causes by which evangelical religion has been rendered less acceptable to persons of cultivated taste," the fourth and final essay in the collection. Foster held peculiar opinions for a Baptist minister: churches were "useless and mischievous institutions", and ordination a lingering superstition. He is believed to have entertained doubts as to the perpetuity of the rite of baptism, which he never once administered. Politically he was a republican.[31] Yet his religious convictions, which he considered to be of an evangelical nature, regulated his thinking, and Robert Hall wrote of him in glowing terms.[32] But Foster's life can be studied elsewhere;[33] it is his work that is of primary interest.

Essays in a series of letters to a friend contains four essays. The first three are normal literary pieces: "On a man's writing memoirs of himself," "On decision of character" and "On the

British Museum Catalogue (1881) has entries for various eds. up to the 13th (1846), while the Bodleian Library Catalogue contains an ed. of 1875 as its latest copy. It is interesting to notice the progress of Foster's reputation. The spate of eds. of the *Essays* gradually dies down until the final issue (as far as I have been able to ascertain) is reached in the concluding decade of the nineteenth century. Such a posthumous career is not difficult to account for. The rise of a more numerous reading public without the educated taste of former generations, the questioning of the basic tenets of Christianity by both scientific and "higher critical" circles, and the great increase in the supply of popular fiction, would all tend to limit the appeal of books like Foster's—not to mention his eighteenth-century tone and manner. A glance at Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the reading public* (London, 1932), will show the competition against which Foster was struggling. (Mrs. Leavis' whole thesis is relevant.) The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9th ed. (1879) has a principal article on Foster; in the 11th ed. (1910) it is greatly reduced; the current ed. (1955) ignores him.

31 So *D.N.B.*

32 Obituary in the *Annual Register* for 1843, p. 305.

33 See *Foster's life and correspondence*, ed. J. E. Ryland (London, 1846); G. Gilfillan, *Galleries of literary portraits*, II (Edinburgh, 1856); E. Whately, *Life and writings of the late John Foster, the essayist* (Dublin, 1863); W. W. Everts, *Life and thoughts of John Foster* (London, 1868); P. Bayne, *Six Christian biographies* (London, 1887).

application of the epithet romantic." They are all written from an explicitly Christian viewpoint and each treats specifically Christian aspects of the subject. Thus in the course of the first essay Foster describes the way in which a man of little intellectual ability or attainment can become an atheist[34] and he points out the happiness of the devout man;[35] during his second essay he takes the opportunity to mention briefly the activities of Christian missionaries among the heathen;[36] the last two letters of the third essay contain a meditation on the sinful state of man and his impotence to bring about any reformation of morality and affairs generally by his own strength.[37]

The final essay, on the aversion of the man of taste to evangelical Christianity, is the most substantial and the most interesting from the point of view of our particular enquiry. Foster begins by stating that the most important of all man's affairs is the search for that form of life which will render him eligible to enter "that greater stage" of existence. "We, my friend, are persuaded that the enquiry, if serious, will soon terminate, and that the Christian character will be selected as the only one, in which it is wise to await the call into eternity. Indeed the assurance of our eternal existence itself rests but on that authority which dictates also the right introduction to it."[38] He goes on to aver that "the Christian character is simply a conformity to the whole religion of Christ."[39] There is, however, a strong tendency, especially in persons of refined taste, to shrink from some of the peculiar distinctions of Christianity, or at least to modify them. Foster has no intention of discussing the natural repugnance of those manifesting no concern for religion in general; he sets out to consider only the intelligent person who accepts the divine revelation of the Bible and the rightness of Christianity, yet dislikes deeply the basic evangelical tenets. Foster's study of the state of mind of such a man shows considerable insight into the subtleties of the human spirit faced with the demands of an uncompromising gospel. Probably his experience with the members of the several Baptist

[34] *Essays in a series of letters*, 6th ed. (London, 1846), pp. 46-56. There is a footnote on p. 49 in which Foster considers briefly also the careers of the unbelieving philosophers who "have ascended the dreary eminence, where they look with so much complacency up to a vacant heaven and down to the gulf of annihilation", showing that there is little difference between the process of reasoning which led them to unbelief and the more vulgar considerations which prevailed in the lesser mind.

[35] *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 125.

[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 217-245.

[38] *Ibid.*, pp. 247-248.

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 248.

congregations to whom he had already ministered would prove of assistance in this analysis. He writes:

> If it were safe, he [the hypothetical cultivated man who finds evangelical Christianity distasteful] would much rather be the dignified professor of such a philosophic refinement of Christianity [i.e., "a scheme composed of the general principles of wisdom and virtue, selected from the Christian oracles and the speculations of philosophy, harmonized by reason, and embellished by taste"], than yield himself to be completely humbled into a submissive disciple of Jesus Christ. This refined system would be clear of the unwelcome peculiarities of Christian doctrine, and it would also allow some different ideas of the nature of moral excellence. He would not be so explicitly condemned for indulging a disposition to admire and imitate some of those models of character which, however opposite to pure Christian excellence, the world has always idolized "[40].

