

FICTIONAL VERSIONS OF THE MYTH OF JESUS  
IN THE MODERN PERIOD

by

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## ABSTRACT

For a brief period in the history of Western literature, liberated, yet disturbed, by the decline in faith, some important writers sought to "improve" upon the myth of Jesus by re-constructing his historical life in imaginative presentations of various types. This paper is concerned with such works of fiction and prose drama, not poetry, poetic drama, or conventional biography.

Ernest Renan's Life of Jesus, published in 1863, provided the impetus for fictional versions of the life by such writers of the early modern period as George Moore and Bernard Shaw; Moore's The Brook Kerith was a major influence on the writers of the next generation, including D.H. Lawrence and Robert Graves. The writers tend to create Jesus in their own image, thus many and varied are the portraits they present. The result is an exclusively human hero, what Schweitzer calls "the half-historical, half-modern Jesus," interesting as a stage in the evolution of a new hero-figure, but lacking the supernatural quality necessary for a great religious symbol.

However, in this process of "de-mythologization," as Tillich calls it, many works of literary merit were produced; some of the most original attempt to introduce the feminine principle into this most masculine of myths, in common with modern patterns of thought. The last work examined, Kazantzakis' The Last Temptation of Christ (1948), is also one of the best fictional versions of the life ever written.

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## PREFACE

As late as 1968, when he wrote the "Introduction" to the Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology, Robert Graves found it necessary to account for the omission of "all Biblical narratives, even when closely paralleled by myths from Persia, Babylonia, Egypt and Greece; and of all hagiological legends. . . ." This omission was made because "mythology is the study of whatever religious or heroic legends are so foreign to a student's experience that he cannot believe them to be true." In other respects, he feels the Encyclopaedia to be a comprehensive work. It is ironical that the most far-reaching myth of modern times should be thus excluded, for there is a vast bulk of literature, at least since Strauss's first Life of Jesus, published 1835/6, which applies the concept of myth to the New Testament narratives in the same way in which it has been applied to the Old Testament stories for years. Even Strauss is far from being the first to apply mythical interpretations to the Gospel, but as Albert Schweitzer points out, he was the first to do so consistently, not confining his work to the virgin birth and the resurrection, but looking at the whole life of Jesus. He was able to do this because he did not believe that any of the evangelists were actual eye witnesses; and because he was not affronted by the use of the word "myth", seeing it as "the clothing in historic form of religious ideas shaped by the unconsciously inventive power of legend, and

embodied in a historic personality."<sup>1</sup> The historic Jesus had to appear in "the garb of Old Testament Messianic ideas and primitive Christian expectations." Strauss had been freed from orthodox belief by Hegel's philosophy, which had opened his eyes to the "mystic interpenetration of . . . God and man"<sup>2</sup> leaving him ready to accept the apparent contradictions in the idea of God-manhood, synthesized in the historic personality of Jesus. For Schweitzer, Strauss goes too far in discounting supernatural elements in the life, but he recognizes the immense sensation that the publication of the book caused at the time, and its far-reaching effects on European thought and writing.

Schweitzer himself, at the end of his brilliant study, sees the utter negativism of its results:

The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the Kingdom of God, who founded the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth, and died to give His work its final consecration, never had any existence. He is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in an historical garb.<sup>3</sup>

The half-historical, half-modern Jesus will never work for anyone; what does work for mankind, or at least for Schweitzer, is the fact that "a mighty spiritual force streams forth from Him and flows through our time also." He can be understood only by contact

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<sup>1</sup>Albert Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus, (New York: Macmillan, 1959), p. 79.

<sup>2</sup>Schweitzer, p. 79.

<sup>3</sup>Schweitzer, p. 396.

with his spirit, he was "not teacher, not a casuist; He was an imperious ruler. . ." and can be comprehended only by an act of faith.<sup>4</sup>

This conclusion is echoed and adapted by Tillich in 1957, when he specifically turns his attention to what he calls "demythologization",<sup>5</sup> a negative and artificial approach which must be attacked and rejected if it means complete removal of symbols and myths. Tillich feels that Christianity rests on a "broken myth" which can and must be accepted even by men who have reached the stage of questioning mythological visions as literal. In other words, he feels it is both possible and desirable for men to subscribe to the religion even after they become conscious of its symbolic character. "Christianity" he says is "superior to those religions which are bound to a natural myth. But Christianity speaks the mythological language like every other religion."<sup>6</sup>

Many of the major writers of the last hundred years, since Ernest Renan wrote his Life of Jesus in 1863, have attempted to present this "half-historical, half-modern" Jesus in works of fiction and drama; and the results tend to bear out Schweitzer's assertion rather than Tillich's compromise. Their often valiant efforts to mend the old myth, in keeping with their prejudices of course, fail completely to reestablish the figure of Jesus; but they are extremely interesting as contributions towards a new, still largely unrealized pattern of belief, based on a new model.

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<sup>4</sup>Schweitzer, p. 401.

<sup>5</sup>Paul Tillich, Dynamics of Faith, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957), p. 50.

<sup>6</sup>Tillich, p. 54.

## INTRODUCTION

The Christian myth, like any resurrection myth, depends on a sacrificial victim; although, of course, pagan versions of the myth carry with them promises of earthly survival, sometimes the actual renewal of the hero himself, while Jesus returns only briefly before melting into the abstract heaven he invites mankind to share one day. (He will, of course, revisit earth once more to collect the chosen.)

Terence Des Pres writing in Encounter, September, 1971, says:

Our most serious models, those who for centuries have commanded love and imitation, draw their sanction and compelling strength from death. Christ, Socrates, the tragic hero from Antigone to Samson to Becket, all are sacrificial victims, all die to resolve conflict, to re-affirm a larger order, to ensure that the spirit they speak for will not perish.

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But times change, and within a landscape of total disaster, places like Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the hamlets of Viet Nam where men die by thousands, where machines reduce courage to stupidity and dying to a kind of complicity with aggression, it makes little sense to speak of the dignity of death or of its communal blessing.<sup>7</sup>

What is required now, says Des Pres, is a Survivor. He demonstrates convincingly that this Survivor, in flesh as well as in spirit, already dominates our cultural yearnings, and is best exemplified in the works of such writers as Albert Camus and Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

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<sup>7</sup>"The Survivor", Encounter, Vol. xxxvii, No. 3, p. 4.



But before this anti-hero could be born, there was a long period of literary gestation; and it is during this time that many writers who thought they were helping to sustain the Christ myth, usually by modifications and omissions to make it "relevant" to the age, were actually hastening its demise. Many interesting pieces of work were produced, creating, at least for contemporary readers, who seem often to have completely misunderstood the import of the work in question, a comforting, fictional Jesus who survives even though God is dead.

Understandably, each writer tends to recreate Jesus in his own image, at least in his idealized self-image, starting with Renan's charming, gentle dreamer. For Moore and Lawrence, he is the deluded self-styled messiah, who must be spiritually re-born, with a radically new set of values. For the younger Shaw, Jesus is an artist and bohemian, a super-realist, capable of providing a blueprint for the salvation of man on earth; however, the older Shaw regretfully recognizes this admirable man has to "vanish"--the Life Force will need many other manifestations in order to come to fruition. Graves' Jesus is another intellectual man of action; legitimate heir to the throne of Judah, a sacred king who must die for the Goddess. Kazantzakis' hero seems closer to Moore's and Lawrence's in his determination to cast off the past, and all it implies, in his search for freedom: "I hope for nothing, I fear nothing, I am free." Most of the writers are uneasily aware that the story of Jesus is primarily a myth for and about men; and one of the most important aspects of each writer's approach is his attempt to resolve this problem. Some writers concentrate on Mary the Mother, but if they try to present

her as more than a "vehicle", they are faced with Jesus' rejection of her as he grows to manhood. They deal with this either by sentimentalizing the words of the Gospel, a difficult task with such retorts as "Woman what have I to do with thee?", or by underlining the stark qualities of the relationship and presenting a tragic figure. Neither method can alter the fact that Mary's role is virtually limited to her biological (not even miraculous in modern terms) function at the beginning of the story. If the writers focus on Mary Magdalen, and they often do, they encounter the dangers of bringing their all-too-human hero face to face with her, and must therefore deal with the difficult question of Jesus' sexuality.

Paradoxically these writers who decide to rewrite the actual "historical" life of Jesus enjoy, and suffer from, more freedom than those who attempt to "transfigure" him. Theodore Ziolkowski in Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus<sup>8</sup> examines the latter group, including such novels as Mann's The Magic Mountain, where the writer transposes the myth to other periods, other settings, yet must stay very close to the basic events of the life, or of course, the symbolic values are lost. There is also a large group of rather timid "biographers" who are faithful to the Gospels, with only a hesitant "perhaps" or "it must be that" to introduce limited flights of fancy, and who deservedly produce only dreary imitations of what has been done superbly in the Gospels. These can safely be ignored. The most

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<sup>8</sup>Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972 ).

interesting, and influential, fictional versions of the life appear to be written when the artist himself is in a state of transition, reflecting the conditions of a society in that state of feverish over-production preceding disintegration, a period with what Rose Macaulay calls "a terrible look . . . with too much literature and too many religious trends."<sup>9</sup> Men can be satisfied with the Evangelists' versions of the story of Jesus as long as they believe his earthly life is only one act, by no means the most important, in his drama. Once this belief is seriously threatened, both the writer and his audience are ready to risk the loss of the supernatural in Christ that might result from a too-successful re-telling of his story. Certainly there have been earlier periods in Christian sacred art when the human Jesus, "disfigured with blood and grief"<sup>10</sup> has predominated, but always, until the modern period, the Holy Ghost hovers in the background.<sup>11</sup> The divinity of Christ can survive the most homely of genre paintings (always the little aureole defines the Christ-child); poetry, with its many dimensions, cannot destroy it, but the modern novel destroys it utterly. For the novel celebrates life on earth; it is a blueprint for survival, not a dream of death; built of

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<sup>9</sup>Religious Elements in English Literature, (London: Hogarth Press, 1931), p. 154.

<sup>10</sup>Dorothy Sayers, The Man Born to be King, (New York: Harper, 1943), p. 1.

<sup>11</sup>Dickens' exaggerated revulsion at Millais' famous painting of Christ in his father's carpenter shop is an indication of his well-found fears for the loss of the rather sentimental myth he embraced. His own version of the life, written for his children, is insipid, but the myth he created in A Christmas Carol, a myth of survival and conquest of death, has much more to say today.

factual explanations it takes "the hero with a thousand faces" and discusses what he wears and eats, how he sleeps, and with whom; quite literally "nothing is sacred." The modern play is even more destructive, as Shaw realized when he abandoned one of his first attempts at drama (a life of Jesus in blank verse), at the point before Jesus is brought in front of Pilate, and ceases, in Shaw's view, to act in character. Shaw was also faced with problems of a Jesus who is merely a "disembodied voice in the wings"; this difficulty is surmounted in the very successful radio play, The Man Born to be King, but the topicality demanded by this medium puts other kinds of pressures on the artist, which will be examined in detail when Dorothy Sayers' play is discussed.

At this point, it seems useful to set out the basic structure of the story; which is at least as difficult to do with the story of Jesus as with any great myth, for the gospel itself comes fourfold, supplemented by the "Acts of the Apostles", the "Letters" and "The Revelation of John". Mark and John give no data about the childhood of Jesus. Both Matthew and Luke mention the Virgin Birth and give Bethlehem as the location. Matthew describes an angelic visit to Joseph, the visit of the Magi, and the flight into Egypt; while Luke writes of angelic visits to Mary and Elizabeth, the adoration of the shepherds and the exploits of the boy Jesus in the Temple. The synoptic gospels describe Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist (John 1: 32-33 also refers obliquely to it); and describe the temptation in the desert. They seem to be in general agreement about many facts of his public life; it was spent largely in Galilee, although it

ended in Judaea, and consisted of teaching and working miracles--healing miracles, nature miracles, raising the dead, expulsion of demons--but there is great confusion, even within a gospel, as to the meaning of these miracles. Jesus taught in parable and sermon, and, according to John, also by discourse. The main concepts he discusses concern a benevolent, yet rigorous God, with whom he is in very close communication; the establishment of a spiritual kingdom; the necessity for repentance and a break with the past; and, above all, the importance of belief in God and love for one's fellowman. All four gospels begin the story of the last week with the triumphant entry into Jerusalem; all four describe a last supper; all four point to Judas as the "perfidious friend", although, of course, the other disciples also desert Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane; and Pilate plays his interesting role in each version of the trial. Detailed accounts of the torture and Crucifixion and Resurrection are given in all four gospels, but the only clear description of the Ascension is given in Acts 1:9 --"as a cloud removed him from their sight." All four gospels promise a second coming.

The evangelists were writing with different purposes. Matthew seeks to convert the Jews, so he spends much time quoting from and interpreting the Old Testament; Luke seeks to convert the Gentiles and writes a story with wide general appeal; Mark chronicles deeds rather than teachings (there is an old tradition that his gospel is based on the memoirs of Peter, the man of action); while John conducts sophisticated discourses of his own composition.

Various combinations of details drawn from all four of the gospels, plus some more flamboyant ideas from the New Testament

Apochrypha (especially concerning Mary the Mother), together with certain traditions about Jesus' contacts with the Essenes, lately given substance by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, supply modern writers with most of the material for their work. What they add is most often inspired by their identification with various aspects, often the messianic, of their hero. Some of them even identify with Judas; and Kazantzakis, for one, sees himself in both Jesus and Judas. The stipulation often made that the biographer must not have an axe of his own to grind seems impossible to meet and many are the motives which lead modern writers to attempt this most difficult of tasks. Yet the best of them are honest men, and in the process of revealing the inner life of Jesus, they make discoveries about him and about themselves which take them far beyond narrow self-interest. This is perfectly obvious in the first important work that must be considered: Renan's Life of Jesus, published in 1863, and translated into English that same year.

This book was immensely popular in its time (eight editions in three months), and is the biggest single influence on the works in the same vein which followed it. The book was based on solid scholarship--Renan was a professor of semitic languages--but differed from other Lives in that it was deliberately written not only to "preserve the religious spirit whilst getting rid of the superstitions and absurdities that deform it, . . ."<sup>12</sup> but had also, more importantly from a literary point of view, pretensions (some of which were undoubtedly realized) to being a work of art. For Schweitzer, at least, it is an example of the puzzling nature of French art,

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<sup>12</sup>Life of Jesus, (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & Company, 1893), Translator's Preface.

. . . which in painting grasps nature with a directness and vigour, with an objectivity in the best sense of the word, such as is scarcely to be found in the art of any other nation, . . . [but] has in poetry treated it in a fashion which scarcely ever goes beyond the lyrical and sentimental, the artificial, the subjective, in the worst sense of the word.<sup>13</sup>

The book was the first "pop" version for a Catholic audience, although Renan, like so many of the writers who follow him, had lost his Catholic faith, found "free-thought too plebeian for his tastes . . ."<sup>14</sup> and was basically a sceptic. The numerous sects in Protestantism did not appeal to him. He was also confused politically, being in turns Royalist, Republican and Bonapartist, although this may simply have been expediency. Schweitzer gives him credit for offering a Jesus who was alive, whom he had encountered with the help of his artistic imagination "under the blue heaven of Galilee." However, his Jesus seems to be a lay figure in a charming pastoral scene rather than a living man; and there is some justification for Schweitzer's summing-up:

Christian art in the worst sense of the term . . . wax images, the gentle Jesus . . . might be taken over from the shop-window of an ecclesiastical art emporium in the Place St. Sulpice.<sup>15</sup>

The word "charming", from the French "charmant", Renan's favorite adjective, is often quoted derisively by his critics.

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<sup>13</sup>Schweitzer, p. 181.

<sup>14</sup>Richard M. Chadbourne, Ernest Renan, (New York: Twayne, 1968), p. 67.

<sup>15</sup>Schweitzer, p. 182.

Chadbourne's explanation that he was perhaps using it to mean "charismatic" in the case of Jesus is plausible; however, while Renan achieves his ambition to present an uneducated Jesus, untouched by dogma, at the same time his gentle dreamer appears to lack the qualities that heroes and martyrs are made of.

