

# PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

## Introduction

ACCORDING TO THE *OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY* the novel is "a fictitious prose narrative of considerable length, in which characters and actions representative of the real life of past or present times are portrayed in a plot of greater or less complexity." An important characteristic of the novel is that its plot should unfold with sufficient cogency to capture the reader's attention and induce what Coleridge called "the willing suspension of disbelief." It is this feature of the novel to which Graham Greene calls attention in subtitling certain of his works "entertainments". Now while the communication of unadorned truth is the province of "nonfiction" writers, the writer of fiction may, nevertheless, seek to employ the form of the novel to convey a philosophical or social outlook to the reader. This can be achieved, for example, by the obvious method of having a sympathetic character state the author's opinions or that of having an absurd one express views which the author fails to share. Thus the insistence of the Dr. Pangloss character in *Voltaire's Candide* that "all is for the best in this, the best of all possible worlds" – even when confronted with incontrovertible evidence to the contrary – is clearly intended as a satire on what Voltaire took to be the shallow optimism of Leibniz and his followers.

A novelist may choose to communicate an outlook not through the device of bald assertion, but instead through the subtler, and yet at the same time more realistic means of provoking selected characters to respond to "objective" situations tailored to embody that outlook. The protagonists of *Patricia Highsmith's* novels, for instance, find themselves embroiled in circumstances, often of their own making, in which they are compelled to act, sometimes

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

with violence, and yet are not called upon to answer for their misdeeds. Here the impression is received that, although individual human beings act in accordance with their own immediate ends, that is, through local causation, in society at large randomness prevails. From the novels and, especially, the short stories of *Cornell Woolrich* one obtains a quite different view of the nature of society, for, as in Greek tragedy, his heroes are doomed from the start, their futile actions no more than the struggle of a fly trapped in a spider's web. In fact we know from Woolrich's biography that his view of the world was irremediably pessimistic: for him human life was a mockery, an interval of meaningless anxiety and pain between birth and death. A different sort of pessimism concerning the human predicament—bleak, but tinged with romanticism—is to be found in the novels of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian writer *Mikhail Artsybashev*. In his **Breaking Point** of 1913 he created what may be termed without exaggeration the "ultimate" Russian novel. Set in a grim Siberian village, extreme depression induces most of its principal characters to commit suicide. This fate is shared even by the "student" character whose role it is to represent optimism and belief in social progress: given all that has gone before, it seems inevitable that one turns the last page of the book to find that he has hanged himself in despair at the futility of it all. Artsybashev's pessimism (along with that of many Russian writers of the period) is traceable to the failure of the uprising of 1905, and the consequent stagnation of the process of social reform in Russia.

We shall be concerned with philosophy *in* literature, which is to be distinguished from philosophy *of* literature. (How much can turn on a simple preposition!) In the latter, literature itself is taken as the object of philosophical investigation, just as in the philosophy of science, of mathematics, of art, of music, etc. In

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

philosophy in literature, by contrast, individual literary works are studied as vehicles for the expression of philosophical ideas. If philosophical writings are themselves regarded as literary works, then this study would necessarily include the philosophical texts themselves; indeed the works of some philosophers who were also masters of literary style such as Plato, Lucretius, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are normally included within "literature." But works by less "literary" philosophers such as Aristotle, Leibniz, and Kant are usually excluded; and, notwithstanding Stanislaw Lem's remark that "once it is no longer assented to, a philosophy automatically becomes fantastic literature," it is unlikely that the works of Hegel, say, will ever be read in the same way as one reads a novel.

Accordingly by "literature" we shall mean *narrative* literature, that is, literature which, in a broad sense at least, tells a story. Our principal topic for discussion will be the *novel of ideas*, which for present purposes may be defined as a novel in which themes of a philosophical or scientific nature play a prominent role. The body of such writings is naturally very large. At the very least it would include *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, *Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Honoré de Balzac's La Peau de Chagrin*, *Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Fyodor Dostoyevsky's The Grand Inquisitor and Notes from Underground*, *Albert Camus's L'Étranger*, *Elias Canetti's Auto-da-Fé*, *Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace*, *Jack London's The Sea-Wolf*, *Dashiell Hammett's The Maltese Falcon*, *Joris-Karl Huysmans's À Rebours*, *Arthur Koestler's Darkness at Noon*, *George Orwell's Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-four*, *Yevgeni Zamyatin's We*, *Aldous Huxley's Brave New World*, *Karel Čapek's War with the Newts*, *Thomas Mann's The Magic Mountain*, *Hermann Broch's The Unknown Quantity* and *The Sleepwalkers*, *Jean-Paul Sartre's Nausea*, and *L. H. Myers's*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

**The Near and the Far.** It would include much of the work of *Hermann Hesse, Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges*. And, of course, by definition it includes the whole extraordinary genre of *science fiction*.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

### I. Political Novels

THE RUSSIAN WRITER *YEVGENI ZAMYATIN* (1884-1937) had been a member of the Bolshevik party in his youth and was imprisoned, and later exiled, after the abortive Russian uprising of 1905. Having left the Bolsheviks before the 1917 revolution, his independent and critical attitude to the new regime caused him to fall into disfavour with its authorities, and as a result he left Russia for good in 1931.

Zamyatin had a Manichaeian view of the world, seeing existence as an eternal struggle between the forces of energy and entropy, life and death. This philosophy had a pronounced influence on his artistic outlook:

*In art the surest way to destroy is to canonize one form and one philosophy.*

A great enthusiast for the revolutionary and the fantastic, he rejected realism in literature as an outworn, reactionary form incapable of meeting the demands of a time when both science and revolution had exploded the solid, familiar world. In an essay of 1923 he remarks:

*Life itself has lost its plane reality: it is projected, not along the old fixed points, but along the coordinates of Einstein, of revolution. In this new projection, the best known formulas and objects become displaced, fantastic, familiar-unfamiliar. This is why it is so logical for literature today to be drawn to the fantastic plot or to the amalgam of reality and fantasy.*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

Zamyatin's anti-utopian novel **We**, written in 1920, remained unpublished in Russia until after the collapse of the Soviet Union. George Orwell had read this novel and its influence can be seen in his **Nineteen Eighty-four**.