Such a person does not dislike Christianity because of the abuses and depraved institutions of what passes for Christian civilization; he can discern the hypocrisy and worldly ambition which stain Christian history, and readily rejects what is un-Christian therein. While he freely admits the divine authority of the Christian religion, however, he instinctively recoils from that part of its dogma which is professed in the evangelical system: man's radical corruption, the doctrine of the atonement, the effectual calling of the Holy Spirit, and separation from the world.[41] Antipathy to these doctrines naturally leads to hostility to the very moral spirit of Christianity.

Foster then embarks on his exposition of the difficulties attendant on the intelligent man's acceptance of evangelical doctrines. These lie not only in the nature of the doctrines themselves, but in the attitude and the intellectual equipment of a proportion of evangelicals whose mental defects must be apparent to the "man of taste". Much of the second, third and fourth letters are taken up with the enumeration of indications of the mental inadequacy of many of the humbler adherents of evangelical Christianity. Foster's objective survey is reminiscent of the aspersions cast by contemporary and later opponents on the average puritan's intellectual stature, and prophetic of much that is said today about so-called "fundamentalists." It must be admitted, however, that a great deal of what the "man of taste" considers to

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 252.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 255. Foster adds that evangelicalism was often called, "among the scoffing part of the wits, critics, and theologians of the day, by the terms Fanatical, Calvinistical, Methodistical." The term "fundamentalism" had not then been added to the armoury of the critics of the evangelical system.

detract from Christianity in the intellectual conduct of its evangelical followers might well be noted and corrected (if necessary) by Christians of any period. The gospel, says Foster, is for all, and since of those who accept it there will be a greater number of "weaker minds", it tends to appear mean in the eyes of intellectuals. Hence, for the Christian, greater mental ability brings greater responsibility for devotion to his faith. He must avoid the many pitfalls for the unwary, weaker brethren: refusal to enquire into the foundations of Christianity because such research implies the existence of doubt; failure to appreciate the importance of right doctrine beside the value of experience; concentration on a favourite doctrine to the exclusion of others, equally important; disinclination to acquire knowledge (although having the means and the time) because it has no relevance to Christianity; a tendency to boast of a lack of knowledge; a misplaced zeal for reading only the Bible, and expressing approval of only those works that accord with almost illiterate Christian belief; the application of disproportionate emphasis on the precise modes of religious observances (we remember Foster's view of the practice of baptism); the use of artificial solemnities of diction, expression and behaviour; and the cultivation of a peculiar vocabulary, and addiction to a stock repertoire of clichés, metaphors and similes when discussing Christian matters.

This last point leads Foster into an extended discussion of the contemporary evangelical vocabulary and style—in which he attacks the use of a pseudo-biblical dialect in which phrases are employed as substitutes and not vehicles for ideas—which takes up letters three and four. This is interesting as an indication of his approach to language and style, but is not quite relevant here. It will be sufficient to say that he gives examples of the various manifestations of the evangelical "dialect" and offers his critical

42 Many of these charges, both as to mental equipment and personal behaviour, were levelled at the Puritans by their more untheological antagonists, who found them fair game to satirize; Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* is probably the best-known example, and Macaulay's classic misrepresentation (see p. 100, n. 24) the most influential. For authoritative refutations of these criticisms, see, e.g., L. B. Wright, *Middle-class culture in Elizabethan England* (Chapel Hill, 1935), *passim*—by a scholar who shows no special sympathy toward the Puritains. See also the well-known works by Haller, Miller and Knappen. Perry Miller deals with the intellectual ethos of the New England Puritans, as does S. E. Morison, *The intellectual life of colonial New England* (New York, 1956). The Puritan is no longer here to defend his nasal tones or his peculiar gait, but there can be no doubt as to his intellectual interests and his pursuit of them.

comments. His clarity of expression and what can only be described as sheer common-sense might be compared with Dr. Johnson's. whose language, Foster remarks, is condemned by all men of taste—poetic justice after Johnson's censure of Milton for his "Babylonish dialect."[43] He cites Addison, Pope, Shaftesbury, Bolingbroke and Hume with approval (for their clear and "neutral" language), and mentions Burke (with Milton and Johnson) as an example of a secular writer employing an "arbitrary and capricious construction" such as he deplores in the language of some evangelical Christians. His criticisms cover the bulk of contemporary evangelical writing which manages to smother its theology in a blanket of clichés, mock-eloquence and sheer bombast.

So far Foster has discussed the misrepresentations and the uncouth expressions of Christianity which naturally disquiet the man of taste. Now he turns to consider other factors which pervert the very principles of taste itself, "so as to make it dislike the religion of Christ, even if presented in its own full and genuine character." He advances for his readers' assent a proposition which would be familiar, in a sense, to those who knew anything of the views of the early and medieval Christian writers, or who recalled the strictly disciplined intellectual life of the puritans in the seventeenth century and before. It is an assertion, however, which startles because it is rarely stated; it is either implied or ignored.

> I fear it is incontrovertible, that far the greatest part of what is termed Polite Literature, by familiarity with which taste is refined, and the moral sentiments are in a great measure formed, is hostile to the religion of Christ; partly, by introducing insensibly a certain order of opinions unconsonant, or at least not identical, with the principles of that religion; and still more, by training the feelings to a habit alien from its spirit . . . I do refer to writers palpably irreligious . . . but to the general assemblage of those elegant and ingenious authors who are read and admired by the Christian world, held essential to a liberal education and to the progressive accomplishment of the mind in subsequent life, and studied often without an apprehension, or even a thought, of their injuring the views and temper of spirits advancing, with the New Testament for their chief instructor and guide, into another world[44].