Although most of Renan's followers prefer to present a Jesus with a little more backbone, his interpretation of the gospels is so often copied that it is worth examining in detail. Renan's Jesus was born at Nazareth; later it was necessary to pretend he was born at Bethlehem to fit in with Old Testament prophecies. His parents were people in humble circumstances, he was the eldest of several brothers and sisters; and his education was limited to Judaism. Mary was the head of the family, Joseph being dead before Jesus takes a public role. Jesus never married "having an extremely delicate feeling towards women."<sup>16</sup> His sufferings in the desert are, of course, psychological; and Renan describes his development from a maker of "innocent aphorisms" to a policy-maker who would abolish the law, but the strongest feeling Renan allows him is "a gloomy resentment"<sup>17</sup> against his enemies. Renan discusses the cycle of fables which are the basis for the stories of supernatural birth, and the royal descent from David, but he stresses that Jesus never thought of himself as the incarnation of God, although he probably "deliberately determined to allow himself to be killed" in

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<sup>16</sup>Renan, p. 80.

<sup>17</sup>Renan, p. 257.



order to found his kingdom. At this time Renan felt he seemed "totally outside nature . . . sometimes one would have said his reason was disturbed."<sup>18</sup> For Renan, "poor" Judas may have suffered more from awkwardness than perversity, and Pilate could scarcely have acted otherwise. Renan hoped that Jesus' delicate constitution brought him a swift death, although he mentions the many instances when crucified men were brought back to life; on the whole he blames the strong imagination of Mary Magdalen, who, after all, had once been possessed of seven devils, for the resurrection legends. Every one of these interpretations has been taken and developed in various ways, but the universally accepted idea, not original with Renan, but first made easily available to the English-speaking world in translations of his Life of Jesus, is his view of Jesus as "the highest summit of human greatness," the closest man has yet come to divinity.<sup>19</sup>

It is difficult to believe that Major-General Lew Wallace's Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ was published in 1880, only seventeen years after Renan's version of the life. It seems so surely of the modern world. This very successful,<sup>20</sup> still quite readable, huckster's version of the myth is a perfect solution for those who would have their cake and eat it. The story of Christ provides a sentimental, charming backdrop to the robust action story of the handsome young

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<sup>18</sup>Renan, p. 224.

<sup>19</sup>Renan, p. 305.

<sup>20</sup>Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ, (New York: Airmont, 1965). p. 7. (A million copies were distributed before 1911; in 1939 Sears Roebuck disposed of a million copies from a single order.)

Jewish prince, adopted by a Roman tribune, who loves the martial arts, good horses, women and money. For a time, Ben-Hur believes Jesus to be the warlike Messiah Israel has been awaiting so long; but, with the help of the magus, Balthasar, he at last understands the true nature of the Kingdom, and becomes one of the first Christians, first having prudently removed himself and his money from Jerusalem ("afloat in the marts of the world as bills of exchange.")<sup>21</sup> Ben-Hur's travels bring him into contact with Iras,<sup>22</sup> Balthasar's daughter, a devotee of Isis. Iras is pagan, and therefore in Wallace's terms, worldly, scheming and voluptuous, in contrast to the pure, slavish Esther, the Jewish girl Ben-Hur eventually marries. Both the heroines "glide" through the novel, but Iras glides sinuously, Esther submissively.

It should surprise no one that the Virgin Mary in this version, as in so many others, has blue eyes and "a flood of golden hair." Jesus himself has dark blue eyes, and bright chestnut hair. Iras says:

Instead of a Sesostriis returning in triumph or a Caesar helmed and sworded--ha, ha, ha!--I saw a man with a woman's face and hair, riding an ass's colt and in tears. The King! The Son of God! the Redeemer of the world! 23

And one feels a certain empathy with her.

Nevertheless, Wallace's version of the crucifixion is dramatic and moving. The ex-Civil War General does not shrink from the harsh

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<sup>21</sup>Wallace, p. 416.

<sup>22</sup>A forerunner perhaps of "the woman who served Isis" in Lawrence's "The Man who Died?"

<sup>23</sup>Wallace, p. 410. This view of Jesus must surely have been influenced by the much-reproduced painting "Light of the World" by Holman Hunt, which is reputed to depict the face of Christina Rossetti, surrounded by the yellow hair of another female model.

details often glossed over or avoided by his fellow-writers, and the scene is full of colour: "red splotches" of blood, "golden vestments," "purple pomegranates, and golden bells," until the "supernatural night . . . dropped from the heavens" brought death and fear, "for the blood of the Nazarene was upon them all."<sup>24</sup>

The novel provides the perfect basis for the many filmed versions of the myth, in which the true hero of the story is not the gentle, passive victim, but the survivor; in this case, Ben-Hur, lover, horseman, soldier, patriot and businessman, in his comfortable "villa by Misenum," giving great sums to the new Church to assuage his conscience for his failure to act at the Cross. He did try to intervene in the Garden; he was none other than the "young man with nothing on but a linen cloth . . . [who] slipped out of the linen cloth and ran away naked." (Mark 14: 51-52).<sup>25</sup>

Wallace's novel is the first, and still the best, in a series of "action-packed," superficially pious versions of the myth.<sup>26</sup> He was apparently converted to Christianity himself during the course of writing it. More interesting works have been created by the few, very few believers like Mauriac who have attempted amplifications of the

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<sup>24</sup>Wallace, p. 441.

<sup>25</sup>For a very different version of this always mysterious episode, see a discussion of The Secret Gospel by Morton Smith, later in this paper.

<sup>26</sup>Lloyd C. Douglas' The Robe (1942) and The Big Fisherman (1948), are among the better of these popular novels.

mythical life with some success;<sup>27</sup> but the most worthwhile efforts have been those of men who, like Renan, were questioning the double standard which conventional Christianity imposed upon their world.

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<sup>27</sup>Indeed Mauriac says of the non-believer, "if he belong to the category of those who first deny the supernatural and do not see the God in Jesus, we may be certain he understands nothing of the subject of his studies."

## CHAPTER I

## SHAW, MOORE AND HARRIS

In a letter to Frank Harris, written on November 11th, 1915,

Shaw says:

. . . and you now tell me that you are doing a life of Jesus. I am doing exactly the same thing by way of Preface to Androcles and the Lion, which is a Christian martyr play. They tell me that what I have gathered from the gospel narratives and the rest of the New Testament, which I have read through attentively for the first time since, as a boy, I read the whole Bible through out of sheer bravado, is much the same as Renan's extract. I do not know whether this is true; for I have never read the Vie de Jésus, though I will look it up presently. Anyhow it is rather significant that you and I and George Moore should be on the same track. The main thing that I have tried to bring out is that modern sociology and biology are steadily bearing Jesus out in his peculiar economics and theology.<sup>1</sup>

This was written in reply to a letter from Harris in which he explains that he has been studying "the Master" for years but is afraid the subject is too much for him, and is resolved never to publish the work unless it "bettered my best". Very sensibly, Harris abandoned his life of Jesus, although he published an interesting short story, "The Miracle of the Stigmata", and devoted a chapter of his notorious Life and Loves to "Jesus the Christ". Both of these will be examined. Shaw, too, after an early unfinished poetic drama, (unpublished until

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<sup>1</sup>Frank Harris, Bernard Shaw, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), p. 359.

very recently) never centred a major work on the figure of Christ, and of the trio "who were on the same track", only George Moore produced a major work, The Brook Kerith, which deserves detailed examination. Nothing Shaw wrote, however, can be ignored, and there is a great deal of interest, not only in the Preface to Androcles and the Lion, mentioned above, but also in the Preface to On the Rocks and in The Adventures of the Black Girl in Search of God.

Shaw's earliest known effort to present the story of Jesus was in the form of a poetic drama, an alien medium for what to him, at that time, could be considered an alien subject. Fresh from the Catholic versus Protestant absurdities of Dublin, he was probably closer to being an atheist than at any other time. The play was never finished by Shaw, in fact he wrote "vile stuff"<sup>2</sup> across the manuscript, but was published in 1971 with the title Passion Play: A Dramatic Fragment, edited and introduced by Jerald E. Bringle.<sup>3</sup> His approach to the subject is interesting in that it foreshadows his later work, both stylistically and thematically. The play begins in the carpenter's shop in Nazareth: Mary and Joseph, respectively a shrew and a shiftless bully (prototypes of Adam and Eve in Back to Methuselah) are arguing bitterly about their sons Jesus and John who "don't help", when Judas Iscariot, a wealthy traveller, enters, looking for a first-rate craftsman. Joseph, hungry for business, recommends Jesus, Mary's illegitimate son, and despite Jesus' protests that he is quite unskilled (the idea of Jesus

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<sup>2</sup>J.Percy Smith,The Unrepentant Pilgrim, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1965), p. 131.

<sup>3</sup>Passion Play: A Dramatic Fragment,(Iowa: Windhover Press, 1971).

as a "failed carpenter" comes up quite frequently in the fictions), the two men go off together, deep in Shavian discussion. Jesus tells Judas about a god who is not a "gloomy tyrant", but "a grand, ineffable, benevolent Power/Throned in the clouds and all composed of love. . . ." who "gives us all that's noble in our natures." (Act II, Sc. ii). Judas sees no need for a poetic myth of a god, prefers to study man, believes in the powers of objective reasoning, and sees Jesus as a poet who "hast made a refuge in rosy bowers of imagination/ Where thy o'erburdened questioning soul may rest." Shaw deals with the incident in the temple, and shows Jesus' horror when his un-Fabian actions in overturning the money-changers' tables incite Barabbas to violence, and the murder of the Roman soldier. Shaw abandons the play at the moment when Jesus is about to confront Mary Magdalene, Pilate's mistress. The idea of such a meeting fills Judas with dread, since he believes Jesus will not be able to resist her charms. Although the last sight of Mary Magdalene shows her remorseful, on her knees, an encounter between the virile Jesus and the irresistible Mary he had created was probably more than Shaw felt ready to deal with at this stage in his career; although of course he describes many confrontations between similar characters in his later plays. It seems a pity that he did not finish the story of Judas and Jesus, which is an early example of his endless debate between realism and idealism; although there is a hint of resolution in the pact Judas makes with Jesus:

. . . Henceforth thy gentle faith  
 Shall travel hand in hand with hard negation  
 Tempering its unsympathetic edge  
 And learning somewhat from its breadth of vision.  
 (Act I, Scene ii).

A fragment that might serve to illustrate the dichotomy in Shaw himself.

At this time, of course, Shaw had not yet developed his own particular myth of a god, closely related to Bergsonian ideas of "creative evolution". This god is best described as the "Life Force", and the best spokesman for the Life Force is Juan in "Don Juan in Hell", from Man and Superman. The Life Force is a "stupid god" says Juan, "but not as stupid as the forces of Death and Degeneration"; after ages of struggle, it has evolved the human intellect, "a mind's eye that shall see, not the physical world, but the purpose of Life, and thereby enable the individual to work for that purpose, instead of thwarting and baffling it by setting up short-sighted personal aims as at present."<sup>5</sup> The happiest and highest sort of man, then, is the philosophic man "who seeks in contemplation to discover the inner will of the world, in invention to discover the means of fulfilling that will and in action to do that will by the so-discovered means." Later in his career, Shaw was, of course, easily able to fit Jesus into this select group of men and women, who, simply by being what they are, are able, like Samuel Butler's "gentlemen" to take mankind a shade higher on the evolutionary ladder. In this sense, Jesus is still a messiah, one of those who will eventually lead mankind to a state of heaven on earth. Shaw also "uses" Jesus--Bentley feels Shaw's theology is no theology but a symbolism, chiefly a use of

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<sup>5</sup>The Complete Plays of Bernard Shaw, (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1965), p. 379.



religious language<sup>6</sup>--in a very practical and convincing way as an early subscriber to various theories of Fabian socialism. In the Preface to Androcles and the Lion, Shaw says that Jesus advocates communism, the widening of the family with its cramping ties into the great family of mankind under the fatherhood of God, the abandonment of revenge and punishment, the counteracting of evil by good.<sup>7</sup> Shaw is, of course, on solid ground here and has no trouble backing up his assertions, although there are moments when he is felt to be stretching the myth too far--Jesus is imagined to be "laughing outright" at the idea of the Sunday School theorists that money might be distributed according to merit. A laughing Jesus has not appeared in Christian art for many centuries.

Shaw explains his willingness to use "Jesus more than another":

. . . for some reason the imagination of white mankind has picked out Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ and attributed all the Christian doctrines to him; and as it is the doctrine and not the man that matters and as besides, one symbol is as good as another provided everyone attaches the same meaning to it, I raise, for the moment, no question as to how far the gospels are original, and how far they consist of Greek and Chinese interpolations. The record that Jesus said certain things is not invalidated by a demonstration that Confucius said them before him. Those who claim a literal divine paternity for him cannot be silenced by the discovery that the same claim was made for Alexander and Augustus.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Eric Bentley, Bernard Shaw, (New York: New Directions, 1947), p. 67.

<sup>7</sup>The Complete Prefaces of Bernard Shaw, (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1965), p. 574.

<sup>8</sup>Prefaces, p. 548.

All the same, Shaw is well aware that he himself is not free from superstition. He admits he is fascinated by "certain ideas and doctrines . . . flatly contrary to common practice, common sense and common belief . . . which have, in the teeth of dogged incredulity and recalcitrance, produced the irresistible impression that Christ . . . was greater than his Judges."<sup>9</sup> A superman in fact. One must be grateful for this "weakness" in Shaw, which enabled him to produce in Saint Joan what is probably the most successful interpretation of the myth of Joan, or indeed of any other Christian martyr, for modern audiences.

These moments of weakness are few, however, and he has plenty of reasons to explain other "unreasonable" feelings. For example, on the subject of Jesus and marriage, Shaw writes:

The mere thought of Jesus as a married man is felt to be blasphemous by the most conventional believers and even by those of us to whom Jesus is no supernatural personage, but a prophet only as Mahomet was a prophet feel that there was something more dignified in the bachelordom of Jesus than in the spectacle of Mahomet lying distracted on the floor of his harem whilst his wives squabbled and henpecked around him.<sup>10</sup>

And he feels the absence of any complaint against Jesus' cavalier treatment of mothers, fathers and wives "tempts us to declare that on this question of marriage there are no conventional people; and that everyone of us is at heart a good Christian sexually."

Certainly, this aversion to the idea of a married Jesus is shared by many other writers in the modern period. Renan's hero's

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<sup>9</sup>Prefaces, p. 548.

<sup>10</sup>Prefaces, p. 584.

"extremely delicate feelings towards women" are shared by many of the "Jesus Christs" who follow him. In The Brook Kerith, Moore, always exploring delicate subjects through Jesus' alter ego, Joseph of Arimathea, shows his hero to be a man more likely to love another man than a woman. He is never more explicit than this. Lawrence's Jesus is certainly heterosexual, but not domesticated; even Graves' King Jesus denies his bride the consummation of marriage, describing it as "the act of darkness," the "act of death." Shaw, seeing Jesus as the "artist-philosopher", who has no need of, in fact who must not be trammelled by, domestic ties, identifies strongly with this aspect of Jesus' teaching, and writes:

When he said that if we are to follow him in the sense of taking up his work we must give up our family ties, he was simply stating a fact; . . . to this day the Roman Catholic priest, the Buddhist lama, and the fakirs of all the eastern denominations accept the saying. It is also accepted by the physically enterprising, the explorers, the restlessly energetic of all kinds; . . . the unmarried Jesus, and the unmarried Beethoven, the unmarried Joan of Arc, Clare, Teresa, Florence Nightingale seem as they should be; . . . <sup>11</sup>

It is, however, with Jesus the Economist that Shaw feels the closest affinity; perhaps he feels they both subscribe to the oldest myth of all, the idea of a Golden Age of plenty for every man, by virtue of a practical and equal distribution of the world's goods. Shaw is not interested in a share of the kingdom of heaven, but he never allows himself to doubt that this Golden Age must come

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<sup>11</sup>Prefaces, p. 586.

eventually on earth, when at last mankind heeds the words of Jesus  
(and men like him) and realizes that

the kingdom of Heaven is within you . . . we are  
members one of another; . . . get rid of property  
by throwing it into the common stock . . . if you  
let a child starve you are letting God starve  
. . . . Love your neighbour as yourself . . . every  
mother you meet is as much your mother as the woman  
who bore you. . . . <sup>12</sup>

Why then does Shaw neglect to dramatize the myth of this most suitable  
and popular hero, who shares so many sound socialist ideas? It is  
usually assumed that it is because of the impossibility of presenting  
Jesus on the stage at that time, yet this kind of consideration never  
stopped Shaw from fulfilling what he saw as his role as "artist-  
philosopher", in conflict with the defenders of the status quo. The  
reason for Shaw's "neglect" of Jesus springs from something much more  
fundamental than fear of censorship.