In the society of the twenty-sixth century depicted in **We**, the citizens of the Single State are brought up to behave like machines and have lost their individuality so completely as to be identified only as numbers. They live in glass houses (**We** was written before the invention of television), so enabling the political police - the "Guardians" - to supervise them more easily. They all wear identical uniforms, and a human being is commonly referred to either as "a number" or "a unif." They live on synthetic food, and their usual recreation is to parade in fours to the accompaniment of the anthem of the Single State blaring through loudspeakers. At prescribed intervals they are allowed exactly one hour of privacy behind lowered curtains around their glass apartments. The Single State is governed by a personage known as The Benefactor, who is unanimously re-elected every year by the entire population. The narrator of Zamyatin's story, the engineer D-503, an essentially conventional fellow, is jolted from his complacent acceptance of the system by falling in love (a crime in the Single State) with a certain I-330 who is a member of an underground resistance movement. She succeeds in overcoming his doubts and induces him to join it. When the rebellion finally breaks out D-503 is shocked to discover that the members of this movement - more numerous than he had supposed - actually engage, when their curtains are down, in such criminal activities as smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol. D-503 is ultimately saved from the consequences of his own folly when the authorities announce that they have discovered the cause of the recent disorders: it is that some human beings suffer from a disease called "fantasy."

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

The cerebral node responsible for this disease has been located and can be cauterized by means of X-rays. D-503 undergoes the treatment, after which it is easy from him to do what he knows he ought to have done all along -- that is, betray his confederates to the police. They are all literally "liquidated" by a machine which reduces them to a puff of smoke and a pool of clear water. Finally relieved of his fantasy, D-503 takes up his old life with equanimity.

Like the character D-503, Zamyatin had originally been trained as an engineer and his novel is full of scientific references: even its form mimics laboratory notes. But the dissident character I-330 reflects another of Zamyatin's views (which is stated explicitly in certain of his essays), namely, that humanity will develop eternally and that there can be no "final revolution." This is brought out in the following exchange between D-503 and I-330:

*"Do you realize that what you are suggesting is revolution?"*

*"Of course it's revolution. Why not?"*

*"Because there can't be a revolution. Our revolution was the last and there can never be another. Everybody knows that."*

*"My dear, you're a mathematician: tell me, what is the last number?"*

*"What do you mean, the last number?"*

*"Well then, the biggest number!"*

*"But that's absurd. There are infinitely many numbers. There can't be a last one."*

*"Then why do you talk about the last revolution?"*

Although Zamyatin's purpose in writing **We** may not have been the pillorying of the Soviet regime, passages such as the one above

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

can hardly have made the Soviet authorities anxious to see the book published.

The daily lives of the "unifs" of the Single State are regulated by the Tables of Hourly Commandments, which are derived from what Zamyatin calls the "Taylor System." This is a satirical reference to the American engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor's (1856-1915) idea of "scientific management," in which the actions of human beings in production are to be coordinated in the most efficient manner. In **We** Zamyatin depicts a society in which the idea of scientific management has been carried to its logical end: human beings are not merely subordinated to the machine, but are required to become mechanisms themselves.

\*

*Aldous Huxley* (1894-1963) is best known for his anti-utopian novel **Brave New World** (1932), a black comedy in which, like **We**, attention is drawn to the dangers of a totalitarianism based on science. In the year 632 after Ford (i.e., the 26th century), humanity is unified in the World State, whose motto proclaims "COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY." These ideals have been achieved through wholesale genetic engineering, in which embryos are cloned and chemically adjusted (in "Hatcheries") to develop the mental and physical attributes demanded by society. Once "decanted," the babies enter the appropriate social caste - from alpha to epsilon - for which they have been prepared. The population has free access to a psychotropic drug, soma<sup>1</sup>, which affords its users a temporary escape, without side effects, from reality. One of the novel's protagonists, Bernard Marx, visits a

---

<sup>1</sup> The Sanskrit word *soma* means "an intoxicating plant juice of ancient India used as an offering to the gods and as a drink of immortality by celebrants of Vedic ritual."



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

Savage Reservation, in which a few "primitives" are permitted to lead a pre-technological life. There Bernard encounters a woman, who has been long stranded in the Reservation far from her origins in civilized society. Sympathetic to her plight, he obtains permission to return her, along with her Savage son, to the community to which she feels she belongs. But during the many years she has spent on the reservation she has had no access to the rejuvenating drugs available to everyone in ordinary society. The resulting effects of age and disease make her disgusting in everyone's eyes, and in her misery she gradually overdoses on soma. Later, her son and two dissidents are interviewed by Mustapha Mond, one of the ten World Controllers, who argues that the social control exercised by the State is necessary for stability. The two malcontents are sent to islands where their activities can be pursued without risk of affecting the rest of society. The Savage, whose idea of the world has been gleaned through the reading of Shakespeare, remains unpersuaded by the Controller's arguments. He attempts to withdraw into solitude, but his exoticism and odd behaviour attract the attentions of the mass media to such a degree that he is finally bedevilled into committing suicide.

The World Controller and the Savage represent opposite poles in their beliefs concerning what is desirable for human beings: the one justifies the loss of "spiritual" values on the grounds that they merely obstruct the attainment of happiness, the other elevates spiritual values above all else. To the Savage's question "Then you think there is no God?", Mond replies:

*"No, I think there quite probably is one...but he manifests himself in different ways to different men. In pre-modern times he manifested himself as the being that's described in those books.*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*Now...he manifests himself as an absence; as though he weren't there at all."*

*"That's your fault."*

*"Call it the fault of civilization. God isn't compatible with machinery and scientific medicine and universal happiness..."*

*"But isn't it natural to feel that there's a God?"*

*"You might as well ask if it's natural to do up one's trousers with zippers. You remind me of another of those old fellows called Bradley. He defined philosophy as the finding of bad reasons for what one believes by instinct. As if one believed anything by instinct! One believes things because one has been conditioned to believe them. Finding bad reasons for what believes for other bad reasons – that's philosophy. People believe in God because they've been conditioned to believe in God."*

*"But all the same, it is natural to believe in God when you're alone – quite alone, in the night, thinking about death..."*

*"But people never are alone now. We make them hate solitude; and we arrange their lives so that it's impossible for them ever to have it."*

...

*"What about self-denial then? If you had a God, you'd have a reason for self-denial."*

*"But industrial civilization is only possible when there's no self-denial. Self-indulgence up to the very limits imposed by hygiene and economics. Otherwise the wheels stop turning."*

...

*"Quite apart from God...isn't there something in living dangerously?"*

*"There's a great deal in it. Men and women must have their adrenals stimulated from time to time. It's one of the conditions of perfect health. That's why we've made the V.P.S. treatments compulsory."*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

"V.P.S.?"