Having stated his opinion with exemplary clarity, Foster goes on to a more detailed examination of both classical and modern literature, setting out his Christian reactions to their study.[45]

Firstly, in letters five and six, Foster considers the literature of

[43] *Ibid.*, p.313.

[44] *Ibid.*, pp. 335-336.

[45] It would be difficult and probably unwise to depart from Foster's orderly presentation of his thesis: hence my account bears something of the nature of a precis.

classical antiquity. Latin had ceased to be the medium of civilized intellectual communication before Foster's day, consequently the Christian would not be disturbed to any great extent by the fact that the grammatical textbooks of that language—formerly living—were based on the analysis of, and illustrated by quotations from, classical authors. This was the dilemma of the Latin Fathers, who were further embarrassed by the certainty that Christian writing could not bear comparison stylistically with that of the pagans. By Foster's time the classics had attained academic status, and hence afforded no compelling problem; the general decline of once almost universally held Christian standards also contributed to a failure to recognize any discrepancy between holding the faith and studying pagan literature, either classical or modern. The age had passed when a translator had to justify his labours to turn a heathen poet's work into English, hoping that the result would prove

> "Not more delyghtfull too the eare than frutefull to the mynd."[46]

But the classics—as Foster points out—were the basis of education, and thus a formative influence on taste. He is therefore constrained to stress that the influence of the writers of heathen antiquity is heathenish. Much of their philosophy could be safely and without regret consigned to oblivion; even their ideas of a Supreme Being are debased by association with other less exalted concepts. Their metaphysics are outmoded, but their didactic morality has attained great influence by virtue of the attractiveness of pagan biographies of personified moral sentiments, both historical and fictitious—i.e., the writings of both historians and poets.

Like any good critic, Foster then proceeds to particularize, and discusses the great figures of classical literature.

> Homer . . . is the favourite of the whole civilized world; and it is many centuries since there needed one additional word of homage to the amazing genius displayed in the Iliad. The object of enquiry is, what kind of predisposition will be formed toward Christianity in a young and animated spirit, that learns to glow with enthusiasm at the scenes created by Homer, and to indulge an ardent wish, which that enthusiasm will probably awaken, for the possibility of emulating some

[46] *Shakespeare's Ovid, being Arthur Golding's translation of the Metamorphoses,* ed. W. H. D. Rouse (London, 1904), Preface to the reader, line 169 ff. The whole of Golding's Epistle and Preface repay attention. His Christian moral interpretation of the classics is representative, but L. T. Golding's description of him in his title (*An Elizabethan puritan,* New York, 1937) needs more justification. Cf. P. Cruttwell, *The Shakespearean moment* (London, 1954), p. 157, where the suggestion is made that the puritan preferred the heathen thought and imagery of the classics to those of the Christian Middle Ages, because the former were safely dead while the latter were still uncomfortably alive.

> of the principal characters. Let this susceptible youth, after having mingled with burned in imagination among heroes . . . be led into the company of Jesus Christ and his disciples . . . what must he, what can he, do with his feelings in this transition? . . . one of these two opposite exhibitions of character will inevitably excite his aversion. Which of them is that likely to be, if he is become thoroughly possessed with the Homeric passions?[47]

What Foster expresses so concisely is of relevance to a similar problem on a lower plane today—the influence of modern mass popular culture on impressionable youth which is inclined to dismiss Christian teaching as being unworthy of its consideration. But this is not our subject; Foster is expressly considering the educated man of taste nourished on polite letters. He next imagines the reader of the Gospels turning to Homer and being confounded that the poetry should call upon him to worship revenge, " the real divinity of the Iliad." For, asserts Foster, the morals deducted from Homer's epics by the critics are nothing—" Whatever is the chief and grand impression made by the whole work on the ardent minds which are most susceptible of the influence of poetry, *that* is the real moral."[48] The *Iliad* is not an eloquent history but a presentation of pagan morality in a manner which prevents a just estimate of it being formed; ". . . a transforming magic of genius displays a number of atrocious savages in a hideous slaughter-house of men, as demi-gods in a temple of glory."[49] How can a Christian read such a work, asks Foster, without " a most vivid antipathy " to what he perceives to be the poet's moral spirit? And he states the paradoxical fact of Homer's acceptance in the Christian West: " Yet the work of Homer is, nothwithstanding, the book which Christian poets have translated, which Christian divines have edited and commented on with pride . . . and which forms an essential part of the course of a liberal education, over all those countries on which the gospel shines . . . Homer, and similar poets, whose genius transforms what is, and ought always to appear, purely horrid, into an aspect of grandeur."[50] Hence Foster concludes that works such as Homer's, which combine anti-Christian influence with great poetical excellence, are " among the most mischievous things on earth."