In the Preface to On the Rocks, Shaw explains why Jesus did  
not defend himself: "he did not regard himself as a prisoner being  
tried for a vulgar offence and using all his wit to escape condemnation.  
He believed he was going through a sacrificial rite . . . he went  
like a lamb to the slaughter."<sup>13</sup> This is the incontrovertible fact  
in the life of Jesus in the Gospels, and Shaw will not falsify it,  
nor can he accept the principle behind it. In his own words:

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<sup>12</sup>Prefaces, p. 574.

<sup>13</sup>Prefaces, p. 369.

I have been asked repeatedly to dramatize the Gospel story, mostly by admirers of my dramatization of the trial of Saint Joan. But the trial of a dumb prisoner, at which the judge who puts the crucial question to him remains unanswered, cannot be dramatized unless the judge is to be the hero of the play. Now Pilate, though perhaps a trifle above the average of colonial governors, is not a heroic figure. Joan tackled her judges valiantly and wittily; her trial was a drama ready made, only needing to be brought within the theatrical limits of time and space to be a thrilling play. But Jesus would not defend himself. It was not that he had not a word to say for himself, nor that he was denied the opportunity of saying it. He was an experienced public speaker, able to hold multitudes with his oratory, . . . yet he went like a lamb to the slaughter, dumb. Such a spectacle is disappointing on the stage, which is the one thing that a drama must not be, and when the disappointment is followed by a scourging and a crucifixion it is unbearable; not even the genius of our Poet Laureate, with all the magic of Canterbury Cathedral for scenery, can redeem it except for people who enjoy horror and catastrophe for their own sake and have no intellectual expectations to be disappointed.<sup>14</sup>

He describes the disappointment he felt when he re-read the Gospel story as an adult, as if he had heard "someone play an unresolved discord and could not go to sleep until he had risen to play the resolution on his piano." The brief dialogue between Pilate and Jesus published in the Preface to On the Rocks is Shaw's attempt to resolve Pilate's discord, at least. Pilate makes the wrong decision on very sensible grounds: it is all right for a "poetic vagrant" to loaf about the roads and talk beautifully, but Pilate must "choose between reasonable, well-informed opinion and sentimental

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<sup>14</sup>Prefaces, p. 371. (Shaw is referring to John Masefield's The Trial of Jesus, written in 1925.)

ill-informed impulse;" after all, the pax romana is better than the civil wars of the Jews, and his job is to preserve that peace. He is very broad-minded about the fact that Jesus breaks all the laws of the Jews, as he puts it, and it is not until Jesus blasphemes against Caesar and Rome that he decides that he must die "whilst there is still some law in the world." Shaw is, inevitably, less successful with Jesus in this scene from a play which was never written. He uses him to examine the everlasting dilemma of the reformer who knows that what he preaches is dangerous:

Jesus . . . must, if he had any sense of moral responsibility, have been challenged by his own conscience, again and again as to whether he had any right to set men on a path which was likely to lead the best of them to the cross and the worst of them to the moral destruction described by St. Augustine . . .<sup>15</sup>

Yet, as Jesus says in the dialogue with Pilate, he must reveal the truth, "that which a man must tell even if he be stoned or crucified for telling it." The reasonable man is defeated, for the truth that Jesus speaks is a matter of feeling as well as of experience, "opinion is a dead thing and impulse a live thing" and "the law is blind without counsel." The climax of the scene comes when Pilate and Jesus are in agreement: Pilate says, "it seems to me that if you are Word made flesh, so also am I" and Jesus quickly agrees, "Have I not said so again and again? . . . The Word is God and God is within you." Jesus and Pilate are both agents of the Life Force.

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<sup>15</sup>Prefaces, p. 370.

Other speeches by Jesus, which wander far from the scriptures, are less successful, and there is no feeling of regret that a play of which this scene would be the climax, was never written. It might, however, have been interesting to see Shaw's version of the disciples. Like Moore, he shared Renan's lack of respect for them, and is hardest of all on Paul, a man possessing many fine qualities, but "hopelessly in the coils of Sin, Death and Logic, which had no power over Jesus."<sup>16</sup>

Not until 1932 did Shaw find a suitable medium in which to explore the idea of Jesus. In his tale The Black Girl in Search of God, Jesus is only one in a series of characters encountered by the heroine, an endearing vehicle for the Life of Force. Unencumbered by the fashionable coyness of some of his early heroines who must stoop to anything to grab the right partner for their eugenic experiments; free of the aura of sainthood which dogs Barbara and Joan, the black girl strides naked and burdened only with her Bible, which she sheds piece-meal through the jungle as it becomes obsolete for her, and her knobkerry which is necessary for defense, not as might be imagined, against a fierce lion (who becomes her friend Androcles-style), but against a Roman Soldier and a Lady Ethnologist, truly dangerous threats to her freedom. Jesus is called the conjurer, and he is the pleasantest person she meets on her journey; he gives her water to drink, and performs a minor miracle for her edification, but his command to "love one another" is too general for the black girl:<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>"Preface to Androcles and the Lion," Prefaces, p. 591.

<sup>17</sup>The Black Girl in Search of God and Some Lesser Tales, (London: Penguin, 1966).

"Do you really and truly love me, baas?" The conjurer shrank, but immediately smiled kindly as he replied "Do not let us make a personal matter of it." "But it has no sense if it is not a personal matter" said the black girl. "Suppose I tell you I love you, as you tell me I ought! Do you not feel that I am taking a liberty with you?"

"Certainly not" said the conjurer. "You must not think that. Though you are black and I am white we are equal before God who made us so."

"I am not thinking about that at all" said the black girl.

"I forgot when I spoke that I am black and you are only a poor white."

A white man's heaven full of "devouring" love does not appeal to the black girl; for her it must be "the home of God and his thoughts; there is no billing and cooing there, no clinging to one another like a tick to a sheep." She finds the conjurer's "cure-all commandments" useful once in twenty times perhaps; in any case it is God she is seeking, not commandments.

"To find him, such as you must go past me" says the conjurer. And with that he vanished. "That is perhaps your best trick" said the black girl, "though I am sorry to lose you; for to my mind you are a lovable man and mean well." (p. 54).

After many adventures, the black girl finds herself in a booth with images of wood and plaster and ivory; on the ground is a large wooden cross on which the conjurer is lying with his ankles crossed and his arms stretched out, acting as a model for the owner of the booth who is carving a statue of him. Mahomet is expostulating with the conjurer for subscribing to so flagrant a breach of the second commandment, but the conjurer explains that he is so rejected of men that this is his only way of making a living. After a sufficient supply of images



has been made, the conjurer can go back to his real life of giving people good advice and telling wholesome truths; he is, unfortunately, no writer and must do it by word of mouth. The black girl inspects all the images in the booth, only one appeals, momentarily, to her: Pan playing a mouth organ. But why half a goat and half a man, why not half a woman? Venus is offered and rejected: "why is her lower half hidden in a sack?" The conjurer adds that the Word must be made flesh, not marble, and "to make a link between Godhood and Manhood, some god must become man." The black girl replies, "or some woman become God." After a brisk exchange with Mahomet on the liberation of woman, the black girl is on her way to Voltaire's garden, where she settles down to dig for God in the garden. Eventually, on Voltaire's advice, she marries a red-haired Irishman, "rather a coarse fellow," who wanders into the garden to help the "oul fella" dig his potatoes; but who is not prepared to waste time searching for a god who is "not properly made and finished yet." The god must do the searching, "we've got to find out its way for it as best we can, you and I; . . ."

The fulfilment can be "made reasonably easy and hopeful by Socialism." The black girl has moments in her happy and busy life as a wife and as a mother to her "charming coffee-coloured children" to marvel at the temerity of the unsettled girl who set off "to pay God a visit." The most man can expect, says Shaw, is for God to jog his elbow when he is gardening unskilfully, and bless him when he is gardening well. If you insist on a full knowledge, you'll "shrive! up and crack like a flea in the fire" as Semele did when she wanted to be loved by a God.

Thus the one artistically successful presentation of Jesus Shaw makes is in a supporting rôle, one of the most successful agents of the Life Force, a vital link in the evolution of man, full of good advice and wholesome truths, but limited in his appeal, and on his way out: "vanishing" says the black girl, is "his best trick."

This reasonable, dispassionate, and one might add, deadening view of Jesus is not shared by Harris, who approaches the topic with trembling fervour and a great deal of empathy. He is a good example of the writers who "identify with" Jesus. Sent to prison for contempt of court, he "drew parallels between himself and the Divine one who was crucified at Calvary" and cried "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."<sup>18</sup>

Frank Harris, like Moore and Shaw, was a Protestant who grew up in Ireland against a background of religious and political controversy, leaving the country as soon as possible--in his case for America--then spending his most important years as a significant part of the fruitful and exciting literary life of London in the early years of this century. Harris's major contribution to letters is as an editor, notably of the Saturday Review, when, to quote H.G. Wells, "Oxford and the Stuffy and the Genteel and Mr. Gladstone were to be destroyed. . . ."<sup>19</sup> Shaw was hired as drama critic, Wells to review novels, Cunningham Grahame

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<sup>18</sup>Vincent Brome, Frank Harris, (London: Cassell, 1959), p. 122. Brome is quoting from A.I. Tobin and E. Gertz, Frank Harris, (Mendelsohn, 1931), p. 187.

<sup>19</sup>Brome, p. 86.

to write travel sketches, Max Beerbohm as chief satirist, and Thomas Hardy and Rudyard Kipling contributed stories and poems. He is also remembered for his highly successful, highly impressionistic biography of Shakespeare, of which Hesketh Pearson writes:

After the dreary works of University Professors it was a revelation. Here was a man instead of a mummy, a man with parts and passions, a man one might meet any day on the street. Time has toned down my first estimate, but I shall not easily forget my first excitement . . . whatever might be urged against Frank Harris's book . . . he at least made it clear that the creator of Falstaff and Cleo was a man, not a committee.<sup>20</sup>

Harris wrote equally colourful lives of Oscar Wilde (whom he defended passionately at the time of his troubles) and, of course, of George Bernard Shaw. He was a man who sought constantly for a hero, a super-man, to worship, and as such is definitely, if not very elegantly, representative of his time.

In Chapter XI, Volume Four of his justifiably notorious autobiography,<sup>21</sup> his insights, methods and attitudes as he approaches the topic of "Jesus, the Christ", unintentionally parody those of better writers than himself, and, incidentally, point up the skill with which they manage to avoid similarly offending in this most difficult of literary tasks. Harris "loves Jesus without adoring Him" and tries to see him as he really was. He is struck by the fact that Jesus' physical weakness was manifested in his inability to carry "a not

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<sup>20</sup> Hesketh Pearson by Himself, (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 102.

<sup>21</sup> Frank Harris, My Life and Loves, (London: Corgi Books, 1966), pp. 880-889.

very heavy" cross. This weakness, he feels, caused Jesus to faint on the cross long before the average victim, thus to survive the cross, but to die soon after his resurrection. Harris reproves Renan for stressing the physical beauty of Jesus; he was obviously not handsome, but was transfigured by the beauty of his voice and message. (Time after time, contemporaries of Harris remark on his physical ugliness, forgotten as soon as he began to speak.) Naturally, Harris's favorite story is that of the woman taken in adultery: "the greatest story in the world, if I may judge it: . . . ." He also rather wistfully asks if the fact that Jesus said "Neither do I condemn thee; go and sin no more" means that he too was not "without sin?" Harris worries about well-known contradictions in the gospels, but he is quite certain that Jesus really lived, in spite of the doubts of John MacKinnon Robertson and "the majority of Rabbis who think that he never existed" because he is convinced that every great movement in the world comes from a great man. He finds cause for enormous optimism in the survival for two thousand years of the ideas that Jesus preached:

I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you.

This he sees as "the impartial statement of scientific truth." The impact of Jesus' admonition to love one another is twofold for Harris. The first is admirably expressed in his work, wherein he demonstrates that loving comprehension leads beyond forgiveness, so that for a short time, at least, in his checkered life, he lives by the "new commandment"

which he says "influenced me in my conduct of the Saturday Review, as I have stated, in my desire to get the best men to work with me, careless of their opinions, and to set them, as far as possible, to praise and not to blame." Secondly, he credits the "intense spirituality of Christ's teaching" with "increasing sensuality and the sensuous expression of affection," exemplified in the Middle Ages, by the love of the Magdalen, the woman who had "loved much". He is ready, then, to exploit the myth in every possible way, not only as justification for widely diverging patterns in his personal life, but also, directly, as material for at least one of his, quite effective, short stories: "The Miracle of the Stigmata."<sup>22</sup>

In this story, he presents Jesus, resurrected, as "an everyday Jew, to all appearances", yet with a "stamp of suffering". He now calls himself Joshua and is a carpenter, married to Judith, niece of Simon and Tabitha. Unfortunately, their happy marriage is broken up when Judith is drawn to "a new Messiah with remarkable powers." The description in the story of Paul might easily have fitted Harris: "not big, nor handsome; small indeed and ordinary looking but as soon as he begins to speak he seems to grow before your eyes. You cannot help believing him; he is like one inspired." Joshua is strangely disturbed by Paul's teachings; he and Judith become estranged when she is converted to Christianity, and he lives alone until he is discovered one day dead at his bench and the stigmata are exposed. Paul, of

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<sup>22</sup>Forum, Nov. 1911, Vol. 46, pp. 564-577.

course, "misunderstands magnificently", believing that Joshua, the unbeliever, who failed to follow his teachings, has been marked by the stigmata as a sign and warning to the world. "The continuous irony" says Brome, "reaches the supreme climax when Jesus is acclaimed as the last unbeliever to be saved."<sup>23</sup> This twist to the plot, however, was probably not Harris's own idea. It is certainly presented with far more subtlety by Moore in The Brook Kerith, in the scene where Jesus asks for an explanation of the word "christian". Even Moore may not be the originator of the idea, for Richard Ellmann, in Eminent Domain, quotes Oscar Wilde as follows:

One day Wilde said he had been inventing a new Christian heresy.. Christ was crucified but did not die, and after burial managed to escape from the tomb. He lived on as a carpenter, the one man who knew the falsehood of Christianity. Once Paul visited his town and he alone in the carpenters' quarter did not go to hear him preach. Henceforth . . . he kept his hands covered. <sup>24</sup>

And W.B. Yeats, Ellmann points out, took the same fable and twenty years later "exalted it into his poem, 'The Magi,' where not Christ but 'the pale unsatisfied ones' suffer from the diminution of an image that once possessed them." It sometimes appears that the idea of transforming Jesus the Sacrifice into Jesus the Survivor obsessed a whole generation of writers. Of them all, only Moore had the temerity to work out his obsession in the form of a full-length work of fiction, The Brook Kerith.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Brome, p. 143.

<sup>24</sup>Eminent Domain, (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 22.

<sup>25</sup>George Moore, The Brook Kerith, (New York: MacMillan, 1916).

Moore wrote The Brook Kerith in 1916, at a time when, as Wilde put it, he had been "conducting his education in public" for over forty years. At the time of publication, it was much admired, and, together with Esther Waters, it is still, and always has been given grudging respect, even by those who have seen Moore as a natural butt for their most stringent criticism. The very physical shape of Moore proclaims the victim, but the s-shaped subject of the famous Manet drawing is also an observer (a self-styled "smooth sheet of wax") and, in his art, he is more often the aggressive innovator than the passive copyist. Although often a fool rushing in with the latest enthusiasm, he also possessed vast resources of perseverance and a dedication which often enabled him at last to attain his objectives, even if in the process these were modified by the compulsions of his art. His motives in undertaking one of his quixotic tasks were so carefully delineated that one tends to accept them at face value. Esther Waters, he assures us, was written as a novel in the naturalistic, brutally realistic mode of Zola. Moore tells in Confessions how he cold-bloodedly collected data about his landlady's servant, "a mule . . . a beast of burden, a drudge too horrible for anything but work. . . ."<sup>26</sup> He also makes it clear that Esther Waters is written to confound the earlier masters of the English novel in their treatment of the universal theme of poor girl with child. Unlike Eliot's Hetty Sorrel, and Hardy's Tess, Esther is able to take responsibility both for the act which produced the child and for the child itself. And, of course, the novel is only one

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<sup>26</sup>Confessions of a Young Man, (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1972), p. 133.

attack in his continuing battle with Victorianism, specifically in the persons of Messrs. Mudie and Smith. In spite of his cold-blooded preamble, what emerges is a "good" book, in every sense of the word. Esther emerges as a woman, not a guinea pig, and her stark, cyclical journey has the beauty of truth.