*"Violent Passion Surrogate. Regularly once a month. We flood the whole system with adrenalin. It's the complete psychological equivalent of fear and rage. All the tonic effects of murdering Desdemona and being murdered by Othello, without any of the inconveniences."*

*"But I like the inconveniences."*

*"We don't. We prefer to do things comfortably."*

*"But I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin."*

*"In fact, you're claiming the right to be unhappy."*

*"All right then, yes, I'm claiming the right to be unhappy."*

*"Not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat; the right to be lice-ridden; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen tomorrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind."*

*"I claim them all."*

*"You're welcome."*

Like the narrator of Dostoevsky's **Notes from Underground** (see below), the Savage claims the right to choose the form of his life, in defiance of scientific rationality.

Huxley first established his literary reputation in the years immediately following the First World War. His early novels are brilliantly witty satirical dissections of the society of the day. But it is in **Brave New World** that Huxley's concern for the future of humanity first appears. Originally intended as a satire on the utopias of H. G. Wells, its apparently antitotalitarian message established Huxley as an icon of the liberal tradition. Yet at the

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

time it was written, Huxley was, like his fellow-intellectuals Yeats, Shaw and D.H. Lawrence, a cultural elitist with a horror of mass society, a proponent of eugenics and a defender of hierarchical government, believing that only radical control from above offered a way out of the chaos to which Western society had been brought by the Great Depression. (Huxley's social beliefs at the time had been strongly influenced both by Wells and the Italian sociologist Vilfredo Pareto, a theorist of social elites.) But the rise of Hitler and the brutalities of German Nazism shocked him into changing his attitude toward totalitarianism as a means of achieving social stability, and he soon came to reject all forms of dictatorship, becoming an active anti-Fascist.

In his *Brave New World Revisited* of 1959 he surveys the changes which have taken place in the world since 1931 when **Brave New World** was written. He says, somewhat pessimistically, that

*The prophecies I made in 1931 are coming true much sooner than I thought they would. The blessed interval between too little order and the nightmare of too much has not begun and shows no sign of beginning.*

In his later years Huxley became something of a mystic. In *The Perennial Philosophy* he presents an anthology of excerpts and commentaries designed to illustrate what he called "the highest common factor of all the higher religions." In the 1950s Huxley experimented with altered states of consciousness through the use of psychotropic drugs such as mescaline, as reported in *The Doors of Perception* (1954) and *Heaven and Hell* (1956).

Other important novels of Huxley include *Point Counter Point* (1923), *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936) and *After Many a Summer*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

(1939). *The Hidden Huxley*, ed. D. Bradshaw (1995) contains many of Huxley's social essays from the 1930s.

\*

The Austro-Hungarian writer *Arthur Koestler* (1905-83) was born in Budapest, and educated in Vienna. His first books were written in Hungarian, later in German, then, after 1940, in English. He had been a member of the Communist Party as a young man and during the 1930s spent some time in the Soviet Union. In 1938 he broke with the Party.

Koestler's novel **Darkness at Noon** (1940) is a brilliant and disturbing analysis of the logic of revolutionary dictatorship and the problem of political ends and means. Rubashov, the novel's central figure is an intellectual and one of the old Bolshevik founders of the Soviet Union. Having already twice recanted his ideological errors, he is arrested at night, taken to prison, interrogated mercilessly, and finally induced to confess to a number of fantastic crimes and conspiracies. He is given a public trial and summarily executed in the cellar of the prison.

The focal question in **Darkness at Noon** is: what causes a revolutionary to confess to crimes that he has not committed and which his accusers surely know that he has not committed? Rubashov is not subjected to, nor even threatened with, physical torture, and while the relentless interrogations bring him to the point of physical collapse, his mental toughness endures. In the end Rubashov confesses because he becomes persuaded of the *political necessity* of so doing. After his final questioning, in a passage with distant echoes of **The Grand Inquisitor** (see below) his interrogator sums up the position:

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*"The Party's line was sharply defined. Its tactics were determined by the principle that the end justifies the means -- all means, without exception. In the spirit of this principle, the public prosecutor will demand your life, Citizen Rubashov.*

*"Your faction, Citizen Rubashov, is beaten and destroyed. You wanted to split the Party, although you must have known that a split in the Party meant civil war. You know of the dissatisfaction of the peasantry, which has not yet learned to understand the sense of the sacrifices imposed on it. In a war which may be only a few months away, such currents can lead to a catastrophe. Hence the imperative necessity for the Party to be united. It must be cast as if from one mould -- filled with blind discipline and absolute trust. You and your friends, Citizen Rubashov, have made a rent in the Party. If your repentance is real, then you must help us heal this rent. I have told you, it is the last service the Party will ask of you.*

*"Your task is simple. You have set it yourself: to gild the Right, to blacken the Wrong. The policy of the opposition is wrong. Your task is therefore to make the opposition contemptible; to make the masses understand that opposition is a crime and that the leaders of the opposition are criminals. That is the simple language which the masses understand. If you begin to talk of your complicated motives, you will only create confusion amongst them. Your task, Citizen Rubashov, is to avoid awakening sympathy and pity. Sympathy and pity for the opposition are a danger to the country.*

*"Comrade Rubashov, I hope that you have understood the task which the party has set you."*

*"I understand."*

The interrogator finally tells Rubashov:

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*"The Party promises only one thing: after the victory, one day when it can do no more harm, the material in the secret archives will be published. Then the world will learn what was in the background of this Punch and Judy show – as you called it – which we had to act to them according to history's textbook...And then you, and some of your friends of the older generation, will be given the sympathy which are denied to you today."*

Thereupon Rubashov signs the confession.

**Darkness at Noon**<sup>2</sup> was written not long after the Moscow trials and provides a penetrating analysis of the psychological state of the many old Bolsheviks who confessed publicly to an absurd catalogue of crimes. The character Rubashov would seem to be modelled both on Trotsky and the prominent old Bolshevik Nikolai Bukharin, the architect of the early Soviet economic system.

In his autobiography, *The Invisible Writing*, Koestler remarks:

*I was twenty-six when I joined the Communist Party, and thirty-three when I left it. The years between had been decisive years, both by the season of life which they filled, and the way they filled it with a single-minded purpose. Never before nor after had life been so brimful of meaning as during those seven years. They had the superiority of a beautiful error over a shabby truth.*

---

<sup>2</sup> In this connection it is worth mentioning the related novels *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* (1948) by Victor Serge (1889-1947) and *The Chains of Fear* (1958) by Nikolai Narokov (1887-?). Serge, who was closely associated with Trotsky, also published a vivid account of early post-revolutionary Russia in his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (1969).