Foster continues his survey of classical literature with Vergil (whose hero is not attractive—a judgment with which most readers would agree—but who presents some difficulty with his portrayal of the underworld and the incidents of Dido's suicide), Lucan (who

[47] *Ibid.*, pp. 342-343.
[48] *Ibid.*, p. 345.
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 346
[50] *Ibid.*, pp. 348-349

sublimates martial to moral grandeur and is therefore more pernicious an influence than Vergil), the Greek tragedians, and classical biography and history. The latter are also to be deplored, because the principles of moral excellence which they exhibit are not identical with the principles of Christianity. After tabulating the essential differences between pagan morality and Christianity Foster sums up with this considered statement, based on what he has previously examined: "Now it appears to me that the enthusiasm, with which a mind of deep and thoughtful sensibility dwells on the history of sages, virtuous legislators, and the noblest class of heroes, of heathen antiquity, will be found to beguile that mind into an order of sentiments congenial with theirs, and therefore thus seriously different from the spirit and principles of Christianity."[51]

From classical antiquity to those modern writers who imbibe and teach the morality of ancient Greece and Rome is a natural progression, and to these Foster turns in letter seven. "After a comparatively small number of names and books are excepted, what are called the British Classics, with the addition of very many works of great literary merit that have not quite attained that rank, present an immense vacancy of Christianized sentiment. The authors do not exhibit the signs of having ever deeply studied Christianity, or of retaining any discriminative and serious impression of it."[52] He quotes Christ's words that he who is not with Him is against Him, and suggests that such writers—the vast majority—see Christ much as they see Confucius. It is these very writers whose works are the chief instructors of persons of taste, and form their habits of feeling and thought. An outstanding aspect of their work is that "the *good man*, the man of virtue, who is necessarily presented to view ten thousand times in the volumes of these writers, *is not a Christian.*"[53] It would not occur to the reader of these books to describe the good men portrayed therein as disciples or servants of Jesus Christ. Indeed, supposing the characters were to become real persons, they would not be at all gratified by such a title.

Worldly happiness as described by modern writers is completely different from that posited by Christianity. No man, according to the Biblical view, can be called happy without certain essential requisites: a change of heart (conversion), assurance of the pardon of sin through Jesus Christ, habitual communion with God, a pro-

[51] *Ibid.*, pp. 363-364.
[52] *Ibid.*, p. 377.
[53] *Ibid.*, p. 382.

cess of improvement (santification), a confidence in God's overruling in human life, and a conscious preparation for the next life, including a firm hope of eternal felicity. This " is not that which our accomplished writers in general have chosen to sanction."[54] Moreover, modern polite literature fails to remind its readers of the eternal future, while the Christian views everything in the light of immortality. This anti-Christian tendency is also obvious in the treatment of distress, old age and death, in which situations Christianity offers the greatest consolation and even joy.

> What are the forms of consolation which sensibility, reason and eloquence, have most generally exerted themselves to apply to the mournful circumstances of life, and to its close? You will readily recollect such as these: a man is suffering—well, it is the common destiny . . . it is well it is no worse. If he is unhappy now, he *has* been happy, and he could not expect to be happy always. . . . If the cause of distress is some irreparable deprivation, it will be softened by the lenient hand of time. . . . As to the consolations in death, the general voice of these authors asserts the grand and only all-sufficient one to be the recollection of a well-spent life. . . . But yet the greater number of the writers of taste advert to the subject with apparent reluctance, except it can be done, on the one hand, in the manner of pure philosophical conjecture; or on the other, under the form of images bearing some analogy to the visions of classical poetry.

To this assertion Foster adds in a footnote:

> What I mean to censure in the mode of referring to another life, is, the care to avoid any direct resemblance or recognition of the ideas which the New Testament has given to guide, in some small, very small degree, our conjectures.[55]

In other words, the writers aim to quieten fear rather than to animate hope. Poetry too delights in portraying heroes desiring death sublimely, never in a Christian spirit, for Christians are not the heroes; hence readers are seduced into admiring the deaths of characters expressing and portraying non-Christian sentiments. Foster pauses here to consider solemnly the plight of those authors who have ignored the fact of Christ's death to conquer him that had the power of death, in their accounts of their heroes' last moments, when they need " no recollection of [Christ] in order to look forward toward death with noble defiance or sublime desire."[56] Foster gives three quotations (without references) from verse tragedies of dying speeches voicing classical sentiments, having already referred to Socrates, Brutus and others whose lives and deaths are favourite material, and comments: " You will recollect to have read many that are . . . improper to engage a Christian's full sympathy, and therefore improper for a poet,

[54] *Ibid.*, pp. 385-386.
[55] *Ibid.*, pp. 395-398.
[56] *Ibid.*, p. 406.

admitting Christianity, to have written, in order to engage that sympathy. It is a pernicious circumstance in passages like these, that some of the general sentiments of anticipation and high emotion which might be expressed by a dying Christian, are combined so intimately with other ideas and a whole state of feeling contradictory to Christianity, as to tempt the mind by the approbation of the one into a tolerance of the other."[57] It is no excuse to plead that the poet or dramatist is imitating reality; piety and even criticism demand the adaptation of all examples and sentiments to the purest moral purpose. The poet does not report; he invents and engages sympathy for his characters. Even Rousseau's description of Eloisa's death is deeply affecting but not Christian. Foster's condemnation culminates in an even stronger passage: " To create an occasion of thus compelling us to do homage to the dying magnanimity of wicked men, is an insult to the religion which condemns such magnanimity as madness."[58]

Again, writers ignore the evangelical doctrine of man's total depravity; they thereby tend to create in their readers a more flattering view of human nature. Even satirists and moralists who censure men's follies maintain that these are accidental to human character, or merely " the wild weeds of a virtuous soil." They do not acknowledge that all men are by nature the children of wrath. Hence the necessity for Christ's redemptive act and man's need to trust Him are vastly lessened in importance. Far from being recognized as the Redeemer, " Jesus Christ is regarded rather as having added to our moral advantages, than as having conferred that without which all the rest were in vain."[59] Eternal happiness, which can be gained only by trust in God's free grace through Christ, is therefore held to be the result of human merit.