A similar process takes place in The Brook Kerith. Another archetypal figure is chosen, this time the ultimate scapegoat. Again the project is carefully organized. Naturalistic techniques are employed: the trip to Palestine; the examination of the Scriptures and the writings about the Essenes, mastered at either first or second-hand; the tradition to be flouted now is neither the English literary one, nor the Victorian moral one; rather he is taking on the whole weight of Pauline Christianity, and is specifically concerned with the task of confounding the joylessness of Roman Catholicism as practised in his native Ireland. Much of his work had already been directed at the absurdity, as he saw it, of celibacy, of martyrdom in the cause of Catholicism, (although it was, of course, always acceptable in the cause of Art).<sup>27</sup>

He realized, as Shaw, and even, mercifully, Harris had, that he could not this time attempt to see the world through the eyes of his protagonist, and so he chose, very wisely, to explore the setting (in

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<sup>27</sup>Malcolm Brown in his useful book, George Moore: A Reconsideration, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1955), p. 213, says, "the harshness of his own self-discipline is now legendary." Yeats, who never praised him gratuitously, said that when in pursuit of unified construction "he would sacrifice what he had thought the day before not only his best scene, but 'the best scene in any modern play,' and without regret: all must receive its being from the central idea; nothing be itself anything."



every sense of the word) for The Brook Kerith through the eyes, ears, and intelligence of Joseph of Arimathea. A young man of the prosperous "middle class," who educates himself through trial and error, rather as Moore did himself, Joseph is able, because of his indulgent father's money, to master Greek and Hebrew language and culture, and to sample all the current ideologies. His father's business (he is a wholesaler of dried fish) brings Joseph into contact not only with Peter, John and James, and thus eventually with Jesus (although he does glimpse him briefly first in the cenoby of the Essenes), but also with Pilate who obligingly eliminates the robbers who prey on the fish-traders' caravans. It is necessary for Moore's "melodic line," a most suitably hypnotic medium for a tale of this kind, to develop one man's stream of consciousness, and Moore found it impossible to use the (to him) limited mind of the young Jesus for this purpose. In this way he happily avoids the charge of "chilliness" which is often made in the case of Esther Waters, which is caused by his difficulty in identifying with a member of the "lower orders." (He does not have trouble with the sex difference in this respect; many of his middle class heroines, Evelyn Innes, for example, are warm enough.)

Joseph is a most endearing character, but he is more than that. By adopting a common technique in historical novels, (as indeed Lew Wallace had already done in Ben-Hur) and choosing as narrator a contemporary witness, about whom so little is known, Moore not only adds colour by means of an "eye-witness" report, arouses interest by the addition of a sub-plot, but, more importantly uses Joseph to embody

his own anxieties, the anxieties of the typical writer of the period often unsure and anxious about his sexuality; who continually finds and discards a hero, and through that hero a religion and a way of life. Joseph, apparently homosexual in his inclinations, is shown, conscientiously, if fruitlessly, inspecting his neighbours' daughters with a view to pleasing his father and carrying on the family. He still believes in law and order, Roman-style, so that commerce and industry may prosper, yet he is attracted by simplicity and the rustic life. Most importantly, Joseph profoundly believes in an ultimately beneficent, if stern, omnipotent patriarchal God. To the end, Joseph's deepest love and loyalty is to his father, Dan, it is this loyalty that bars Joseph from full discipleship, for he cannot obey Jesus' command to "forsake such ghosts as father, mother and children and wife."<sup>28</sup>

Joseph's major function in the action of the novel (as indeed it is in the Gospels), is foreshadowed in the passage explaining the acquisition of the tomb, in an excellent example of Moore's subtle, sometimes almost sly style:

Heraclitus was right: his present life could be nothing else but the death of another life. And as if to enforce this doctrine a recollection of his grandmother intruded upon his meditation. She was seventy-eight when she died, and her intellect must have faded some months before, but with her passing one of the servants told him that a curious expression came into her face--a sort of mocking expression, as if she had learnt the truth at last and was laughing at the dupes she left behind. She

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<sup>28</sup>The Brook Kerith, p. 186.

lay in a grave in Galilee under some pleasant trees, and while thinking of her grave it occurred to him that he would not like to be put into the earth; and his fancy favoured a tomb cut out of the rocks in Mount Scropas, and going out on the terrace he stood under the cedars and watched for an hour the outlines of the humped hills that God had driven in endless disorder, like herds of cattle, all the way to Jericho, thinking all the while that it would be pleasant to lie out of hearing of all the silly hurly-burly that we call life. But the hurly-burly would not be silly if Jesus were by him, and he asked himself if Jesus was an illusion like all the rest, and as soon as the pain the question had provoked had died away, his desire of a tomb took possession of him again. . . . (p. 199).

This passage does so many things, it seems worth making an effort to list them. With an affectionate respectful backward glance, it eliminates grandmother, an important figure early in the book but a possible source of complications when Joseph brings Jesus home from the tomb. It demonstrates Joseph's dilemma, "Am I Greek or Jew?"--and shows that he is drifting back to an earlier state, before Jesus' irrational ideas of the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth disturbed his Greek rationalism. In the course of the paragraph it becomes clear that Joseph already begins to doubt Jesus as Messiah, although he is still devoted to him as man; that he longs for solitude and lonely salvation, in fact that Joseph is rapidly approaching the state of nirvana which Jesus only achieves twenty years later.

Moore's narrative amplifies, but in no way disagrees with, Mark's description of Joseph and his part in the story of Jesus:

By this time evening had come; and as it was Preparation-Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath), Joseph of Arimathaea, a respected member of the Council, a man who looked forward to the kingdom of God, bravely

went in to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead; so he sent for the centurion and asked him whether it was long since he died. And when he heard the centurion's report, he gave Joseph leave to take the dead body. So Joseph brought a linen sheet, took him down from the cross, and wrapped him in the sheet. Then he laid him in a tomb cut out of the rock, and rolled a stone against the entrance. And Mary of Magdala and Mary the mother of Joseph were watching and saw where he was laid. <sup>29</sup>

Mark 15: 42-47.

Moore's Joseph does not actually witness the crucifixion (this is the kind of scene Moore sensibly avoids, he knows he cannot handle it), but is there in time to lay his hand on the centurion's spear-head, staying the sympathetic coup de grâce which has always been a problem for those who believe Jesus did not die on the cross. It is made clear here, and at other points in the book, that the crucifixion, the common mode of execution at that time, meant a three or four day death-agony. The appeal to Pilate for permission to take and bury the body, the discovery in the tomb that Jesus is still alive, the heroic struggle to carry him to the deserted cottage on Joseph's estate, are all well done; but Moore comes into his own, as usual, in the cosy domestic scene, with the old woman (there are only old, safe women in The Brook Kerith) Esora, applying clean white linen cloths and her famous balsam (from a secret recipe of King Solomon's) to the scourged back; and with the puppies, a useful link between the young-shepherd Jesus and the old-shepherd Jesus, and the light gardening jobs, for therapy.

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<sup>29</sup>The New English Bible with the Apocrypha, (Oxford University Press, 1970).

At his best, Moore is a healer, a builder, as sincerely concerned with bettering the human condition as any of his overtly concerned contemporaries. He is also aware that Joseph and Esora, in preserving Jesus at the risk of their own lives from the cruelties of both Jewish and Roman law, exemplify the best in Christian virtue. And, of course, Joseph lays down his life for his hero, knowing quite well by now that he is not the Messiah, merely a sick man whom he loves.

Joseph disappears from the novel so suddenly that the reader feels bereft (as no doubt he is meant to do) and is forced to enter the consciousness of the man Jesus. Chapters XXIII and XXIV, covering the actual journey from Joseph's home to the Brook Kerith, twenty-odd miles away, is also a symbolic journey of the mind for the crucified man. For Moore explains the "lost years" of Jesus' adolescence and young manhood, as having been spent with the Essenes as their shepherd; and now Jesus is returning to the main business of his life, after the interlude of self-delusion and madness. The puppies, "of three-quarter Thracian stock," the best for herding sheep, make a splendid diversion during this period of transition. The intellectual Joseph and the almost simple-minded sufferer are united in caring for them, at a time of great personal peril. Then it is time for the sophisticated observer to disappear (killed on the streets of Jerusalem by order of the priests) and the narrative flows from the mind of the shepherd-Jesus. There is nothing sentimental in Moore's use of this oldest manifestation of the myth--Jesus as Shepherd; it was prompted by his quixotic journey back to Ireland to play his part in the Irish Renaissance, when he reinforced childhood memories of sheep-herding

as a very ancient and satisfying way of life in contrast to the life of the average man in the modern age. His Jesus is loving and tender with the little orphan ram (amico moorini named it Caesar) but he is saving it from death because it is a ram of the rarest breed, and with it he hopes to rebuild the sickly flock of the Essenes. The celibacy of the Essenes is gently mocked in the descriptions of the brothers' joy in the ram's activities; and it is a pity that Moore felt he had to belabour the point in the Chaucerian descriptions of marital experiences in the "other" cenoby. His preoccupation with Essene sanitation is also irritating; one wishes he had never heard of the little axes and the use to which they were put.

The gentle, contemplative Jesus lives for twenty years in the hills, slowly rebuilding his mind, which "died" on the cross; and at the point when he retires to end his days in the cenoby, another questing intellectual takes over the flow of the novel, this one by no means as lovable as Joseph of Arimathaea. In what must be considered a triumph for Moore, Paul and Jesus are brought face to face. Paul appears just at the moment when Jesus' half-submerged memories are surfacing, and he is beginning to tell his own story in the light of twenty years of contemplation and spiritual growth in the lonely hills. Hazael, the old President of the cenoby, is making it easier for him by relating his own part in the story. He is "recruiting" in Nazareth when he finds a small boy "that would do honour to the Essenes and love God more than any I had ever met with yet." Jesus interrupts Hazael's account with "but a year of my life is unknown

to thee Hazael" and is about to confess his delusions for the first time, when they are interrupted by the monks. Jesus resolves to tell his story next day, but the arrival of Paul dramatically intervenes. Moore had already written "The Apostle," in 1911, a play based on a Paul/Jesus confrontation, and the dialogue at this point of the novel becomes highly dramatic, with elements of low comedy from the two frightened Essenes who resist Jesus' efforts to open the door and succour the wanderer. So Paul tells his version of the story first, Jesus has become the Lord Jesus Christ, resurrected by the power of his Father, and Paul, chastened by a vision on the road to Damascus, is now the chief architect of a flourishing new religion, rejecting the claims of Jesus' brother James who had

made his brother acceptable in Jerusalem by lopping from him all that was Jesus, making him according to his own image; with these Christians he no longer stood up as an opponent of the law, but said: I come not to abolish the law but to confirm it  
 . . . . (p. 407).

Unable to come to terms with Peter ("a timid man and anxious always to avoid schism"), or with James, Paul returned to Tarsus convinced that "there did not seem to be on earth a true Christian but myself," a nice touch, underlined by Jesus' innocent question "What is a Christian?"

Despite his avowed admiration for Paul, Moore gives full vent to his feelings about Paul as spoiler-of-the-fun--Paul on the Athenians:

A frivolous people, Mathias, living in a city of statues in the air, and in the streets below a city of men that seek after reason, and would explain all things in the heavens above and the earth beneath by their reason, and only willing to listen to the story of a miracle because miracles amuse them. A race much given to enjoyment, like women, Mathias, and among their mountains they are not a different race from what they are in the city, but given to milking goats and dancing in the shade to the sound of a pipe, . . . a light race that will be soon forgotten, and convinced of their transience I departed for Corinth, a city of fencing masters, merchants, slaves, courtesans, yet a city more willing to hearken to the truth than the light Athenians, perhaps because it has much commerce and is not slothful in business. . . . (p. 416)

#### Paris and London?

Jesus is not present when Paul tells his story to the brothers, but it is well-received by the more gullible monks, though questioned by Mathias, the scholar and teacher, who is especially doubtful of Paul's doctrine of predestination. When Jesus at last tells his story, he dwells heavily on his own wrong-doing:

. . . in Nazareth, when my mother came with by brothers and sisters to the Synagogue I said, woman, I have no need of thee, and when Joseph of Arimathaea returned to me after a long attendance by his father's bedside. . . . I told him that he must learn to hate his father and mother if he would become worthy to follow me. But my passion was so great in those days that I did not see that my teaching was not less than blasphemy against God, for God has created the world for us to live in it, and he has put love of parents into our hearts because he wishes us to love our parents, and if he has put into the heart of man love of woman and into the heart of woman love of man, it is because he wishes both to enjoy that love. (p. 447)



When Jesus sorrowfully admits, "My teaching grew more and more violent. It is not peace, I said, that I bring you, but a sword. . . ." Paul rushes from the cenoby crying "Madman!" before Jesus tells of the crucifixion and his recovery. When Jesus at last hears Paul's version of events, he is determined to go to Jerusalem and scotch it, to atone for his sin of "not having loved man enough." Hazael tries to dissuade him: "But Jesus, all religions except ours are founded on lies and there have been thousands, and there will be thousands more."

The story ends in an effective, low-keyed dialogue between Paul and Jesus on the road to Caesarea. Jesus is for a brief time the more forceful of the two; Paul being weakened by an epileptic fit, caused by the shock of Jesus' revelations. He is, however, already rationalizing away his fear; after all he had never been interested in "the human life of Jesus in Galilee," nor in his teaching. "Jesus taught all the virtues, but these were known to humanity from the beginning." It is only the Lord Jesus Christ who appeared to him in the spirit on the road to Damascus who concerns him. Jesus tries to convince Paul that he is in a state of self-delusion, similar to his own of twenty years before; he tells him:

All things are God, Paul: thou art God and I am God, but if I were to say that thou art man and I am God, I should be the madman thou believest me to be . . . God did not design us to know him but through our consciousness of good and evil, . . . There is but one thing Paul; to learn for ourselves and to suffer our fellows to do likewise. (p. 480)

There is a slight suggestion that perhaps Paul will someday reach the plateau himself, but, of course, it will then be too late, Christianity will be firmly established.

Paul goes on his way to Rome, lives in custody, but is free to preach, "the rest of his story is unknown." Jesus is last seen going towards a group of monks from India, and Paul "begins to trace a likeness between the doctrines that Jesus confided in him and the shepherd's story of the doctrines which were being preached by the monks from India. . . finding him to be of their mind they may ask him to return to India with them and he will preach there." Here Moore echoes the old legend that Jesus ended his days as a monk in India.

At the time it was published, The Brook Kerith was received with rapture by many, banned by the circulating libraries, criticized most sternly by those who were interested in tackling the same subject themselves. Robert Graves read it "in the trenches," and many years later makes a savage and interesting attack on the book which will be useful when it is time to consider his own work King Jesus, later in this paper. Humbert Wolfe's George Moore: A Studio Sketch, (called by Frank Swinnerton "arch" and by Rebecca West, "an odd whispering little book"), provides a good example of the feelings of the majority of readers towards the book:

In "The Brook" he concentrated fiercely on Jesus as seen through the eyes of Joseph of Arimathaea. With unremitting fidelity he permitted the story to unfold itself as the direct result not of the author's momentary vision but of the characters in their universal outline. He did not allow himself to be deterred by the majesty of Christ. He insisted that He should explain and be Himself in words and actions. He regarded Him from the storyteller's point of view as a man and a Jew in the first century of Christ's era. The superb command of the English tongue which he had acquired made it possible for George Moore to put

words in the mouth of Jesus that rang true, even from that source. His passionate insight into character enabled him to make a moving human tale of the Gospel Story--a tale so convincing that the second half of the book which denies the Christian faith holds the mind with effortless certainty. 30

This is typical of the confusion which existed among even reasonably enlightened readers of the period. Even as Wolfe praises Moore for down-grading the myth to a "moving human tale," he capitalizes the name, talks of Christ and his majesty; although he does point out that:

Paul, not Jesus, was the Christ of the Victorians, and, like Paul the age was acutely conscious of the flesh, but unlike Paul unable to conquer it by prayer, by fasting and by vision. . . . Not, of course, that George Moore underrates or misunderstands Paul. Indeed I should think that secretly he finds in him the man-god of Protestantism as opposed to Jesus the woman-god of Catholicism. There wasn't enough room for his bald mountain greatness in The Brook Kerith and therefore George Moore wrote The Apostle. But though he could and does appreciate Paul, Paulinism was as abhorrent to him as scamped and dishonest writing.<sup>31</sup>

Moore wrote The Apostle in 1911, so that, in fact, he turned from Paul to Jesus, but this passage is helpful. Again and again in Moore's autobiographical writings he refers admiringly to Paul, yet the effect of Paul in the novel is and has to be negative. It now becomes clear

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<sup>30</sup>Humbert Wolfe, George Moore: A Studio Sketch, (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1933), p. xxi.