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

Koestler goes on to describe the composition of **Darkness at Noon**:

*I knew, for instance, that in the end Rubashov would break down and confess to his imaginary crimes, but I had only a vague and general notion of the reasons which would induce him to do so. These reasons emerged step by step during the interrogations of Rubashov by the two investigating magistrates... The questions and answers in the dialogue were determined by the mental climate of the closed system; they were not invented but deduced by the quasi-mathematical proceedings of the unconscious from that rigid logical framework which held both the accused and the accuser, the victim and the executioner, in its grip. According to the rules of the game they could only act and argue as they did.*

*To the Western mind, unacquainted with the system and its rules, the confessions in the [Moscow] trials appeared as one of the great enigmas of our time. Why had the Old Bolsheviks, heroes and leaders of the Revolution, who had so often braved death that they called themselves "dead men on furlough", confessed to these absurd and hair-raising lies? ... There remained a hard core of men...with a revolutionary past of thirty, forty years behind them, the veterans of Tsarist prisons and Siberian exile, whose total and gleeful self-abasement remained inexplicable. It was this "hard core" that Rubashov was meant to represent.*

*The solution that emerged in the novel became known as the "Rubashov theory of the confessions", and was the subject of a long public controversy.*



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

Koestler points out that the “Rubashov theory”, which he arrived at through an unconscious process of logical deduction, had received independent confirmation through evidence provided by the head of Soviet Military intelligence, General Walter Krivitsky, who in 1937 broke with Stalin’s regime, and who was eventually assassinated by Stalin’s agents) Krivitsky’s memoirs, published in 1939 when Koestler had nearly completed **Darkness at Noon** contains an account of how a certain hard-core Bolshevik was persuaded to confess which is uncannily similar to that “deduced” by Koestler.

\*

*George Orwell* was the pseudonym of the English novelist and political writer Eric Blair (1903-1950). His writing includes hundreds of essays and newspaper articles covering virtually every aspect of modern life, from major political issues to the tiniest details of the daily round. He is best known, however, for his political satires **Animal Farm** (1945) and **Nineteen Eighty-four** (1949), both of which are powerful indictments of authoritarian tyranny.

**Animal Farm** takes the form of an allegory. The animals on Mr. Jones's farm revolt against their human masters and violently expel them. Led by the pigs, they determine to run the farm themselves on egalitarian principles. But the pigs become corrupted by power and, under their leader Napoleon, institute a new tyranny. The animals' revolutionary idealism decays and its brave slogans are cynically rewritten ("All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others"). The idealistic pig Snowball is driven out and Boxer, the noble carthorse whose

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

strength and self-sacrifice had helped to make the revolution possible, is sent to the slaughterhouse. As a final betrayal, the pigs come to an understanding with Mr. Jones.

In **Nineteen Eighty-four** the world is divided into three superstates, Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia, each perpetually at war with the other. Britain, in which the story is set, has become Airstrip One in the state of Oceania, which is ruled over by the Party under the supreme leadership of the possibly nonexistent Big Brother, whose image is everywhere. The Party's rule is enforced through the agency of four ministries, each wielding absolute power in its own domain: the Ministry of Peace whose concern is war, the Ministry of Plenty which deals with scarcities, the Ministry of Truth—bearing its three slogans, WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH—, which handles propaganda, and lastly the Ministry of Love—headquarters of the dreaded Thought Police—which dispenses law and order. In its pursuit of total domination, the Party has extended its control over the past by rewriting history and over the future by redesigning the language. "Newspeak," the modern version of the English tongue being fashioned by the Party, is replete with such mind-numbing words as "doublethink<sup>3</sup>," "thoughtcrime," "plusgood," "prolefeed," and "sexcrime." Installed in each room throughout the land is a telescreen, which, since it cannot be turned off, enables the authorities to monitor every action, word, gesture, and thought. In this dystopia a minor

---

<sup>3</sup> Defined as follows:

*To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully-constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them; to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy; to forget whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again: and, above all, to apply the same process to the process itself.*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

party functionary, Winston Smith, commits thoughtcrimes by keeping a secret diary and loving a girl called Julia, but is seduced into self-betrayal by his superior O'Brien. He is arrested and taken to the Ministry of Love, where he is subjected to prolonged humiliation and torture by his interrogators. Eventually he is sent to Room 101, in which is to be found everyone's ultimate horror. There his spirit is broken so completely that he surrenders his identity to the state and learns to love Big Brother.

Unlike the majority of left-wing intellectuals in the 1930s, Orwell was very critical of the Soviet Union and of the Communist Party generally, which he saw less as a vehicle for achieving the genuine socialism he desired than as an instrument of totalitarian oppression. The satire of **Animal Farm** describes, in straightforward allegorical form, the degeneration of the Russian revolution (with Napoleon and Snowball representing Stalin and Trotsky, respectively). In **Nineteen Eighty-four** Orwell enlarges and deepens his satire. Here he is concerned to show that the ultimate object of all totalitarianism is power for its own sake, power unalloyed, and that this power, carried to its furthest limits, must entail the obliteration of the idea that the individual possesses a consciousness independent of the governing authority, and, so, in the end, the obliteration of the idea of an independently existing objective reality. This is memorably, if chillingly, set forth by O'Brien in one of his later interrogations of Winston:

*"The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness: only power, pure power. What pure power means you will understand presently. We are different from all the oligarchies*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*of the past, in that we know what we are doing. All the others, even those who resembled ourselves, were cowards and hypocrites. The German Nazis and the Russian Communists came very close to us in their methods, but they never had the courage to recognize their own motives. They pretended, perhaps they even believed, that they had seized power unwillingly and for a limited time, and that just round the corner there would be a paradise where human beings would be free and equal. We are not like that. We know that no one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it. Power is not a means, it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship. The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power. Now do you begin to understand me?*