Another disturbing factor, continues Foster, is that polite writers more than tolerate anti-Christian motives to action, for example, the desire to be admired, distinguished or praised. This is most pernicious, for a Christian ought to seek to repress his desire for the estimation of others. In these authors, however, fame is seen as the highest peak of the noble spirit's achievement. Reviewing his indictment thus far, Foster writes: " Now I think I cannot be mistaken in asserting that much the greater number of our fine writers have done the direct *contrary* of what I have thus represented a devout reader of the New Testament as feeling necessary to be done."[60]

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 408.
[58] *Ibid.*, p. 409.
[59] *Ibid.*, pp. 415-416.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 421.

A further tendency which adds to the man of taste's aversion to evangelical Christianity is its portrayal in the work of polite authors. They ridicule "the cant and extravagance by which hypocrisy, enthusiasm, or the peculiarities of a sect or a period, may have disguised [Christian doctrines]." By a criminal carelessness, or design, however, they sometimes do not choose cant, nor do they always distinguish between what taste and sense have a right to satirize and what piety commands to reverence. For the educated man, therefore, who reads such work, evangelical Christianity assumes disagreeable or irreverent associations.

At this point Foster concludes his general indictment of modern secular literature. He recognizes the need for specific criticism to support his theoretical approach; indeed, he suggests that "it might be a service of some value to the evangelical cause, if a work were written containing a clear and serious estimate, individually, of the most popular writers of the last century and a half . . . with formal citations from some of their works, and a candid statement of the general tendency of others."[61] He makes it clear that this estimate would be offered from the evangelical standpoint, expressly with reference to the relationship of the works considered with Christian teaching.

With this desideratum he passes on to review the various genres of polite letters. Moral philosophers and historians, he feels, either ignore or attack Christian truth, while the general essayists, like Addison, never treat the greatest possible theme—redemption—perhaps because it would arouse the hostility of their readers. Foster then offers a considered view of Dr. Johnson at some length. This great writer calls for special attention because of his high moral tone and his adherence to Christianity (although it is "a monstrous fault" that his words occasionally cannot be reconciled with the "evangelic theory"). While he recognizes Johnson's commanding position in English letters and his undoubted standing as a classic, Foster criticizes him on two points. Firstly, Johnson mixed with unbelievers and immersed himself in literary study, and these activities cannot have failed to influence him, however subtly, in his religious views; secondly, Johnson omits to introduce into his work frequent and serious references to Christian doctrine. The whole section on Johnson[62] is well worth careful attention; in it we can see a disciplined Christian intelligence displaying both fine appreciation of Johnson's work and an unashamed and frank

[61] *Ibid.*, p. 425.

[62] *Ibid.*, pp. 433-439.

recognition of what are felt to be his shortcomings. Foster is certainly fair.[63]

Obviously, in turning to the English poets, Foster must consider Milton, whom he calls "the greatest of all their tribe." Like Johnson, Milton invites the Christian critic's scrutiny: as Foster remarks, it is an encouragement to find so much to applaud in the great poet's work. However, after a suitable expression of homage ("Milton's genius might harmoniously have mingled with the angels that announced the Messiah to be come") he passes on to Young, Cowper and Watts, parts of whose poetical works he approves because it is possible to turn from them to the Gospels without the consciousness of any discrepancy in the principles expressed. Foster seems to be aware of the Miltonic unorthodoxy, or even of the unreal, Stoical Christ of *Paradise Regained*. Milton's wholehearted and complete religious absorption has won the critic over almost before he has had time to register approval.[64] From the overtly evangelical Christian poets Foster turns to Pope. Again, he does strict justice: Pope's works are distinguished by a "galaxy of poetical felicities", but these are not to be confused with Christian sentiments. Pope's allusions to Christian matters in his lighter works are in a style of "profane banter", while he seems to expunge all Christian associations from his more serious poems. The *Essay on Man* is even thoroughly anti-Christian.

Finally Foster comes to novels, "in which folly tries to please in a greater number of shapes than the poet enumerates in the Paradise of Fools". Unfortunately, for this very reason they are capable of producing a very considerable adverse effect on the community's moral taste. Novels also sometimes "eloquently display characters of eminent vigour and virtue", qualities which, alas, are uncomplicated by any trace of Christian principles; indeed, the "philosophical" virtues are not seldom accompanied by

[63] *Cf.* Dr. Johnson's celebrated criticism of Milton, where he admits that the poet's powerful impression triumphed over the critic's training in a different cultural tradition: "We cannot wish his work to be other than it is." Johnson reports the resistance he feels as an eighteenth-century critic to Milton's verse at the same time as he gives an overall favourable judgment. This was a considerable tribute to Milton; Foster's opinion of Johnson may similarly be considered a compliment. Both the great and the unknown critic view from a moral standpoint, and both are uncompromisingly frank.