<sup>31</sup>Wolfe, p. 21.

that it is Paul as artist, or perhaps as great artificer, of an enormously successful religion whom he admires, while disagreeing wholeheartedly with the tenets of that religion. Paul is of the stuff of which heroes are made in Moore's eyes: the gentle shepherd is not. Moore was still enough of a Victorian to be attracted by power, action, even aggression; he lived in an England which still enjoyed many of the fruits of initiative and "progress" on a global scale, and which was only in the earliest stages of disintegration. Almost in spite of himself, however, Moore created a new Jesus, a survivor, to whom he could give his deepest fealty.

Moore's ambivalence towards his two protagonists is reflected in his own actions as an Irish landlord. The man who became famous for an irritating piece of bravado:

. . . that some wretched farmers and miners should refuse to starve, that I may not be deprived of my demi-tasse at Tortoni's; that I may not be forced to leave this beautiful retreat, my cat and my python--monstrous . . . 32

(written as Malcolm Brown says, "in the self-mockery of an over-assertion couched in the style of a provocateur in the enemy's pay . . ." <sup>33</sup>) is the same man who rushes home to negotiate with rather than evict his tenants, at a time when eviction was a far more usual course. Brown points out that he knew it was his position as "the great squire's eldest son, whose boyish whims might annoy a thousand Moore Hall

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<sup>32</sup>Confessions of a Young Man, p. 123.

<sup>33</sup>Brown, p. 15.

peasant families" which gave him his sense of freedom, let alone the financial support which enabled him to set out on his heroic journey in the cause of art. Moore was also well aware that the state of passive, natural goodness which his Jesus has attained at the end of The Brook Kerith does not produce the only kind of achievement he, Moore, recognized.

An unidentified writer in the New York Times, August 27, 1916, says of the book:

The Jesus in "The Brook Kerith" and the Jesus of the Gospel are as different as life and death. The character to whom he gives that name might be the devitalized presentation of any of the minor Syrian prophets. Indeed it is a pity that George Moore did not leave the Gospel figures out of account and take up one of the many prophets and wonder-workers who had come a little before that period.

The inference is that this is yet another of George Moore's "landscapes" and that there is no need for one of the figures introduced for interest to be that of Jesus. This is a superficial view of the book, but it does have a ring of truth, borne out by what Moore says himself in the Preface to the October, 1916 edition: " Now what, I said to myself would be the future life of a man who has lost every belief? How will life reconstruct itself?" Actually his examination of the problem is three-fold: Joseph, stripped of his last belief when he finds his Messiah is merely a man, is left only with feelings of love and pity, which apparently sustain him to the end; Jesus, wounded in body as well as in mind, is, at first, incapable of feeling or thought, and must be re-born after twenty years of slow preparation, meditation in

the hills as a new man in a state of nirvana, ("all things are God, Paul: thou art God and I am God . . . God like all the rest is a possession of the mind"); whilst Paul, faced by a complete negation of his whole structure of belief, takes refuge in a fit of madness and rises from it unregenerate to found Christianity on a tissue of lies. For Moore's purpose, then, a minor "prophet and wonder-worker of the period" just will not do.

His other stated intention in the Preface to the October, 1916 Edition is to forget "the hieratic Byzantine mosaic of the early centuries" (in direct contrast to Yeats, it must be noted) and to supplant Holman Hunt's Christ, a product of the "fond sentimentalities that the Italian Renaissance invented, a woman's face with a blond beard," Renan's "fond sentimental redeemer." This, I believe, he achieves, with the help of his knowledge of another pastoral civilization, and in the spirit of the early Pre-Raphaelite ideas of a return to primitive Christianity he had absorbed as a young man. But Moore could no more have created his particular Jesus without the help of Renan, than the writers of the next generation could have produced their versions without the help of Moore.

## CHAPTER II

THE NEXT GENERATION: MURRY, LAWRENCE, MAURIAC  
SAYERS, GRAVES AND KAZANTZAKIS

In the next generation of writers, those who came to maturity during the First World War, there were many who felt the need to trans-mogrify, and thus somehow "save" Jesus, not so much for themselves as for their readers, "the simple Christians," as one writer calls them. Many writers published their version of the life, and the most important of these works include John Middleton Murry's Jesus: Man of Genius in 1926, D.H. Lawrence's The Man Who Died in 1928, Francois Mauriac's Life of Jesus in 1937, Dorothy Sayers' The Man Born to be King in 1943, Robert Graves' King Jesus in 1946, and Nikos Kazantzakis' The Last Temptation of Christ in 1948.

Moore's The Brook Kerith provided the impetus for this generation of writers, in much the same way that Renan's Life of Jesus had inspired the generation that followed him. For example, Robert Graves appears to have written King Jesus in (delayed) rebuttal to Moore's novel, while Lawrence's Jesus in The Man Who Died, is in many ways the natural successor to Moore's hero, making explicit much that was implicit in The Brook Kerith.

In his Reminiscences of S.H. Lawrence, J. Middleton Murry saw his friend as the "Jesus of our times." He writes:

Whereas I am in no danger of discovering that I am like the founder of Christianity, D.H. Lawrence veritably is. He happens to be more like him than any man who has lived for the past fifty years, unless perchance it were that other anti-Christian, Friedrich Nietzsche.<sup>1</sup>

Murry casts himself in the role of the man from Kerioth:

My duty as a friend to Lawrence was to be his pure enemy. Lawrence knew it well, I knew it dimly.<sup>2</sup>

And so he made use of his experience as the friend and chronicler of the "suffering man" he had seen on the famous night at the Café Royal, in order to write another in his series of hero-worshipping biographies (he had already tackled Shakespeare and Keats), Jesus: Man of Genius. In his Preface to the work, he states that his training as a literary critic "trying to understand men of genius"<sup>3</sup> is probably the best training for the project, for even if Jesus is not a supernatural being, he is certainly no ordinary man. At this point, Murry is reminiscent of Frank Harris, (whom he knew and admired), sharing the same reverent, trembling approach to his heroes, yet hard-headed and shrewd when it came to recognizing and publishing these "men of genius." The most convincing portraits of Judas share this ambivalence of character; he is often presented as the disciple who loved and understood Jesus best, yet sought to exploit him, usually on behalf of revolutionary forces.

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<sup>1</sup> John Middleton Murry, Reminiscences of D.H. Lawrence, (London Jonathan Cape, 1933), p. 266.

<sup>2</sup> Murry, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> John Middleton Murry, Jesus: Man of Genius, (New York: Harper, 1926), pp. vii-xiii.



In the Preface to his Jesus: Man of Genius, Murry explains that he is editing the gospels in order to give his story unity; what he actually does in the smooth-flowing narrative is to leave out all the details which give life and colour to the gospel story. While he accepts the Marcan hypothesis, he sees Mark as "a naïve recorder of vivid and crucial incidents as the aged mind of Simon Peter remembered them." He begins the biography when Jesus is thirty, at the time of the baptism by John, and replaces the fabulous and beautiful story of Jesus' birth and childhood by a brief, rather dreary account of a fatherless boy brought up in rigorous circumstances by a poor mother. He concedes the fact that the healing miracles might have taken place in such an age of faith, but he cannot accept what he calls the "prodigies," and has as many rational explanations for them as any of the "advanced critics" he reproaches for having taken away the Jesus of the "simple Christians." No water is turned into wine, there is no miraculous feeding of the five thousand, the storm was about to die down in any case, and nobody walked on the water, except in the imagination of the disciples.

In fairness, it must be said that Murry leaves more dimensions to his hero than do many of his fellows in the same field of fictionalized biography. In the first part of his book he has created a believable representation of "the best man who ever lived"; and in the second part he presents the best of the teachings as a magnificent literary achievement by a man with "a creative mastery of the scriptures," whose major success he describes in this way:

For in the Old Testament there is not one God, but many gods; from among them Jesus sought but one, one who should satisfy his own deep intuitive knowledge of what God must be; . . . a God whom he could worship . . . [with] a voice ineffably sweet.<sup>4</sup>

This Jesus of Murry's is indeed the Son of God, but only in the sense of being the single man who has ever completely understood and loved God. All men, says Murry, are capable of being sons of God in just this way, and when they are, the anarchy that Jesus preached will be possible. This stance is akin to Shaw's; however, Murry was at this time in his life calling for direct political action.

Murry's Jesus, far from being the helpless victim, the lamb, wrote the script for, and produced the drama of the Crucifixion: setting up Judas, (although Judas believes he is in control) and arranging for Simon of Cyrene to produce "an unbroken colt on the outskirts of Jerusalem." Unlike his "liberal and rational" predecessors who, Murry said, ended the story on a note of "sympathetic condescension," Murry felt he alone understood the sublime imagination of Jesus as he sought the only aesthetically fitting death for the only son of God.

As for Judas, Murry says:

He needed but one man: one to betray him. Judas of Kerioth is lost forever in the darkness of history. His memory has been blotted out. Yet, even by the believers in the God-man, the name of Judas should have been revered as the name of the man by whose hand God's sacrifice was made possible. For a believer in the man-God Judas stands next to Jesus

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<sup>4</sup>Jesus: Man of Genius, p. 24.

himself in the great story. For he, when all were without understanding, must have understood. Perhaps not all, but something. Whether Jesus knew his weakness, or discovered his strength; whether he was the unconscious instrument or the conscious partner in Jesus' purpose--must remain forever hidden. The man who betrayed Jesus and hanged himself in sorrow, judged by the commonest measure was a man, and perhaps more a man than the disciples who left their Master and fled, or than Peter who denied him thrice.<sup>5</sup>

This passage echoes some words of Moore's in The Brook Kerith, where Nicodemus sees Judas as a "sort of other Jesus." However, while Moore is also sympathetic to Judas, he takes the much more common tack of making him act out of a desire to save Jesus from the ultimate blasphemy of believing himself to be the Messiah.<sup>6</sup>

Although Murry never managed to make the leap to full belief in Christianity, he came very close, not only to conversion, but to ordination in the Church of England. The main stumbling block was his lack of belief in the Resurrection. F.A. Lea says that "he was still unconvinced of any resurrection at all beyond what he felt as the 'real presence in my imaginative being' of Jesus, Keats and Katherine [Mansfield],"<sup>7</sup> a statement typical of Murry's frequent,

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<sup>5</sup>Jesus: Man of Genius, p. 242.

<sup>6</sup>Eric Linklater's novel, Judas, published in 1939, is one of the best treatments of this fascinating character and his motives. He presents a Judas who acts to save the city from rioting and bloodshed when he perceives a new, violent Jesus emerging; but fears that he also acts to protect his own life and property. This Judas loves Jesus more than any of the other disciples do, since he alone cannot bear to go on living after the Crucifixion.

<sup>7</sup>The Life of John Middleton Murry, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1959), p. 249.

sometimes endearing, incongruities. In his humility, in his acceptance of the worthiness of the sacrifice contrived and willingly made by his Jesus, he comes very close to traditional Christian belief. But he was a changeable man in a changeable time. As a disciple of Lawrence, he tried very hard to find salvation, first in the "blood-brotherhood" of man, secondly in the union of man and woman. He did not measure up to Lawrence's exacting standards for blood-brotherhood; and the story of his stormy first marriage to Katherine Mansfield is well-known, while his three other marital adventures, all embarked on with the same earnest sense of commitment, also failed him in one way or another. After Lawrence's death, in his never-ending search for a way of life, he was "consumed even to tears by the reading of Das Kapital, and wrote The Necessity of Communism, another eulogy of a man of genius, this time a "bourgeois ideologue" like himself, Karl Marx."<sup>8</sup> By this time, he was convinced that contemporary man could find his reality only in a social context, and from then on became concerned with the practical implementation of a social system not unlike the anarchy proposed by the hero of Jesus: Man of Genius. Unfortunately, even here, he found himself following in the footsteps of his first master: his authoritarian approach to the various communities he founded evokes memories of Lawrence, and the role Lawrence envisioned for himself in Rananim.

If Murry could accept the Atonement, and be satisfied with a survivor in spirit,<sup>9</sup> Lawrence could not. Murry lived to a ripe old

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<sup>8</sup>F.A. Lea, p. 191.

<sup>9</sup>Murry makes it clear that it is the spirit of poetry that he is talking about, and that Jesus shares this with Keats and Shakespeare, among others.

age, but was always fascinated by death and ideas of sacrifice; Lawrence died young, having fought death for years, and had no sentimental illusions about it. It is not surprising that the idea of resurrection should be the most appealing aspect of the myth for him, although his treatment of the idea was far from orthodox, despite his protests to the contrary:

. . . Church doctrine teaches the resurrection of the body and if that doesn't mean the whole man what does it mean? And if a man is whole without a woman then I'm damned!<sup>10</sup>

The most notable treatment of the idea of a Jesus who does not actually die on the cross, before Lawrence's The Man Who Died,<sup>11</sup> is, of course, Moore's in The Brook Kerith, and the two works have much in common. Neither man felt able to confront the actual hero of the Gospel; Lawrence begins his novella with the "risen man," while Moore devotes half his story to exploring another man's psyche, with only brief glimpses of Jesus the teacher and martyr, until the reader is permitted to enter Jesus' mind after his rescue from the tomb. In his letter of May 3rd, 1927 to E.H. Brewster, Lawrence could be describing The Brook Kerith as well as his own work:

I wrote a story of the Resurrection, where Jesus gets up and feels very sick about everything, and can't stand the old crowd any more--so cuts out--and as he heals up he begins to find what an astonishing place the phenomenal world is, far more marvellous than any salvation or heaven--and thanks his stars that he needn't have a mission any more.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Collected Letters, ed. Aldous Huxley, (New York: Viking, 1932), p. 1115.

<sup>11</sup>D.H. Lawrence, St. Mawr and the Man Who Died, (New York: Penguin Books, 1953).

<sup>12</sup>Collected Letters, ed. Aldous Huxley, p. 975.

Lawrence first named his story "The Escaped Cock," from "that toy in Volterra," which he and Earl Brewster had seen in a shop window. While Moore leads his Jesus gently back into the phenomenal world through an awareness of first the boughs of the tree waving, then the antics of the playful puppy, and finally the lusty young ram fulfilling his purpose in life; Lawrence cuts straight through to the heart of the matter with the proud cockerel. Here the basic difference between the two solutions for survival is apparent. While Moore's gentler Jesus is content to watch with approval the young ram's rejuvenation of the flock, turning thankfully at the end of the novel to a life of what Lawrence calls scornfully (in another connection) Buddhist inaction and meditation,"<sup>13</sup> "The Man Who Died" hastened to put into practice what he had learned from the cockerel; and although he too goes on his way, away from "the little life of jealousy and property" with ". . . the gold and flowing serpent . . . coiling up again to sleep," he promises to return to his lover in the Spring.<sup>14</sup>

If Lawrence's man of action is more effective than Moore's gentle voyeur, Lawrence's treatment also falls short of the matter-of-fact acceptance in sexual matters, characteristic of pagan myth and desirable for viable modern myth. The jarring note in The Brook Kerith caused by the sniggering references to life in "the other cenoby" of married Essenes, is unfortunately echoed in The Man Who Died

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<sup>13</sup> Collected Letters, ed. Aldous Huxley, p. 701.