*"We are the priests of power. God is power. But at present power is only a word so far as you are concerned. It is time for you to gather some idea of what power means. The first thing you must realize is that power is collective. The individual only has power in so far as he ceases to be an individual. You know the Party slogan: 'Freedom is slavery.' Has it ever occurred to you that it is reversible? Slavery is freedom. Alone – free – the human being is always defeated. It must be so, because every human being is doomed to die, which is the greatest of all failures. But if he can make complete, utter submission, if he can escape from his identity, if he can merge himself into the Party so that he is the Party, then he is all-powerful and immortal. The second thing for you to realize is that power is power over human beings. Over the body – but, above all, over the mind. Power over matter – external reality, as you would call it – is not important. Already our control of matter is absolute."*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*"But how can you control matter?" Winston bursts out. "You don't even control the climate or the law of gravity. And there are disease, pain, death, –"*

*O'Brien silences him by a movement of his hand. "We control matter because we control the mind. Reality is inside the skull. You will learn by degrees, Winston. There is nothing that we could not do. Invisibility, levitation – anything. I could float off the floor like a soap bubble if I wish to. I do not wish to, because the Party does not wish it. You must get rid of those nineteenth-century ideas about the laws of Nature. We make the laws of Nature."*

*"But you do not. You are not even masters of this planet. What about Eurasia and Eastasia? You have not conquered them yet."*

*"Unimportant. We shall conquer them when it suits us. And if we did not, what difference would it make? We can shut them out of existence. Oceania is the world."*

*"But the world itself is only a speck of dust. And man is tiny – helpless! How long has he been in existence? For millions of years the earth was uninhabited. "*

*"Nonsense. The earth is as old as we are, no older. How could it be older? Nothing exists except through human consciousness."*

*"But the rocks are full of the bones of extinct animals – mammoths and mastodons and enormous reptiles which lived here long before man was ever heard of."*

*"Have you ever seen these bones, Winston? Of course not. Nineteenth-century biologists invented them. Before man there was nothing. After man, if he could come to an end, there would be nothing. Outside man there is nothing."*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*"But the whole universe is outside us. Look at the stars! Some of them are a million light-years away. They are out of our reach for ever."*

*"What are the stars?" said O'Brien indifferently. "They are bits of fire a few kilometres away. We could reach them if we wanted to. Or we could blot them out. The earth is the centre of the universe. The sun and the stars go round it. For certain purposes, of course, that is not true. When we navigate the ocean, or when we predict an eclipse, we often find it convenient to assume that the earth goes round the sun and that the stars are million upon million kilometres away. Do you suppose it is beyond us to produce a dual system of astronomy? The stars can be near or distant, according as we need them. Do you suppose our mathematicians are unequal to that? Have you forgotten doublethink?"*

*"I told you, Winston, that metaphysics is not your strong point. The word you are trying to think of is solipsism. But you are mistaken. This is not solipsism. Collective solipsism, if you like. But that is a different thing: in fact, the opposite thing."*

The notion that there is no reality outside the consciousness of a ruling oligarchy, no objective reality into which one can escape, is a singularly disturbing form of the doctrine of *subjective idealism* – the claim that reality is mental. Subjective idealism in its purest form is most famously associated with *George Berkeley*, the eighteenth century philosopher, who summed it up in the phrase *esse est percipi*: to exist is to be perceived. Berkeley, as a theist (indeed a Bishop!) held that the mind of God perceives everything simultaneously, thus ensuring the continued existence of what is normally taken to be the external world<sup>4</sup>. But once God is

---

<sup>4</sup> In this connection it is worth quoting the famous limerick by Ronald Knox which amusingly sums up Berkeley's theory of material objects:

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

removed from the scene, as in **Nineteen Eighty-four**, there is nothing in subjective idealism that prevents the "world" from shrinking to the shared irrational beliefs of a group of fanatical sadists. Orwell shows brilliantly how subjective idealism backed up by force can become the ultimate totalitarianism.

The grim physical backdrop of **1984** was intended by Orwell as a satire on some of the less attractive features of immediate postwar Britain—the rationing, the griminess, the feeling of exhaustion after a long war. Also, in the course of writing **1984** Orwell was himself slowly dying.

We clearly influenced the writing of **1984**<sup>5</sup>, and in fact in 1946 Orwell published a review of Zamyatin's novel. In his review Orwell compares Zamyatin's book with **Brave New World**, remarking that he finds Huxley's novel less realistic politically than Zamyatin's, since Huxley supplies no clear reason why the society he depicts should be stratified in such an elaborate way:

*The aim is not economic exploitation, but the desire to bully and dominate does not seem to be a motive either. There is [in Huxley's novel] no power hunger, no sadism, no hardness of*

---

*There was a young man who said, "God  
Must think it exceedingly odd  
If he finds that this tree  
Continues to be  
When there's no one about in the Quad.*

REPLY

*Dear Sir:  
Your astonishment's odd;  
I am always about in the Quad.  
And that's why the tree  
Continues to be,  
Since observed by*

Yours faithfully,  
GOD

<sup>5</sup> Another influence is to be found in James Burnham's *Managerial Revolution* (1941), also reviewed by Orwell, in which a future world split into 3 oligarchical superstates is envisaged, whose governing classes are not the possessors of wealth, but those who command technological or managerial skills.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*any kind. Those at the top have no strong motive for staying at the top, and though everybody is happy in a vacuous way, life has become so pointless that it is difficult to believe that such a society could endure.*

By contrast, according to Orwell,

*Zamyatin's book is on the whole more relevant to our present situation...[in its] intuitive grasp of the irrational side of totalitarianism – human sacrifice, cruelty as an end in itself, the worship of a leader who is credited with divine attributes – [it is this] that makes Zamyatin's book superior to Huxley's.*

In October 1949 Aldous Huxley (who had taught Orwell at Eton) wrote Orwell a letter in which he praised *1984*, but suggested that its horrors were destined to modulate into the brainwashing of his own *Brave New World*:

*I had to wait a long time before being able to embark on 1984. Agreeing with all that the critics have written of it, I need not tell you, yet once more, how fine and how profoundly important the book is.*

*The philosophy of the ruling minority in 1984 is a sadism that has been carried to its logical conclusion by going beyond sex and denying it. Whether in actual fact the policy of the boot-on-the-face can go on indefinitely seems doubtful. My own belief is that the ruling oligarchy will find less arduous and wasteful ways of governing and of satisfying its lust for power, and that these ways will resemble those which I described in *Brave New World*... Within the next generation I believe that the world's rulers will discover that infant conditioning and narco-hypnosis are more efficient, as instruments of government, than clubs*



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*and prisons, and the lust for power can be just as completely satisfied by suggesting people into loving their servitude as by flogging and kicking them into obedience... The change will be brought about as a result of a felt need for increased efficiency. Meanwhile, of course, there may be a large scale biological and atomic war – in which case we shall have nightmares of other and scarcely imaginable kinds.*