[64] Cf. H. J. C. Grierson, *op. cit.*, pp. 252-254, where he suggests that Milton's various heresies, his views on marriage and divorce, and even the publication (1825) of *De Doctrina Christiana*, have had no effect on "the average pious reader", because Milton held all the "central tenets of Christianity to the last."

" a strongly intimated contempt " for any sort of religious ideas, especially those of Christianity. Sometimes novels maintain " an awkward religion "; occasionally they profess " to exemplify and defend, against the cavils and scorn of infidels, a religion of which it does not appear that the writers would have discovered the merits, had it not been established by law."[65]

And so Foster reaches his conclusion. The existence of polite literature is a fact and cannot be ignored, particularly as it is the basis of the man of taste's training. Two points emerge from his survey which disturb the Christian critic. The first is that " so many who profess to adopt [Christianity] never once thought of guarding their minds, and those of their children, against the eloquent seductions of a spirit which is mortally opposite."[66] The spirit of Homer's poetry and that of the classics generally is Foster's meaning here, but his melancholy reflection applies equally to his view of modern literature. The second refers to modern polite letters only: Christianity " presented its claims full in sight of each of these authors in his time. The very lowest of those claims could not be less than a conscientious solicitude to beware of everything that could in any point injure the sacred cause. This claim has been slighted by so many as have lent attraction to an order of moral sentiments greatly discordant with its principles. And so many have gone into eternity under the charge of having employed their genius, as the magicians their enchantments against Moses, to counteract the Saviour of the world."[67]

With these unhappy thoughts—inevitable, it will be seen, for one with his boldly logical views—Foster considers briefly the practical aspect of his study: what can be done by Christians of the evangelical persuasion to counteract the extraordinarily potent influence of anti-Christian literature? He has already stated the need for a more intelligent and elegant presentation of evangelical theology in order to remove a major obstacle from the way of the man of taste's appreciation of it. Now he faces the problem of the Christian approach to literature, one kind of which he has demonstrated throughout his essay. He fully realizes that " polite literature will necessarily continue to be the grand school of intellectual and moral cultivation ". Consequently successive generations of its students will continue to be affected to some degree by its evils; such a situation is part of the destiny of those born in a civilized country. Hence, " it is indispensable to acquire the advantage; it is inevitable to incur the evils."[68] Until " some new dispensation of

[65] *Ibid.*, p. 444.
[66] *Ibid.*, p. 351.
[67] *Ibid.*, pp. 444-445.
[68] *Ibid.*, p. 445.

heaven shall establish the reign of Christianity" when the classics may perhaps be read for the pure intellectual improvement to be derived from them, all that can be done—and Foster admits that it will "but very partially prevent the mischief"—is for the Christian instructor to accompany his pupils through the classics pointing out as the occasion offers how their morality conflicts with that of Christianity.[69] "All that I can do," says Foster, "is, to urge on the reader of taste the very serious duty of continually recalling to his mind, and if he is a parent or preceptor, of cogently representing to his pupils, the real character of the religion of the New Testament, and the reasons which command an inviolable adherence to it."[70] With these practical but somewhat despairing suggestions Foster concludes his *Essay*.

I have tried to let Foster speak for himself. The unfortunately brief but realistic restrictions which he advocates as being of vital importance for the Christian reader of secular polite literature are of less value than that long practical expression of his Christian sensibility coming to grips with classical and modern literature which forms the *Essay*. It is clear that he is ready to admit what might be called secular merit; even those authors whom he castigates are recognized as classics, and their influence he feels to be the more disturbing precisely because their genius enables them to present their ideas in a more intellectually and aesthetically compelling manner. Indeed, the *Essay* gives little reason for supposing that Foster actually evaluated for himself the authors he mentions. It is likely that he selected established reputations and criticized them purely from his Christian standpoint, i.e., his initial criteria were secular and therefore, from his point of view, negative. His subject here is a general one; that he is capable of more particular critical judgment — again without reference to authors or works — is evident from a footnote added to the ninth and subsequent editions of the *Essays*, in which, following on his essay on the term "romantic" included in the collection, he remarks on the difference in tone in English literature which has come about since the book was written.[71]

Foster approaches literature as a Christian, one who professes

[69] *Ibid.*, p. 351.

[70] *Ibid.*, pp. 445-446.

[71] On p. 439 of the 11th ed., 1835, and p. 329 of the 19th ed., 1846. The 9th ed., 1830, is advertized as containing Foster's "last corrections." He notices that the "smooth elegance" of the eighteenth-century writers has given way to "every kind of high stimulus"—an advantage on the whole, but gained at the cost of "an immense quantity of affectation" which grips even the ablest contemporary writers. Unfortunately Foster gives no names.