<sup>14</sup> The Man Who Died, p. 211. (Further page references to this work will be placed in the text.)

by Lawrence's characteristic disdain for the mating of the slaves--what is beautiful and natural in the cock and hens, "one wave-tip of life overlapping for a minute another, in the tide of the swaying ocean of life . . ." (p. 172), and earth-shaking and inevitable in the union of the two aristocrats, is shameful and vulgar in the coupling of the young slaves. Two quotations from his essay on "Aristocracy" in Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine help to explain, if not excuse, this lapse. First, he is convinced that the Messiah must be a superman, in the Nietzschean sense, for

. . . it is the aristocrats like Caesar and Cicero who established a new connection between mankind and the universe. . . .

Secondly, the idea that the Messiah should come to save the poor and humble is abhorrent to Lawrence:

Jesus, in a world of arrogant Pharisees and egoistic Romans, thought that purity and poverty were one. It was a fatal mistake. Purity is often enough poor . . . but poverty is only too rarely pure.<sup>15</sup>

There is even a suggestion of two saviours. For the slaves, Lawrence says: "All-tolerant Pan should be their God forever . . ." (p. 197), while for the Priestess, the saviour is a god of light, an Apollo-figure. Actually she believes the man to be Osiris, the risen God, who will come every Spring to save her. Women (even priestesses) and most men still need "miracle, mystery and authority."<sup>16</sup> Only the Man

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<sup>15</sup>Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine, (London: Martin Secker, 1934), pp. 223-40.

<sup>16</sup>"Preface, The Grand Inquisitor, by F.M. Dostoievsky," Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D.H. Lawrence, (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 288.

Who Died, the true aristocrat, can live for and by himself.

As is often the case with Lawrence, the contribution to the elucidation of mankind's image of itself lies less in the characterization of the hero (what he says about himself, what Lawrence says about him) than in the integration, in this case the re-integration, of the character with his physical surroundings. This is exemplified in The Man Who Died by the extraordinarily wholesome details of the man's brief sojourn on the little peninsula.

When he first appears, "a stranger in a dark broad hat" (p. 190), he rises like a threat from the corner of the temple steps, battling the wind, in sharp contrast to the peaceful temple of which the woman seems almost an integral part as she stands in "her yellow mantle on a step above him, beside a pink-and-white painted pillar." Soon, however, the man is sheltered in a little dark womb-like cave where he is nourished in readiness for his re-birth in the temple above. The description of the transformation of the cave from a "dark lair" into a home for the man is Lawrence at his domestic best:

There the slave-men had carried out the old heath of the bedding, swept the rock-floor, and were spreading with nice art the myrtle, then the rougher heath, then the soft bushy heath-tips on top, for a bed. Over it all they put a well-tanned white ox-skin. The maids had laid folded woollen covers at the head of the cave and the wine-jar, the oil-jar, a terra-cotta drinking cup, and a basket containing bread, salt, cheese, dried figs and eggs stood neatly arranged. There was also a little brazier of charcoal. The cave was suddenly full and a dwelling-place. (p. 200)

The man is massaged back to life, as Moore's Jesus was by the ancient Esora, but this time it is a young woman, "a rare woman" who awaits



a "re-born man," who rejuvenates the hero. For her, he is the risen Osiris, and after their splendid mating, the man feels himself fully at one with the world:

But the man looked at the vivid stars before dawn, as they rained down to the sea, and the dog-star green towards the sea's rim. And he thought: "How plastic it is, how full of curves and folds like the invisible rose of dark-petalled openness that shows where the dew touches its darkness! How full it is, and great beyond all gods. How it leans around me, and I am part of it, the great rose of Space. I am like a grain of its perfume, and the woman is a grain of its beauty. Now the world is one flower of many petalled darknesses, and I am in its perfume as in a touch." (p. 208).

As he stays in the cave the next day while the cold rain falls outside, he realizes: "This is the great atonement, the being in touch. The gray sea and the rain, the wet narcissus and the woman I wait for, the invisible Isis and the unseen sun are all in touch and at one." (p. 208)

By summer-time, the woman has conceived and is happy to be alone "with the coolness of her own air around her," (p. 210), as the man leaves, promising to return in the Spring. The man and the woman are thus part of the natural cycle of life, which Lawrence sought to make basic to his version of Christianity. He attempts constructive criticism of Jesus (in a way that is reminiscent of Shaw's). In the Preface to The Grand Inquisitor, he writes:

The thing Jesus was trying to do was to supplant physical emotion by moral emotion. So that earthly bread becomes, in a sense, immoral, as it is to many refined people today. The Inquisitor sees that this is a mistake. The earthly bread must in itself be the miracle, and be bound up with the miracle.

And here, surely, he is right. Since man began to think and feel vividly, seed-time and harvest have been the two great sacred periods of miracle, re-birth, of the earthly bread, and they are festivals which go to the roots of the soul. For it is the earthly bread as a miracle, a yearly miracle. All the old religions saw it: the Catholic still sees it by the Mediterranean.<sup>17</sup>

So that while Murry's well-meaning, eminently sensible re-telling of the myth makes comfortable reading for the believer, Lawrence's extraordinary little book constitutes a genuine re-vamping of the myth, or, perhaps it would be more correct to say re-creation of the myth. If, as seems probable, Lawrence has played a part in altering man's view of himself, this book has been one of his most successful vehicles for conversion. His man is a survivor, in tune with natural forces, despising the unnatural forces (represented by the Mother and the Overseer) which exploit and enslave mankind for money, forces which Lawrence felt to be nourished by conventional Christianity. His elitism and his feeling of male superiority must be forgiven him.

The Man Who Died, for all its originality, is still part of the tradition established by Renan and Moore, with its stress on man in harmony with a beautiful, balanced, natural setting. The hero of the next work to be examined, Mauriac's Jesus, is quite alone, moving in a stark inner world of psychological conflict. Mauriac's Galilee, the object of so much lush description in other novels, is simply a place where

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<sup>17</sup>Phoenix, p. 288.

a little people struck out in the opposite direction, turned their backs on the quest for power, for satiety and sensual satisfaction. Upon the shores of the Dead Sea, the Essenes lived abstinent and chaste, concerned only with their souls.<sup>18</sup>

Few of the writers discussed in this paper have such self-knowledge as Mauriac, or perhaps few of them are as ready to share their motives and confess their short-comings as this great Catholic writer. In the Preface, before the reader may approach the book, he is warned against Biblical scholars in general, not only the unbeliever, but even the Christian whose "very fervour causes the painter's hand to tremble and obscure the vision." Preferably, a life of Jesus should be written on one's knees, says Mauriac. Having taken the plunge, however, while he sees the weaknesses in his work, Mauriac refuses to apologize:

I have stressed those things which correspond to my own preoccupations, and especially the fury of the Man-God, before which my mind really falters--as though I wished to prove to myself that this does not try my faith. That sharpness and violence I have attached to perhaps a too human idea of love: I believe that in Christ they are not opposed to love, that on the contrary they are its indications.  
(p. 280).

Indeed, this is why he wrote the Life, from a "need of finding and of touching in some way the living and suffering Man, whose place is empty in so many hearts--the Word made flesh, that is an earthly being of the same flesh as our own." Only the concrete can satisfy Mauriac,

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<sup>18</sup> François Mauriac, Life of Jesus, (New York: Longmans, Green, 1937), p. 28.

and he deplores all efforts to minimize the human element, although in his glorification of the human, Mauriac writes in direct opposition to the tradition of Renan, Moore and Lawrence, with its emphasis on man in harmony with a beneficial nature; and half the human race is automatically excluded from glory. Woman can only suffer and sin. A motif which occurs again and again throughout the novel is the sword in Mary's heart, buried deep, but beginning to stir a little as John the Baptist announces the arrival of "one the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop and loose," and causing her untold agony by the end of the story, agony which is little comforted by her son. Even Mauriac wonders if perhaps Jesus might have shown a little more tenderness towards his Mother than the Gospel indicates, but dismisses the idea as somehow effete.

There are also uncomfortably revealing descriptions of Jesus' relationships with other women:

It was the Man-God who raised his eyes towards this woman [the Samaritan woman]. He, infinite Purity, who had no need to put down desire in its lower and more sordid forms, was none the less incarnate desire, since he was incarnate love. He violently desired the soul of this woman.

. . . . .

The Son of Man demanded the possession of this creature. She might fully be what she was: a concubine, woman who had been dragged in the mud, had lain in the arms of six men, and he whose thing she now was, and who had tasted pleasure with her was not her husband. (p. 52)

As for the woman taken in adultery, "she who on that very night had given herself over to the delights of the flesh," she is an example

of the shortcomings of the whole sex, of the "unconquerable weakness of the woman, that crawling cringing creature that she becomes at certain hours, before certain beings." (p. 154). Even the converted woman can do no right:

The women heard these things without understanding them, as they do still, hanging on his lips, enchanted by his voice alone. One of them interrupted to cry out to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore thee and the breasts that thou didst suck." (p. 171)

This earns a stern reproof from Mauriac's Jesus, (as indeed it does in the Gospel.) Grudgingly Mauriac concedes that the mother of Jesus may have been present at the cross, may have "emerged at last from her obscurity, because he no longer had the strength to repel her."

In his collection of essays, Maria Cross, a book, not "about Catholicism, but about eight writers who are Catholics,"<sup>19</sup> Conor Cruise O'Brien examines the forces in Mauriac which dominate his art. For Mauriac, the only child of a widowed, extremely devout mother, the most dreadful situation imaginable is that of a parent, almost always a mother, continuing to dominate an adult offspring. For Mauriac the ultimate horror is the fact that woman turns into child-devouring mother; woman is the cross. In Writers at Work, Mauriac says of his own work, "I don't observe and I don't describe. I rediscover the narrow Jansenist world of my devout, unhappy and introverted child-

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<sup>19</sup> Conor Cruise O'Brien, Maria Cross: Imaginative Patterns in a Group of Modern Catholic Writers, (Fresno, Calif.: Academy Guild Press, 1963). ("Maria Cross" is the name of the heroine of Mauriac's novel Le Desert de l'amour, a story about a father and son, "related through Maria Cross" who is for one a sexual image, for the other a sorrowing mother; both fall in love with her.)

hood."<sup>20</sup> This method, as O'Brien points out, does have its positive side. At his best, says O'Brien, "Mauriac is the least cerebral of writers," and his most "explosive" effects are the result of "irrational instinctive force" lacking in the intellectual abstractions of such fellow masters as Sartre and Camus.<sup>21</sup> "The pagan D.H. Lawrence, who made a cult of sex and sun, never evoked them with anything like the dangerous power of the Christian Mauriac."<sup>22</sup>

There are indeed unforgettable moments in his Life of Jesus, created by what he himself calls techniques of the cinema. At the beginning of the book, first three, and then, after the death of Joseph, two silent figures sit around the table, waiting for it all to begin, while the reader/observer learns of the past through flash-backs in the mind of the woman. Then, after the all-too-short feverish year of activity, the unnatural stillness after the crucifixion:

Clouds dulled the sky. Perhaps it is true the dead came forth, although no one remembered this until later. I imagine rather a spring evening like all evenings in spring, the smell of warm, damp earth, and that fleshly weariness, that emptiness which I felt as a child, after the death of the last bull, when the arena was emptied, as though my own blood had been impoverished with all the blood that had been shed. (p. 266)

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<sup>20</sup>The Paris Review Interviews, ed. Malcolm Cowley, (New York: Viking, 1958), p. 42.

<sup>21</sup>O'Brien, p. 33.

<sup>22</sup>O'Brien, p. 5.

His most vivid writing is when he indulges in an ecstasy of self-abasement: first as he shares in the flagellation:

All our kisses, all our embraces, the prostitution of the body created to be the dwelling of Love, the debasement of the flesh, crimes not only against grace, but against nature, the Son of Man assumed them all himself . . . (p. 248)

second, when he identifies with Jesus, as he cries reproachfully from the cross: "it was necessary for the Son to know that ultimate horror--abandonment by the Father." And Mauriac knows well the road to Emmaus--"Who has not walked on this road one evening when all seemed lost?" deprived of Jesus, not only by his own "disgusting" passions, but also by the well-meaning efforts of sages and philosophers who come between the stark reality of the Man-God and himself.

Despite some criticism of the harshness of the portrait (and Mauriac did "tone down" some of the more lurid passages for the second edition) Mauriac's Life of Jesus was recognized by the Roman Catholic Church as being valuable to the faith. It has something which is often lacking in other fictionalized versions of the modern period; Mauriac is not afraid to deal directly and with brutal honesty with the character of Jesus as depicted in the Gospels. There is no side-stepping the issue, either by sentimentalizing the character as in Renan, or by concentrating the main force of the novel on other characters, or by creating an entirely new, post-Resurrection Jesus. But Mauriac's Jesus belongs to another age, an age which found corruption and crucifixion an irresistible combination; and believed

half the human race, the female half, to be forever inferior at best, forever sinful at worst. Even the passages which attempt to restore a balanced portrait, to relieve the darkness with flashes of light-- "and when Christ preached on earth a spring of love, hitherto unknown, gushed forth in the hard heart of the Roman Empire"--show the love of Christ having a force and compulsion foreign to the gentle healing quality which is still an attractive aspect of the Christian legacy.

The contrast between Mauriac's Jesus and the hero of the next work to be examined, Dorothy Sayers' popularly successful play-cycle, The Man Born to be King,<sup>23</sup> is so extreme that it is difficult to believe that they are based on the same figure. That two contemporaneous writers, who shared what Mauriac, at least, felt to be the most important qualification for the task--they were both devout Christians--and who acted apparently from the same motive, to present "the living and suffering Man" (Mauriac), "the human Jesus disfigured with blood and grief" (Sayers), could have produced such widely disparate heroes can perhaps best be explained by repeating what I have already claimed: Mauriac's hero is a deliberate "throw-back," while Sayers provides a gentler source of inspiration for a world sickened by its own sharpness and violence. Despite her promises of "blood and grief," Dorothy Sayers presents a very civilized version of the myth, and she has done it, first by the use of modern

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<sup>23</sup>The Man Born to be King, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1943).



speech, and second by enlarging the rôles played by women in the story, thus "domesticating" the whole picture. These methods, while they enormously increased the popular appeal of the play in the Nineteen Forties, employ dated language and dated female stereotypes which make it difficult to appreciate her brilliant craftsmanship in the construction of the twelve plays. An examination of the description of Mary may help to illustrate what I mean:

She must be played with dignity and sincerity and with perfect simplicity. Her voice is sweet but not sugary; and there must be no trace of any kind of affectation. A very slight touch of accent--perhaps a faint shadow of Irish quality--would be of assistance in keeping her in her "station of life"; but, if so, Joseph's accent must be in keeping, (and later on we must not get the anomaly of Jesus speaking in a different accent from His mother). (p. 27)

The "Irish quality" apparently adds a saintly dimension; or perhaps English audiences could not be expected to face up to the mother of god with a working-class accent, while a little Irish brogue is permissible, even desirable, at every level. In any case, her description of Mary is interesting in that it shows Sayers' great flaw: her preoccupation with the English class system and her fatal tendency to transpose the "greatest of all stories" into its narrow confines. "We decided," she writes, "that Jesus and his Mother should speak Standard English . . . the question then arose, should the Disciples also speak Standard English (in which case they might, by contrast with the crowd, sound rather like a Universities' Mission to the East End). . . ." In the end, it was decided that there must be a hierarchy among the disciples--John and Judas speak Standard English,

Peter being kept "rougher" and Matthew, "as vulgar a little commercial Jew as ever walked Whitechapel" has a strong cockney accent.

Mary has one good scene in the first play. In keeping with Sayers' general domestication of the Gospel story, it takes place in a shepherd's cottage, rather than in the stables, and she has a moving dialogue with the Three Kings. But the atmosphere of the scene is marred by the author's bathos: three magical, mysterious Kings, riding white horses, wearing glittering bejewelled armour, and bearing priceless gifts, are approaching, and the shepherd's wife cries to her daughter, "look in the dresser drawer and find a clean bib for Baby Jesus!" And although she declares again and again in her preliminary notes to the Play-Cycle that she will in no way soften or sentimentalize Jesus, she cannot face up to his unkindness to his mother at Cana; she evades the issue by having Jesus speak in the "voice of a somnambulist"; the inference is plain that he really does not know what he is saying to his mother as he prepares himself for his first important miracle. Mary does have some fine simple "Syngean" speeches in the Eleventh Play, "King of Sorrows," where she expresses the feelings of the mother who outlives her child:

"This is the worst thing; to conceive beauty in your heart and bring it forth into the world and then to stand by helpless and watch it suffer . . ."

and

"I know now what he is and what I am . . . I, Mary am the fact; God is the truth; but Jesus is fact and truth--he is reality."