In a remarkable essay, *1984: The Mysticism of Cruelty*, the political historian Isaac Deutscher (who knew Orwell personally) analyzes the fascination with the irrational aspect of totalitarianism to which Orwell gives full expression in **1984**. Deutscher describes **1984** as “a document of dark disillusionment not only with Stalinism but with every form and shade of socialism...a cry from the abyss of despair.” He believes that it was the spectacle of Stalin’s great purges of 1936–8 that plunged Orwell into that abyss. As Deutscher points out, Orwell, like most British socialists, had never been a Marxist, finding Marxism’s dialectical materialist philosophy obscure, and its generalizations about social forces and historical events suspect. By nature Orwell was a straightforward rationalist, a believer in empirical common sense. But his rationalism and common sense could not deal with the horrors of Stalin’s purges and Hitler’s death camps. In Deutscher’s view, this led Orwell to abandon rationalism and to “view reality through the dark glasses of a quasimystical pessimism.” Orwell still sought an answer as to *why* human beings could perpetrate such horrors. But his distrust of historical generalizations and sociopolitical theory left open only one motive – sadistic hunger for power. As O’Brien tells Winston:

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*"If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – for ever."*

Although he wrote a number of novels in addition to **Animal Farm** and **1984**, e.g., *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1929) and *Coming Up for Air* (1936), Orwell recognized that he was more of a pamphleteer than a novelist. He once said:

*One has masses of experience which one personally wants to write about, and no way of using them except by disguising them in a novel.*

As a journalist Orwell was best known for *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), a vivid report on unemployment in the North of England, and *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) in which he describes his experiences as a volunteer with the Republican army during the Spanish Civil War. His *Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters* (1968) contain the bulk of his pieces on literature and politics.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

### II. German Literature

PHILOSOPHY HAS LONG PLAYED an important role in German literary and artistic life. So it will be helpful to begin our discussion of German literature by summarizing the work of those German philosophers who have exerted an influence on literature, both in Germany and abroad.

German philosophy has been chiefly *idealist* in tendency, maintaining that reality is at bottom contained in, or at least in some essential way related to, the contents of our own minds. *Immanuel Kant*, regarded as the greatest of modern philosophers, published his *Critique of Pure Reason*, in 1781, a work which has influenced philosophical thinking down to the present day. Its central doctrine, which Kant termed *transcendental idealism*, is that the objects we encounter in the world are never given to us as “things in themselves”, but only as appearances, or *phenomena*, the forms of which are determined by the innate capacities and structure of our minds. But Kant was not a subjective idealist. He did not claim, as did Berkeley, that there is nothing behind the appearances, that the “things in themselves” (or *noumena*) supposedly underlying the phenomena we experience are no more than “permanent possibilities of perception”. His claim is that these external objects do exist, but only in the *transcendental* sense of being *thinkable* but not directly *knowable* by our minds. This idea of Kant’s has proved seminal both in philosophy, and, at several removes, in literature. The central injunction of Kant’s ethics—the *categorical imperative*—has also been very influential. This asserts that an action is morally right only when one would will it to be a universal law. Thus, for example, suppose I consider lying to you so as to persuade you to lend me some money, the underlying idea thus being that I shall lie whenever I shall gain

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

thereby. Can I will this to become a universal law? Only if I were ignorant or perverse, because if it were to become one, the very practices of communication on which lying depends would eventually collapse.

Also influential were the philosophical doctrines of Kant's successors. *Johann Gottlieb Fichte* (1762–1814) claimed that the sole ultimate reality is the *Absolute Ego*, or God, an infinite consciousness from which our own finite egos and moral being result through an act of self-restriction. According to Fichte, the absolute ego restricts itself precisely so as to create that sphere within which morality can function; for morality cannot work, nor the will operate, without encountering some resistance. While Fichte placed consciousness of self at the centre of his philosophical system, *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling* (1775–1854)—the chief philosopher of the Romantic movement—emphasized the autonomous existence of the natural world, which, in his view, is a universal organism through which spirit evolves unconsciously. For Schelling, Mind reaches its consummation not, as Kant and Fichte had maintained, through morality, but rather through the creative act of the artist.

With *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel* (1770–1831), philosophic idealism reaches its zenith in the form of *objective idealism*. For Hegel reality is the self-unfolding of what he terms the *Absolute Mind*, and the goal of history, as presented in his most influential and accessible work, the *Philosophy of History*, is that Mind should come to understand itself as the sole existing being. In his greatest work, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel seeks to show that all intellectual development is the logically necessary result of Mind's effort at self-comprehension. The motive power for this process is furnished by the Dialectic, the struggle arising from the mutually contradictory nature of objects in the world. Hegel's

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

doctrines directly influenced Marx and Engels, who adopted his theory of historical development, but “turned it on its head” by assigning matter, rather than mind, the central role in the process.

The German philosopher exerting the greatest literary influence throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was *Arthur Schopenhauer* (1788–1860). His philosophical system pivoted on the notion of *Will*. He identified the *Will-to-Live* as the central feature of self-awareness, extending it to the world at large where it assumes the form of a *Will-to-Exist*. For Schopenhauer the real world is thus a vast cosmic embodiment of that will. The most influential aspect of Schopenhauer’s philosophy was its *pessimistic* character. For him this arose as a necessary consequence of the primacy of Will in the world. For the object of Will is to satisfy a desire or wish, and so Will cannot exist without a desire to satisfy; but unsatisfied desire is a form of pain. Thus pain is a necessary constituent of the world, and pessimism is the result. Moreover, each individual will be driven to survive at the expense of others, leading to a war of all against all. (One notes that in this respect Schopenhauer’s views were the exact opposite of Leibniz’s, even though Leibniz can also be classed as an idealist.) Schopenhauer offered two ways out from the wretchedness of existence: aesthetic experience, and philosophic resignation, in which will has been negated and all desire overcome.