and seeks to apply standards of judgment which he considers to be in accordance with his faith. It might almost be said, on the basis of the essay that has been examined, that, for Foster, literary criticism was the application of Christian moral principles to his reading: criticism was Christianity. The adopton of this criterion — there could be no other — leads him to embark on philosophical criticism: he discusses "literature" generally in preference to individual works. For his purpose this is what he had to do, for he sought to reorientate his readers' ideas about polite letters, classical and modern; it was not his intention to examine closely the works of any one poet, essayist or novelist. Nevertheless he refers to the more prominent authors as examples, and devotes several pages to Homer and Johnson, without quoting from their works — indeed, without mentioning the title of anything by Johnson.[72] Very properly Foster realizes that one cannot generalize all the time: philosophical criticism must at some point come to grips with a concrete literary work, for it is impossible to discuss either what literature is, what it does, or what it should do, entirely in the abstract. Foster surveys the more important names in the accepted classical and modern syllabus of authors at the close of the eighteenth century. It is noteworthy that he fails to mention Shakespeare or the now highly-esteemed seventeenth-century writers. In this he reflects the taste of his age, and in any case he ignores the drama, except for the quotations he supplies from contemporary verse tragedies.[73]

For what is Foster looking when he reads these accepted authors? It is quite plain that he desires literature, whether poetry, belles lettres or novels, to express Christian doctrines, moral principles and sentiments. He is seeking for didactic literature which will utilize every suitable occasion to include an improving incident or stress a Christian attitude. To compel the reader's admiration — against his will, in the Christian's case — for some expression of un-Christian or anti-Christian principles by the use of literary skill, is to misuse that gift and to come dangerously close to blasphemy. The ancient writers cannot be expected to express Christian ideas; their readers, however, in a Christian country, living in the light of Christ's gospel, should exercise their

[72] Foster apologizes for his lack of references to modern tragedies, and indicates that he had no access to the necessary books.

[73] On the relationship of tragedy to Christianity see, among others, J. Peter, *Complaint and satire in early English literature* (Oxford, 1956), p. 211 f., and H. Weisinger, *Tragedy and the paradox of the fortunate fall* (London, 1953), pp. 228-268.

intelligent discretion so that, while gaining the cultural benefit to be derived from the classics, their minds are not influenced more than is inevitable by the heathen morality necessarily espoused by the classical authors. Similarly, modern serious writers who fail to give expression to Christian principles, as well as those who definitely deny any religious belief, are bringing upon themselves a heavy weight of guilt, both by the wrong use of their gifts, and the subtle seduction of their readers' minds from Christianity.[74] Foster admits that it is too much to expect any sort of reformation in either the authors or the usual readers of polite letters, and so all he can advocate is constant vigilance on the part of the Christian reader, who must study literature for his education's sake. The strictness of Foster's criterion is evident in his criticism of Johnson, who, for all his massive integrity, is considered to fall short to some degree of the standard which might be expected of a fully-committed, intelligent Christian author.

Thus John Foster takes his place in that tradition of the moral criticism of literature which includes Plato, Sidney, John Dennis and Dr. Johnson. Literature is valuable for what it teaches: if it does not promote moral improvement by a pleasing presentation of virtue which causes the reader to imitate it, it is not only useless but positively dangerous, for merely to delight is not a sufficient justification for its existence. But Foster's thorough-going Christian attitude is a highly individual one which sets him deliberately apart from other more celebrated critics.[75] He obeys one of the commands contained in that Old Testament which he carefully avoids mentioning in relation to Christian principles, "All thy estimations shall be according to the shekel of the sanctuary."[76] The puritan or the evangelical preacher expounding that text would lay stress on "all" and "thy" — nothing is excepted, and the demand is singular and personal. Foster measures up to this precept (with reference to his subject) more completely than one would at first think possible.

For it *is* difficult to read and to judge literature in the light only of one's convictions. That Foster faced up to the task so courageously and so fairly must be held in his favour. Yet his

[74] Foster does not consider light reading in his *Essay*, any more than he discusses the man averse to evangelical Christianity who is not refined. Plainly he must have clearly-defined limits to his subject.

[75] E.g., Sidney, followed by Shelley, applauded Homer's moral influence, caused by the desire to imitate the grand expressions of pagan morality. Cf. D. Daiches, *Critical approaches to literature* (London, [1956]), p. 119.

[76] *Leviticus* 27: 25.

recognition of the cultural value of polite letters, his admission that the Christian must read profane literature for the sake of his mental health, while rigorously insisting on the palliative of a strict comparison with Christian truth, points to there being a quality in literary art irrespective of its moral effect or its relationship to Christianity. Foster does not attempt either to conceal or to explore this implication. With eighteenth-century urbanity he concedes the point and refuses to thrust poets unceremoniously beyond the pale.[77] For him, although it is to be understood only by implication, good expression, stylistic excellence, is a value in itself, exclusive of the content thus conveyed. It can be used to proffer with the utmost authority and forcefulness a view of life and a habit of thought utterly at variance with Christian truth. Because both the material and the effect of this large class of secular writings are anti-Christian, Foster considers it to be pernicious. He does not dispute it to have a secular value, however. This is to say that he recognizes the existence of another scale of values by which literature can be judged; there are non-Christian criteria — non-evangelical criteria, in fact — according to which the same works are justifiably estimated to be great. Foster would certain regard these non-Christian criteria as invalid, but he speaks only for the Christian, and does not offer his views as an ultimate literary-critical standard. In other words, he does not dismiss the works which he dislikes — the vast majority of the world's writings — as being unworthy of the very name of literature. He deplores their authors' views and their explicit or implicit expression because of their effect on the reader's mind and spiritual state; he does not therefore criticize them adversely as literature.[78]

Foster's concern is wholly with the attractive or unattractive expression of Christian or un-Christian sentiments in literature. The result of this controlling habit of thought is seen very clearly in his essay on the man of taste: the severely logical imposition of his standard on the accepted corpus of polite letters puts out of court any excellence other than the effective expression of Christian sentiments. It is true that Foster insists on the necessity of effectiveness; he excludes the great bulk of evangelical writing from

[77] Foster's evangelical faith gives him a realistic view of human worth and thus prevents him from adopting any form of perfectionism. His Republic would not have expelled poets: it would have tried to convert them. His legislation is only for Christian consciences.