What of the other women in the Play-Cycle? Mary Magdalen is the stock prostitute with a "heart of gold," who has her (rather tasteless) moment at the cross, when she sings and dances for the Centurion, an old customer, for the privilege of approaching closer and taking John and the Mother with her. Claudia Procula, Pilate's wife, is a typical Roedean girl: "the very best type of Patrician lady--sure enough of her own position to talk with unaffected interest and simplicity to bath attendants and her own servants. (Pilate married rather above himself; the daughter of the Claudians is out of the top drawer). . . ." (p. 152) Later, and rather incongruously, this cool character has dreams, "has looked upon Pan in the moonlight" and warns Pilate not to persecute Jesus.

Partly because of the "pop" medium in which Sayers is working; and partly because she is not a writer who delves beneath the surface of her characters (there is no necessity for the hero of even such fine detective novels as hers to be any more complex than the much-loved Lord Peter Wimsey) her characters, male and female, remain superficial and unconvincing. For all her erudition and her technical skill, she seems too civilized, too "cerebral" above all too English to be able to create the atmosphere of "historical realism" she craves. This is, unfortunately, especially true of her delineation of Jesus.

Since this work was originally meant to be heard (and was heard by literally millions of people) it seems useful to learn the opinions (especially on her characterization of Jesus himself) of at least two contemporaries of the author who heard the play at the height of its success. G.W. Stonier in The New Statesman writes:

Miss Sayers has done little more with the character of Christ than make Him humanly approachable--a difficult enough feat, goodness knows; she emphasizes his practical and humorous side, and ignores the cryptic aloofness and the fits of anger which at one moment may be directed against money-changers in the temple, but at the next against a fig-tree that won't bear fruit out of season. She enjoys the miracles in a sensible bustling way--like modern miracles of surgery. . . .<sup>24</sup>

R.A. Scott-James in The Spectator is less generous:

. . . we shall not be impressed by evidence that those who do not know their Gospels will have been carried away by these broadcasts. We should expect so splendid a theme to have an effect even if not presented to the greatest advantage. . . . The experience of the present reviewer is that whenever Miss Sayers was inventing, whenever she was using an imaginary situation not drawn from the Gospel in which Jesus was not an actor, she was successful. She has produced quite good stories of the shepherds and of Herod attended by his court officials, and clever dialogue between Caiaphas, Annas and Judas. Nor should it be said that she failed in her pictures of the disciples. Where she really breaks down is in her presentation of Jesus himself. The language of the Authorized Version is already extremely simple, and has the merit of being intelligible to everyone. A slight departure from the colloquial--and it was not the language of the man-in-the-street in King James' day--stylizes it just enough to lift it above the ordinary and permit of that conception of grandeur that we dare not eliminate. <sup>25</sup>

Neither critic mentions Sayers' treatment of the Resurrection, in the twelfth play of the cycle. In her production notes, which serve as an introduction to this episode, she faces the problem of presenting "no fewer than nine supernatural appearances, without tedious

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<sup>24</sup>The New Statesman, Vol. 26:28, July 10, 1943.

<sup>25</sup>The Spectator, Vol. 171:42, July 9, 1943.

repetition, and without suggesting either Surrey melodrama or the more lily-livered kind of Easter card." She does escape both these emotional pitfalls, but her common-sense approach produces something even more deadening than a "cheap thrill"--a neat scientific explanation for a variation on the age-old detective mystery of the murder victim in the locked room. How did Jesus get out of the tomb? Under the sub-heading, "Mechanics of the Resurrection," she deals briskly with the "operative elements in the problem"--the open sepulchre and the undisturbed grave-clothes--and comes to the conclusion that "the physical body was, as it were, dissolved into its molecular elements, drawn out through the grave-clothes and through the stone and assembled outside." This phenomenon, not surprisingly, was accompanied by a violent electrical disturbance, perceptible as a kind of earthquake. This "Body," she explains, does not have to carry its original components with it, "It could build Itself up from any atomic material that happened to be handy."

It must be noted that The Man Born to be King was a pioneer, a genteel, well-sponsored one, but still innovative. As Stonier points out the radio was able to blaze a trail for the drama of Christ in a way that the theatre could not, since "the theatre in England, as everyone knows, belongs to the devil. Christ may not walk there." The B.B.C. had strong church backing for the production and "it was a victory for good sense, though I am afraid that the B.B.C. would be as quick to ban a play by Mr. Shaw on the subject as it has been eager to encourage Miss Sayers." "It seems unfair, absurd even, nowadays to look at The Man Born to be King in the light of Saint Joan. Only on

one aspect will I dare to make comparisons. Shaw, in his genius, had long perceived what Sayers was still bravely groping for: "That the Godhead must contain the Mother as well as the Father."<sup>26</sup> Although Sayers does give her women characters many lines to say, they speak them as second-class citizens, whether they speak in Claudia Procula's clipped accents or "talk rough" like the shepherd's wife. Her novel Gaudy Night, which as well as being a classic among detective stories is also an interesting account of women students and dons clawing their way out of the dark ages of the Nineteen Twenties and Thirties in Oxford, constantly afraid of being thought unnatural women for using their minds, points up her basic conservatism in an area where one might have expected much from a woman writer of her stature. But Dorothy Sayers, as a devout Anglican, stayed strictly within the confines of this most masculine of myths; and one must turn to a man, Robert Graves, for an extraordinary attempt to bring the "Mother as well as the Father" into the Godhead, without abandoning the Christian myth. In an article called "Two Studies in Scientific Atheism," Graves castigates Bertrand Russell and Julian Huxley for their attempts to supply a new scientific myth and has some suggestions of his own:

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<sup>26</sup>Shaw on Religion, ed. Warren Sylvester Smith, (London: Constable, 1967). In a letter to Dame Laurentia McLachlan of Stanbrook Abbey, Shaw asks her why she flies out at him "when I devoutly insist that that the Godhead must contain the Mother as well as the Father?" He goes on to discuss the failure of the Christian Maries: "not as approachable as the Egyptian Goddesses of the Great Period." (p. 205)

[a] great mistake of the Church has been to freeze its myths beyond the point where they can be unfrozen. If the Christian God finally abdicates and is succeeded by some more immediately potent deity or deities, the reason will be that his myth no longer corresponds with recent developments in the Western social system. He is still presented as an absolute Oriental male monarch too holy ever to reveal himself in public, whose existence is apprehended only by the symbolic male dove his spiritual emanation; and whom mortals cannot approach unless they have first secured the good offices of his sole son. This son, formerly a mortal, is said to have been parthogenously born from a mother, who, though now assumed to heaven does not participate in his godhead.

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In modern republics and in constitutional monarchies, often ruled by queens, this myth makes little sense.<sup>27</sup>

In King Jesus,<sup>28</sup> Graves does his best to thaw the "frozen myth," by re-writing the Gospel story with great emphasis on the Female. Mary the Mother naturally dominates Part One of the complex and fascinating novel, but after Part One, "triple-Mary" takes over. Graves explains her best in The White Goddess. The early church found, he suggests, that along with the "most diabolical and unpardonable heresy" of identification with the Hercules-Dionysus-Mithras Bull with Jesus Christ went another, "the identification of the Virgin Mary with the Triple Goddess . . . the Copts even ventured to combine the three Maries who were spectators at the Crucifixion into a single character." It is the story of the "three Maries" which gives King Jesus its claim to be called a novel, in contrast to the long, ingenious, but often somewhat perfunctory re-workings of the doings and sayings of Jesus. It is

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<sup>27</sup> The Crane Bag and Other Disputed Subjects, (London: Cassell, 1969), p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> King Jesus, (London: Cassell, 1946).

clear, in fact, that this Jesus is working without the benefit of the Muse (the White Goddess); he produces doggerel like this:

The farmer trudges out to sow,  
The leathern seed-bag slung at his side,  
Along the merry furrows watch him go  
To scatter the good seed far and wide.

Agabus, the Decapolitan, who narrates the story in about A.D. 93,<sup>29</sup> explains that Jesus' trouble was that he "was true to Jehovah without a single lapse in loyalty . . . he had come . . . to destroy the work of the female." (p. 9). In this he was acting within contemporary Jewish thought, for the "Jews as a nation have persuaded themselves that they never owed any duty to the Great Triple Moon-Goddess." This claim, says Agabus, is untenable, for their sacred books preserve clear traces of their former attachment, and he believes that the homeless condition of the Jews at the time he is writing is a direct result of the "Goddess's ineluctable vengeance."

While Agabus pays tribute to the charm of the Nativity Drama as "religious literature," he undertakes to tell the real story. Childless Hannah, the heiress of the royal house of Michal, went into the streets of Jerusalem in her bridal dress of ten years before, wearing a "purple headband, of which the chief ornament was a silver crescent moon, curved around the six-pointed star of David, stitched

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<sup>29</sup>In a defence of the novel, "The Historic Logic of King Jesus," Cornhill Magazine, 162, Autumn, 1947, Graves speaks of employing the "analeptic" technique in King Jesus, first used in I, Claudius, "to restore the lost or damaged parts of some real story, by reliving the period." Agabus was chosen because he had lived long enough to understand Church policy after the Fall of Jerusalem.



in gold and scarlet; the gold pyramid of Anatha interlocked with the scarlet vau triangle, her wedge. . . embroidered with myrtle-twigs, bells, cedar-trees, scallop-shells and pomegranates, the tokens of queenship." (p. 28) Not surprisingly, she finds a magic garden where she is fed sweet wine and the seed of the lotus by a "grave bearded man" and soon swoons away. The result of this adventure on the night of Eve's Festival of Fruits is Miriam (Mary). Similar adventures befall Mary in her turn, except that she is legally, if secretly, married to Prince Antipater, son of King Herod. Antipater has been convinced by the Priest, Simon, that through this marriage to Mary, the heiress of the most ancient royal house (older by far than the House of David) he can become the authentic King of Israel; for in the ancient days kings and chieftans ruled by woman-right. A child born to this union then is doubly royal; although, to confirm his kingship, he must in his turn marry a royal heiress.

The story of Elizabeth and her adventures at the love festival of Rimmon, the Pomegranate-God, adds Zacharias to the ranks of complaisant old husbands, and results in the birth of John the Baptist. Graves is at his imaginative best on the meeting between Mary and her kinswoman, Elizabeth. Mary is admitted to her house "in the name of the Mother," and it is no accident that the meal shared by these two fertile "goddesses" has a magical, ritual quality quite lacking in the sterile bitter feast that Jesus imposes on his puzzled disciples thirty years later.

As the story progresses, Mary is never the passive victim, never merely the vehicle. She deals calmly with the richly dressed

messenger who comes to announce her betrothal to the royal prince, (he comes on Monday, so "call me Gabriel, who is Monday's angel"), but the priest, Simon, has to confirm and explain the message before she acquiesces. It is her idea to travel to Bethlehem; when three Damascene Jews bring special gifts to her son, she knows they are rightly bestowed, and accepts with dignity; when she hears of Antipater's death, she weeps, but rejoices in her son; when the family, with Joseph as nominal head, takes refuge in Egypt she finds work. For twelve years she is close to her son, but the last moment of this understanding is recorded as they sail from Alexandria to Tyre on their way back to Jerusalem:

He silently stretched out his hand to Mary and each had a perfect understanding of what was in the other's mind: "The sea is our mother. From the sea the dry land was delivered at the Creation as a child is delivered from the womb. How beautiful is our Mother's face!" But old Joseph wrapped his cloak more tightly about him and shivered in the waste of waters. (p. 153)

Joseph, as a good Jew, hates the sea, because he associates it with "the Great Goddess in her erotic character of Rahab the Harlot--the fish-tailed Aphrodite, in fact, of Joppa and Beyrout and Ascalon."

Years later, Mary tells Jesus of his royal parentage, but he has already accepted expulsion from the Temple debates, as a bastard, (Temple records show his mother's marriage to Joseph took place after his birth), and this disillusionment, brooded over for five years, prepares him to listen to the woman-hating Essenes who describe the Female as the "threefold demoness who is Mother, Bride and Layer-Out to fallen man." He now meets and challenges the Third Mary, Mary the Hairdresser (Mary Magdalen), a terrifying old witch, who does

her best to tell him the true story of the Female, but without success. Jesus and the Third Mary match spells, taking turns to interpret the pictures on two great stones which lie at the foot of the Ark of the Covenant, of which Mary is custodian. In his "Historical Commentary" at the end of King Jesus, Graves explains the genesis of this long dialogue between Jesus and Mary thus:

. . . I am here suggesting a new theory of the composition of the early historical books [of the Bible]: that to the parts not already existing in, say the ninth century B.C. in the form of ballads or prose-epics were added anecdotes based on a deliberate misinterpretation of an ancient set of ritual icons, captured by the Hebrews when they seized Hebron from the "Children of Heth," whoever those people may have been. A similar technique of misinterpretation--let us call it iconotrophy--was adopted in ancient Greece as a means of confirming the Olympian religious myths at the expense of the Minoan ones which they superseded.  
(p. 355)

Thus Mary's assertion ". . . here my mistress, the First Eve, restores her virginity by bathing in the fish-pool of Hebron and becomes the Second Eve . . ." and Jesus' counter-assertion, "No, but King David from the roof of his palace at Jerusalem sees the wife of Uriah the Hittite bathing and lusts after her. . . ." Jesus wins the contest, but it is a shallow victory, because she knows her mistress must win in the end: "the apostate may deny his mother the First Eve, and his bride, the Second Eve, he may reject; yet the Third Eve, his grandam, will inexorably claim him for her own." (p. 219)

Jesus now allows himself to be allied in marriage with Mary the Bride, another royal heiress, a kinswoman of his mother, in order to confirm his right to the kingdom through the female line, but refuses to consummate the marriage, saying: "I have come, not to renew

but to make an end. Beloved let us not do the act of darkness, which is the act of death." Mary, the mother, gives the classic reply: "My son, is this how you deal with your virgin bride? What if the King your father had shamefully done the same?" (And here Graves levels his major criticism of Christianity, its attitude towards sexual love.) Mary, the Bride, is sister to Lazarus; the delay in coming to the help of Lazarus, always a problem for the interpreters, is ingeniously accounted for. Jesus suspected that the cry for help was merely a subterfuge on the part of Mary to lure him to her bed!

Jesus continues in his ministry, preaching not a glorious restoration of the Kingdom of Israel (as his followers believe), with the backing of Pilate and the Roman Emperor, but the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven and the end of life on earth. He knows he is doomed to failure, despite his great gifts as preacher, hypnotist, healer, and is not surprised when Mary the Hairdresser, the last Mary, comes with her alabaster jar of terebinth ointment to anoint him for the coming sacrifice. The three Maries are all present at the Crucifixion and all three of them surround Jesus upon the Mount of Olives, when the disciples have a last sight of him, before a cloud envelops the mountain and they all four disappear. Jesus has lost his battle with the Female. The fact that Christ will reign for two thousand years is another matter.

In his essay, "Don't Fidget Young Man,"<sup>30</sup> an account of a meeting with George Moore, and a criticism of The Brook Kerith, Graves explains the difference between Christ, who implies self-sacrifice, the mediation of God with man, a theme which can be "treated in a thousand

<sup>30</sup>Robert Graves, Steps, (London: Cassell, 1958), pp. 176-181.

legitimate ways by poets, artists, theologians, etc. . . ." and Jesus, a historical character, whose vital characteristic to Graves is his "complete Jewishness." A sense of this, he complains, is completely lacking in The Brook Kerith, which was written by a "Gallicized Dubliner." But he concedes that when he read the book, when it first appeared during the Battle of the Somme, when Jesus was being called upon by Germans and Allies alike, and the soldiers had lost respect for Pauline religion, but felt a sympathetic reverence for Jesus as a fellow-sufferer, Moore's story made "good, cynical sense" to him and to his fellow-sufferers. In fact, although Graves does not say this, Moore's gentle, contemplative survivor, who comes to terms with the physical world and rejects dreams of the kingdom of heaven, was exactly the kind of hero for men threatened every moment by violent death, who dreamed only of a natural world amid the wasteland of the trenches. Moore's myth of a madman restored to sanity must have been especially appealing in the context of a world gone mad. (And still is).