Schopenhauer’s vision of the world as a ceaseless battle of wills had a profound effect on the philosophical outlook of *Friedrich Nietzsche* (1844–1900), but he rejected Schopenhauer’s pessimistic conclusions concerning life in such a world. He was repelled by the idea of resignation, and proposed instead that life and the world be interpreted in terms of a human “will to power”, making possible the emergence of exceptional human beings—the so-called “overmen”—possessing an independence and creativity far

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

above the norm. Nietzsche was openly and profoundly hostile to most forms of morality and religious thought, believing that they feed upon and foster weakness, poisoning the human vitality which he regarded as the highest good. So he also rejected the hypothesis of God's existence—famously declaring that “God is dead”—and denied the existence of a transcendental world of being beyond human experience and aspiration. While Nietzsche was unquestionably an elitist, he was also, in a sense, a humanist. Unfortunately, it is the former aspect of his doctrine which has had the greater influence.

\*

The German novelist *Thomas Mann's* (1875-1955) monumental fictions bristle with philosophical ideas. His first novel *Buddenbrooks* (1900), a luminous analysis of the dichotomy between artistic sensibility and commercial values, charts the fortunes of a prominent Hanseatic merchant family, whose strength and prosperity undergo a gradual decline through the fascination the arts hold for successive generations. The theme of *Dr. Faustus* (1947) is the discord between genius and sanity, both in the individual and in society, while *The Holy Sinner* (1951), a retelling of the legend of St. Gregory, is an epic of retribution and penance, and the transfiguration of character.

Thomas Mann's most overtly philosophical work, **The Magic Mountain** (1924)—which Mann himself called "a dialectical novel,"—is concerned with the conflict between opposed systems of belief and the tragic consequences of such conflicts. In the early years of this century, a somewhat naive young man, Hans Castorp, enters a sanatorium situated high in the Swiss Alps, intending at first to remain only for three weeks, but in the end

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

remaining for seven years. Castorp's fellow inmates are a cosmopolitan bunch: Settembrini, an Italian liberal; Naphta, a Jesuit intellectual; Krokowski, a doctor; Clavdia Chauchat, a Russian woman; and Castorp's cousin Joachim, who longs desperately for an active life and leaves the rarefied atmosphere of the sanatorium for a time only finally to return to it to die. Most of their time is spent in heated discussion, pursued relentlessly and with an Olympian detachment from the world outside. These discussions are dominated by the growing conflict between the two brilliantly articulate intellectuals Settembrini and Naphta, who represent diametrically opposed viewpoints, the one, rationalist humanism, the other, religious authoritarianism, poles between which the somewhat impressionable Castorp is pulled back and forth. The antagonism between these two formidable characters eventually results in a duel fought with pistols: Settembrini, the first to fire, discharges his pistol into the air, but Naphta, seeking death in defiance of rationality, puts his pistol to his head and pulls the trigger. Finally Castorp leaves the sanatorium to fight in the First World War.

The dialogues between Settembrini and Naphta are masterly pieces of philosophical disputation. Settembrini's position is straightforward: he proclaims his belief "in objective, scientific truth, [that] to strive after [its] attainment is the highest law of morality, [and that its] triumphs over authority form the most glorious page in the human spirit." Naphta's view, if reactionary, is more original, a blend of pragmatism and authoritarianism reminiscent of that of O'Brien in **Nineteen Eighty-Four**. In response to Settembrini's proclamation Naphta replies:

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*"There can be no such triumphs as those you speak of; for the authority is man himself –his interests, his worth, his salvation – and thus between it and truth no conflict is possible. They coincide. ... Whatever profits man, that is the truth. In him all nature is comprehended, in all nature only he is created, and all nature only for him. He is the measure of all things, and his welfare is the sole and single criterion of truth. Any theoretic science which is without practical application to man's salvation is as such without significance, we are commanded to reject it. ... Why have we given the Platonic philosophy preference over every other, if not because it has to do with knowledge of God, and not knowledge of nature? Let me assure you that mankind is about to find its way back to this point of view. Mankind will soon perceive that it is not the task of pure science to run after godless understanding; but to reject utterly all that is harmful, all that, even ideally speaking, is without significance, in favour of instinct, measure, choice. It is childish to accuse the Church of having defended darkness rather than light. She did well...to chastise as unlawful all unconditioned striving after the 'pure' knowledge of things –such striving, that is, as is without reference to the spiritual, without bearing on man's salvation. For it is this unconditioned, this philosophical natural science that always has led, and ever will lead men into darkness."*

He goes on to say that the principles and standards of the Church, after centuries of disfavour,

*"...are being resurrected by the modern movement of communism. The similarity is complete, even to the claim for world-domination made by international labour as against international industry and finance; the world-proletariat, which is today asserting the ideals of the Civitas Dei in opposition to the*



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*discredited and decadent standards of the capitalistic bourgeoisie...Its task is to strike terror into the world for the healing of the world, that man may finally achieve salvation and deliverance, and win back at length the freedom from law and from distinction of classes, to his original status as child of God."*

When Settembrini objects to the inconsistency in Naphta's professing to accept both a Christian individualism and a socialism pushed to the point of dictatorship and terrorism, Naphta replies:

*"Opposites may be consistent with one another. It is the middling, the neither-one-thing-nor-the-other that is preposterous. Your individualism... is defective. It is a confession of weakness. It corrects its pagan state morality by the admixture of a little Christianity, a little 'rights of man,' a little so-called liberty – but that is all. An individualism that springs from the cosmic, the astrological importance of the individual soul, an individualism not social but religious, that conceives of humanity not as a conflict between the ego and society, but as a conflict between the ego and God, between the flesh and the spirit – a genuine individualism like that sorts very well with the most binding communism."*

Naphta rejects science for essentially the same reasons as Dostoevsky's narrator in **Notes from Underground** (see below) claims the right to be perverse: "because it is permissible to exercise choice, whether to believe in it or not." And in any case, he goes on to say,

*"Is not the idea of a material world existing by and for itself the most laughable of self-contradictions? The modern*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*natural sciences, as dogma, rest upon the metaphysical postulate that time, space, and causality, the forms of cognition, in which all phenomena are acted, are actual conditions, existing independently of our knowledge of them. This is an insult to the spirit..."*

Once again, we are back to subjective idealism.

Settembrini and Naphta represent irreconcilable philosophies: a rationalism directed into the external world, and an intuitionism turning inward to the world of our own thoughts. The conflict between these philosophies has never been presented with greater verve than in the dialogues of **The Magic Mountain**.