[78] Cf. H. J. C. Grierson, *op. cit.*, p.3. "Foster recognizes and appreciates the worth of what he condemns." He compares Newman's attitude, which was essentially the same.

consideration as literature because it is poorly expressed. But in the whole range of classical and modern literature he can find only five authors (Young, Cowper and Watts, Milton and Johnson) on whom he can bestow praise according to his own criterion, and of these, the latter is the target of some searching criticism, and the first three are commended only briefly for certain parts of their work. It would seem that not only should the author's evident standpoint be Christian (and evangelical), but also that the subject-matter should be vitally concerned with Christian truth.[79] Only this conclusion can be drawn from Foster's approval of hymns and the Miltonic poems, and his qualified commendation of the less overtly Christian writings of Johnson. He accepts two separate criteria, one to distinguish "literature" from the great mass of written material, the other to indicate the few works included in polite letters which can be read with profit — or at least without harm — by the Christian.

That Foster's critical theory is inadequate will not, I think, be disputed, for a more rewarding approach to Pope and the other great classics (ancient and modern) is surely necessary for the critical Christian reader: they cannot be dismissed from his consideration and still be recognized as "literature". But Foster's concern for Christian truth, his deep interest in the education of the children of Christian parents,[80] the clarity of his thought and expression, the ordered exposition of his case, and the rigour with which he applies his sole criterion to the whole scope of his subject, strike the reader as admirable. It is also plain that he was read for the greater part of the nineteenth century and presumably exercised some influence, however inconsiderable, over his evangelical admirers. For the modern reader Foster is stimulating; for the Christian, especially the evangelical, his essay is fundamentally disturbing, because Foster's views place him in a long Christian tradition. He restates "in the spirit of the second Puritan movement in England a protest that is as old as Christianity itself, the protest of the early Fathers and innumerable saints against the

79 Cf. H. A. Mason, *Humanism and poetry in the early Tudor period* (London, [1959]), pp. 66-67. "The Humanists . . . could find no justification for literature other than its moral instructiveness, . . . their literary vision narrowed to a crude view of Content."

80 W. T. Whitley, *A history of British Baptists* (London, 1923), pp. 276-277, praises Foster for his proposal in 1819 that education should be provided by the Government for all children. Cf. A. C. Underwood, *A history of the English Baptists* (London, 1947), whose brief reference to Foster merely recommends the essay "On decision of character" (p. 173n. and p.198n).

literature, the drama, and the art of a secular world, a protest which has been renewed at every great revival of the intenser, more intransigent spirit of Christianity."[81] John Foster makes his protest, but fails to solve the problem which exists for every intelligent Christian reader of secular literature. His essay exemplifies one Christian approach to literature; if it seems narrow, it is but traditional,[82] as Sir Herbert Grierson points out. At the very least, his essay should sharpen the evangelical conscience, and thereby lead to a fuller understanding, a finer appreciation, of the problem which poses itself every time a Christian reads a book, however celebrated, which does not deal specifically with Christian matters from a Christian point of view.

The University of Liverpool.

[81] H. J. C. Grierson, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

[82] For the attitude of the early Fathers see the volumes by M. L. W. Laistner and H. O. Taylor, and G. L. Ellspermann, *The attitude of the early Christian Latin writers toward pagan literature and learning* (Catholic University of America, Patristic Studies, 82: Washington, 1949), H. Hagendahl, *Latin Fathers and the classics* (Studia Graeca et Latina Gothoburgensia, 6: Göteborg, 1958), and W. Krause, *Die Stellung der frühchristlichen Autoren zur heidnischen Literatur* (Vienna, [1958]). From the celebrated "What has Christ to do with Apollo?" and "Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?" (Alcuin), one moves to expressions like "[The divell] feeds daintie ears with choise of words, and uncleane hearts with the unchast and wanton love-songs of Italian Poetry" (Richard Greenham, quoted by L. B. Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 232), or "Let the sinner come forth, that hath been converted by hearing stories or fables of poets, I am sure there is none: for faith is onely by the worde of God: or let the preacher come forth that useth such things, and doth it not either to please men, or to boast of his learning." (Edward Dering, quoted by A. F. Herr, *The Elizabethan sermon* [Philadelphia, 1940], p. 90.) These might be multiplied Modern views may be found in E. Cailliet, *op. cit.*, A. N. Wilder, *Theology and modern literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), W. S. Reid, "A Reformed approach to Christian aesthetics", *Evangelical Quarterly*, XXX, 1958, pp. 211-219, and many other places, e.g., V. Buckley, *Poetry and morality* (London, 1959), especially Appendix A, "Criticism and theological standards."