As Graves prepares to tackle the subject himself, many years later, he forgets what Moore actually created, and talks of Moore's "superman," deploring the fact that he "seemed more interested in the irrelevant ambition of writing a literary masterpiece than in getting at the factual truth of the Gospel story." The thesis that Jesus survived the crucifixion, says Graves, is much more plainly argued in Samuel Butler's The Fair Haven, and "I already hated Paul as perverter

of the original Nazarene Gospel".<sup>31</sup> Even the cocks in the famous cockfight scene in The Brook Kerith are the wrong breeds. Yet Moore's life-long and never-concealed longing to write literary masterpieces seems at least as valid and promising a motive for writing a novel about Jesus as Graves' desire to expose the "true facts." As it happens, these facts on which Graves builds his thesis have either been hotly disputed or completely ignored by biblical scholars, but this does not seem to me to affect the quality of King Jesus one way or another, any more than Moore's anachronistic flora and fauna affects The Brook Kerith as a work of art. Actually, of course, Graves is most successful when he moves imaginatively among his pagan queens; his ascetic Jewish prophet, much as Graves identifies with his single-minded pursuit of the truth, and admires his royal blood, and his scholarship, is less successfully portrayed. And, after all, what has Graves created in his Jesus, but a superman, a king among men, even if impotent among women, who perceives the irony of his fate at the end?

. . . Dysmas, oblivious of his approaching death, said drowsily to Jesus: "My Lord, remember me in your Kingdom. Give me office in your new Kingdom."

Jesus comforted him, concealing the bitter irony of his words: "When tonight I enter the Other Kingdom, you will be at my right hand." (p. 343)

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<sup>31</sup> Samuel Butler, The Fair Haven, (London: A.C. Fifield, 1913). This novel lies outside the scope of this paper being the "Memoir of the Late John Pickard Owen" but contains what Butler apparently intended to be a satirical portrait of Jesus, yet is strangely pious in its effect.

This stubborn, cynical, erudite man who dies attempting to "fulfill Deutero-Zechariah's prophecy" could never, one feels, have convinced or inspired his disciples, let alone the countless millions who have lived by his myth ever since. It begins to seem impossible that a convincing fictionalization of the myth can still be written: one which is recognizably the Bible story without being simply a naïve re-telling of the tale; a version which takes into account the extraordinary changes and stages through which the mind of Western man has passed, and reinterprets the myth, keeping intact its basic image patterns so that the sceptical reader can at least appreciate, even if not succumb to its power. However, the last major work to be examined, Nikos Kazantzakis' The Last Temptation of Christ,<sup>32</sup> finished in 1951, at the end of a long, immensely rich, life, is in some ways the most complete and satisfying version yet attempted.

A peculiar combination of qualities (which will be discussed later) made Kazantzakis capable of sustaining the excitement and expressing the passions necessary to make this a plausible story for a "modern" novel, without departing radically from the concrete details of the Gospel story. He does, of course, fall into heresy, "the same heresy that Milton, led by his scorn of cloistered virtue and his belief in the necessity of choice (ideas shared by Kazantzakis) slipped into on occasion--as when he declared that evil may enter the mind of God and, if unapproved, leave 'no spot or blame behind.'"<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>The Last Temptation of Christ, (New York: Bantam Books, 1968).

<sup>33</sup>"A Note on the Author and His Use of Language," appendix to The Last Temptation of Christ, by the translator, P.A. Bien.

Bien goes on to explain that this heresy is the key to Kazantzakis' great ambition: "to life Christ out of the Church altogether."

This is borne out in the novel by Jesus' impassioned denunciation of plans to establish his words in Holy Scriptures, to make new laws, to build new synagogues and to select new priests, (p. 419) and by the final sight of Paul, in the last temptation-dream, running like a famished wolf, "to eat up the world."

Kazantzakis' Jesus is an epileptic. This belief is common in old legends of Jesus (and of many other extraordinary people, especially mystics and prophets of all religions). An attack of epilepsy, for Jesus, is always presaged by the appearance of a mysterious figure "with the savage body of a woman covered head to foot with interlocking scales of thick bronze armour." This creature has the head of an eagle, grasps a piece of flesh in her beak, and regards Jesus "tranquilly and mercilessly." She is "the Curse" and his Fate, but she is also a blessing; under her influence, Jesus has his most portentous dreams and visions, and when she comes to claim him at the end on Golgotha, he is grateful to her.<sup>34</sup> However, the other females in the story pull down his spirit. Mary the Mother, despite her belief in the miraculous circumstances of his conception and birth, (God comes to her in her dream as a Jovian thunderbolt, Kazantzakis joyfully mixes his mythologies), resists all ideas of his glorious destiny and cries:

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<sup>34</sup>She seems to have much in common with Graves' Mary the Hag, the Female "layer-out," and it is because his hero neglects the Triple Goddess that he fails. Kazantzakis' Jesus, on the other hand, respects his muse, "the Curse."



"Have pity on me Father! A prophet! No, No! And if God has so written, let him rub it out. I want my son a man like everyone else, nothing more, nothing less. Let him build troughs, cradles, plows, and household utensils like his father used to do, and not as just now crosses to crucify human beings. Let him marry a nice young girl, from a respectable home--with a dowry." (p. 62)

Mary Magdalen, his childhood playmate, now a most successful prostitute, also pulls him down to earth, not only with the attractions of her body, but also with the guilt he feels for having rejected her, the girl chosen to be his bride, whose sexual feelings he was (in all innocence) the first to arouse when they were both children. Mary and Martha of Bethany, sisters of Lazarus, tempt him with cosy domesticity, good food, slavish devotion to his comfort. All these temptations are brought together in the "last temptation" which takes the form of a dream on the Cross, during which he first has a glorious sexual adventure with Mary Magdalen, then settles down to beget children with both Mary and Martha, and lives to a respected old age! Jesus, of course, resists the last temptation--it is Judas who recalls him to his duty--and awakes to find himself still on the Cross, crying triumphantly: "It is accomplished!"

Thus Kazantzakis pursues the great question, implicit in King Jesus and painfully explicit in Mauriac's Life of Jesus. In the Preface to his novel, Kazantzakis writes: "My principal anguish and the source of all my joys and sorrows from my youth onward has been the incessant merciless battle between the spirit and the flesh." He quite frankly sees this as a battle between the male principle as spirit and the female as flesh; but, unlike Mauriac, he revels in the

battle, and it is not at all clear that he feels that Jesus is to be envied or admired for winning it. Kazantzakis' early days were spent in a patriarchal society with an almost biblical simplicity and intensity, and when, in his last years, he wrote the novel, he was able to recreate that early scene, with a result that his women, while assuming much greater importance than they actually do in the Gospel story, fit the time-honoured patterns far better than the uneasy creations of other modern writers. In a letter written in 1933, he says:

Women (you know this well) have another universe-- Material, moral, intellectual. Their spirit is laden, all rippling with flesh. They are innocent even in their greatest infidelities (especially then) for they obey a subterranean drive, pre-human and extraordinarily profound. They are always faithful to this drive and, to be sure, therein lies their great sad virtue. Men can sometimes be free, in a moment of heroism and intoxication: women never. Freedom such as this (which in a man is honour) would be for her insubordination to her destiny-- a vice.<sup>35</sup>

All great rubbish, but an excellent philosophy on which to base a last great Christian novel.

Like Mauriac, Kazantzakis captures the feeling of expectancy at the very beginning of the novel, but instead of three people waiting silently around a table for the Messiah to begin his mission, he has a whole sleeping, dreaming village groaning aloud their longing:

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<sup>35</sup>Helen Kazantzakis, Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography Based on His Letters, transl. by Amy Mims, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 277.

"God of Israel, God of Israel, Adonai, how long?"  
 It was not a man; it was the whole village dreaming  
 and shouting together, the whole soil of Israel  
 with the bones of its dead and the roots of its  
 trees, the soil of Israel in labor, unable to give  
 birth, and screaming. (p. 6)

This atmosphere of agonized expectancy is sustained throughout the feverish journeyings of Jesus, and Kazantzakis is able to generate an atmosphere of excitement and urgency about his hero which makes it quite believable that fishermen should leave their nets, shepherds their flocks, even hard-headed businessmen their dealings to follow him. The very extravagance of his style and, his lack of irony which militate against his popularity in some circles<sup>36</sup> is exactly what works to "suspend disbelief" here. His humour--the Zorba-esque old men, the eagerness of Matthew to transcribe Peter's dreams as "gospel" truth--never jars, by virtue of its innocence.

Everything in Kazantzakis' former life seems to have been leading him to this particular achievement. He was "an intellectual--the author of treatises on Nietzsche, Bergson and Russian Literature, the student of Buddhism, the translator into Modern [demotic] Greek of Homer, Dante and Goethe."<sup>37</sup> He understood the agony of a subject people, having witnessed the struggle of his people against the Turks, and he shared the ardour of the revolutionary, although, in his case, it was usually freedom of the mind that he fought for, rather than a

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<sup>36</sup>Robert Maurer, "The Unorthodox Greek," Saturday Review, 51: 37-38, explains that Kazantzakis' lack of popularity in England was not because of his unorthodox religious views, but because of "glaring faults" in style, unreadability of much of his work, and a certain naivety, i.e. in his desire to unite all people (writers, especially) in a mass movement beyond politics.

<sup>37</sup>Bien, p. 488.

political cause. The character of Judas in The Last Temptation of Christ is sometimes in danger of becoming the hero: "If you had to betray your master, would you do it?" asks Judas, and Jesus replies, "No, I do not think I would be able to. That is why God pitied me and gave me the easier task: to be crucified." Judas at the end of the novel is a freedom fighter in the hills, but Jesus achieves the ascetic's ultimate goal of complete withdrawal from life and its temptations.

While Kazantzakis does tell the bible story, he adds enormously to it, and what he adds has the flavour of peasant life in Greece. This is largely due to the use of demotic Greek, the preservation and promulgation of which was probably what he felt to be his "divine mission." Even in translation, the richness of the language is not completely lost, as Bien points out:

. . . the language's reliance on metaphor can often be conveyed. Demotic always prefers the concrete to the abstract: the sun does not "hang" in the sky, it "tolls the hours" (that is, it is suspended, just as the bell is suspended in the campanile); a camel does not "get up," it demolishes its foundations. 38

So that the hero's most difficult concepts are made most beautifully concrete, just as the thoughts of Jesus are expressed in parables in the Gospels. Yet this is not simply a novel about Greek peasants, thinly disguised; it has a universal quality, in contrast to The Greek Passion, an earlier novel in which Kazantzakis transposes the Gospel

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<sup>38</sup>Bien, p. 492.

story into a modern Greek setting, and the story is used to demonstrate what is uniquely Greek. By the time he wrote The Last Temptation of Christ, he had reached a plateau where he felt himself to be beyond all the partisan activities which engaged him for most of his life, and which are reflected in his writings until the last years. His Jesus is not a superman, not a communist, not a Greek patriot; and by this time, his use of demotic Greek appears to be from artistic rather than political motives.

However, it must be remembered, his Jesus is not a god; he is a man with an infirmity, a suffering hero who endures with courage, who can renounce the world and all its pleasures for the sake of an ideal; and Kazantzakis suggests that while there is always a place for a hero of this type, he must be balanced by the strong man of action, who resists injustice and lives to fight another day. And The Last Temptation of Christ, rich and satisfying as it is, plays its part in the disintegration of the myth.

## CONCLUSION

It appears that every one of these sincere and gifted writers, even the believers, Mauriac and Sayers, has helped to desacralize the myth by this emphasis on the human qualities of Jesus at the expense of the divine; for, as Mircea Eliade says "myth constitutes the History of the Acts of Supernaturals."<sup>1</sup> When belief in the supernatural nature of Jesus is lost (or apologized for), no number of intellectual explanations or symbolic expressions can preserve his myth. The prose play and the novel celebrate men, not gods. Indeed Eliade goes so far as to say that "the modern passion for the novel expresses the desire to hear the greatest possible number of 'mythological stories' desacralized or simply camouflaged under profane forms."<sup>2</sup>

Loss of belief in the resurrection is the key factor in the conditions leading the writer up to the moment when he feels he must work out his version of the myth, and, as has been demonstrated, many and ingenious are the methods employed to turn Jesus the Sacrifice into Jesus the Survivor. Thoughts of an afterlife are dismissed, and life on earth is celebrated in every version save Mauriac's. Instead of man enduring a brief and painful sojourn on earth in order to enjoy eternal heaven, the writers are concerned to reintegrate man with his surroundings, showing him in tune with a beautiful and bountiful nature. Instead of a god, too pure to entertain sexual thoughts, the writers describe a man whose sexuality ranges from a harmless

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<sup>1</sup> Myth and Reality, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Eliade, p. 191.

voyeurism to joyful participation, which, in the case of Lawrence's hero, results in the conception of a child. In his "last temptation," Kazantzakis' hero thinks wistfully of a long and fruitful married life, and his final resistance seems more the result of the kind of man he is than of any superhuman qualities he may possess.

Above all, the central symbol of Christianity, the lonely Man-God on the Cross, has been replaced by a man (not even a "superman") among men. I like best Moore's last impression of his hero as he moves out of Paul's world with a group of monks from the East.

Thus consciously, or unconsciously, the writers I have discussed in this paper expose the incompatibility of the myth of Jesus with modern man, who no longer asks where he comes from or where he is going, but how to survive as best he can in this world.

## POSTSCRIPT

Fictional versions of the myth continue to be published but serious writers have apparently ceased to address themselves to the task of trying to improve upon the Gospels; and only the often belated translation into English of a work in another language brightens the picture. Mikhail Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita,<sup>1</sup> for example, although primarily a brisk and most amusing saga of the Devil's visit to Moscow, has several brilliant episodes starring Pontius Pilate as he tries to save the life of a gentle, humorous healer, Yeshua. It is the Devil himself who recounts the first episode, concerned to convince his listeners that God (and Jesus) exists, in order to legitimize his own position. Par Lagerkvist's Barabbas<sup>2</sup> also concentrates on a supporting character in the drama, the man who was spared in place of Jesus, and who survived for many years in an agony, not so much of guilt, as of doubt, until he is finally crucified, committing his soul to the darkness. In a Moslem version of the myth, City of Wrong: A Friday in Jerusalem,<sup>3</sup> M. Kamel Hussein examines the guilt of a whole society as it condemns an innocent man in the name of the established order. As Kenneth Cragg points out in his introduction to the novel,

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<sup>1</sup>The Master and Margarita, transl. from the Russian by Michael Glenny, (London: Collins and Harvill Press, 1967). (Written in 1938).

<sup>2</sup>Barabbas, transl. from the Swedish by Alan Blair, (New York: Random House, 1951).

<sup>3</sup>City of Wrong: A Friday in Jerusalem, transl. from the Arabic by Kenneth Cragg, (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1959).



"the central figure . . . is strangely absent from the scene." This may be explained by the fact that Islam believes Jesus was never actually crucified, yet the author never makes clear who dies in Jesus' place, or when the substitution is effected. However, since the whole focus is on the accusers not the accused, this is not important to the development of the novel.

Then there are the popular best-sellers. Irving Wallace's The Word<sup>4</sup> has plenty of violence, sex and suspense, in a topical story of the discovery of a lost manuscript, a Gospel according to James. This gospel presents a "liberated" Jesus, one who, for example, believes in the equality of women with men. Most of the story concerns the efforts of a gallant young P.R. man to authenticate the manuscript, and his martyrdom at the hands of the "big publishers" when he realizes and tries to expose the fact that it is a fake. Nature imitates Art in the publication of The Secret Gospel<sup>5</sup> by Morton Smith, who claims to have discovered a fragment of "A Secret Gospel According to Mark," which exposes the secrets of Jesus the Magician, especially in regard to baptismal ceremonies and thus explains the presence in the garden of the naked young man grasping a sheet about him. Such books as this are

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<sup>4</sup>The Word, (Richmond Hill, Ontario: Simon & Schuster, 1972).

<sup>5</sup>The Secret Gospel, (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

presented as works of scholarship--they include The Passover Plot<sup>6</sup> by Hugh J. Schonfield, who describes just how Jesus arranged to be drugged on the cross, and The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross,<sup>7</sup> by John M. Allegro, who points out that Jesus was not a man at all, but a mushroom--and are thus, blessedly, outside the scope of this investigation.

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<sup>6</sup>The Passover Plot, (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1967).

<sup>7</sup>The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross, (New York: Doubleday, 1970).

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