\*

The Austrian writer *Hermann Broch* (1886-1951) is the philosophical novelist *par excellence*. He used the novel as a vehicle for the expression of ethical and metaphysical problems which he believed were incapable of "scientific" resolution. In a letter written in 1932 he says:

*...you know my thesis concerning the present condition of philosophy: philosophy as such, as far as it does not become mathematics, can no longer 'prove' anything – though as 'science' it would be obliged to do so – and in view of this situation philosophy has withdrawn into mathematical concerns. However, this does not do away with the tremendous metaphysical problems that remain – not only do they exist, they are more urgent than ever – but the basis for their solution must be looked for elsewhere. This can be found in only in the irrational, the poetic. If there is a task for the poetic, and since*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*Goethe there has been one, it lies in making these mystic problems accessible to proof.*

Broch's novel **The Unknown Quantity** (1933) – one of the very few with a mathematician as the central character – embodies this thesis. In it, the young mathematician Richard Hieck learns, through falling in love and the death of his brother, that the "unknown quantity" of life resists mathematical formulation. In a comment on the novel, Broch asserts:

*It should depict that condition of the soul in which purely scientific, mathematical thinking turns into its irrational, mystic opposite, approximately into that condition which Kant expressed in the phrase "the starry skies above me and the moral law within me"... Whatever raises the claim to be called poetry has to do with the simplest basic drives of the soul, with birth and death, with love and nature and social communion, with the primordial symbols of their expression, but not with scientific materials: the mathematician Richard Hieck hence has to be occupied with mathematics only to the point where mathematics becomes the crystallization of these primordial powers of the soul, in other words, to the extent...that the cognitive process of mathematics can serve as the exponent of a deeper dynamics of the soul.*

In his great novel **The Sleepwalkers** (1932) Broch charts the progressive disintegration of values in German life during the period 1888-1918. Its three episodes span the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II, from his coronation to his abdication at the end of the First World War. In the first of these episodes, "The Romantic, 1888," we are introduced to the world of the Junker officer von Pasenow, whose youth is spent in military duty in Berlin, who falls in love with a girl below his social rank, but who dutifully

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

marries the daughter on the neighbouring estate. Broch portrays his hero as acting out a kind of confused charade based on a vanished tradition of nobility and glory. The protagonist of the second episode, "The Anarchist, 1903," is the petit-bourgeois Esch, who, after losing his job as a bookkeeper, is cast hither and thither in a world that makes no sense to him. The third episode, "The Realist, 1918," focuses on the end of the First World War and the collapse of a world whose apparent stability was based not on true "values," but on mere automatism and cliché. The characters of the two preceding volumes reappear: the Junker Pasenow, returned to active duty during the war, has risen to the rank of major and is now the military commander of a small town in Western Germany; the former bookkeeper Esch has re-emerged as the publisher of the town's newspaper. Towards the end of the war Huguenau, a former businessman and army deserter, turns up in the town. He buys into Esch's newspaper by persuading the Major to take him on as a partner, but subsequently falls out with Esch, later attempting unsuccessfully to poison the Major's mind against him. Finally, the war ends and, during the ensuing political upheavals, the Major receives a severe head wound; Huguenau takes advantage of the confusion to bayonet Esch in the back. This leaves Huguenau free to collect the balance of the money he had engineered in making the original deal with Esch, and he returns to his home town to resume his commercial activities. It is Huguenau's consistent application of business standards to all phases of life, his logical self-interest unfettered by "values," which constitutes his "Realism."

The third episode of **The Sleepwalkers** is interlarded with ten chapters, in which Broch presents his analysis of the crisis in philosophical and ethical thinking which led up to the First World War, and the subsequent "Disintegration of Values" (as each of

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

these chapters is entitled). In this discussion Broch muses on the connections among logic, history, epistemology, and religion, and on their further connection with the concept of "value." Broch avers that there is a deep connection between values and the irrational: in respect of Huguenau's murder of Esch,

*Huguenau did not think of what he had done, and still less did he recognize the irrationality that had persuaded his actions,..., he cannot know anything about it, since at every moment he is ruled by some system of values that has no other aim than to conceal and control all the irrationality on which his earthbound empirical life is based. The irrational, as well as consciousness, is, in the Kantian sense, a vehicle that accompanies all categories – it is the absolute of Life, running parallel, with all its instincts, conations and emotions, to the other absolute of Thought: irrationality not only supports every value-system – for the spontaneous act of positing a value, on which the value-system is based – is an irrational act – but it informs the whole general feeling of every age, the feeling which ensures the prevalence of the value-system, and which both in its origin and its nature is insusceptible to rational evidence...In circumstances like these it is not surprising that Huguenau knew nothing about his own irrationality.*

Broch asserts, in contradistinction with the rationalist philosophers, that every system of values springs from irrational impulses, and that the principal task of ethical thought is to transform these irrational impulses into something absolutely rational. However,

*...every system of values comes to grief in the endeavour. For the only method that the rational can follow is that of*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*approximation, an encircling method that seeks to reach the irrational by describing smaller and smaller arcs around it and never in fact reaches it, whether the irrational appears as an irrationality of one's own inner feelings, or as an irrationality of world conditions and of the infinitely complex nature of the universe - all the rational can do is atomize it. ...There is a stage in the development of every system of values during which the mutual interpenetration of the rational and the irrational reaches its maximum...these are the times of culminating achievement. ...But this condition of equilibrium is never permanent...the logic of facts...initiates the process of disintegration, the splitting up of the whole value-system into partial systems, a process which ends in complete dissociation, with free and autonomous Reason on the one hand, and free and autonomous Life on the other.*

The process of disintegration of values is, according to Broch, completed by

*...the human individual. And the less that individual partakes in some authoritative system, and the more autonomous he becomes...the narrower and more modest does his "private theology" become, the more incapable it is of comprehending any values beyond its immediate and most personal environment. ...[Such an individual] has become the exclusive representative of an individual value, and is metaphysically an outcast, for his autonomy presupposes the resolution and disintegration of all system into its individual elements; such a man is liberated from values...and can be influenced only by the irrational.*

And so, finally,

*Huguenau, a man [thus] liberated from values, was nevertheless still a member of the commercial system; he was a*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*man who had a good reputation in provincial business circles; he was a conscientious and prudent agent, who had always fulfilled his commercial duties wholly and completely, even with radical thoroughness. His murder of Esch, moreover, while it hardly came within the province of his duty as a businessman, was not an infringement of the business code. It had been a kind of holiday deed, committed at a time when even the commercial system of values had been temporarily suspended and only individual motives remained.*

With the restoration of the "commercial system of values," Huguenau is able to take up his business affairs with a clear conscience once again.

\*

The Austrian writer *Elias Canetti* (1905-1994) was the author of plays, a book of aphorisms, three volumes of autobiography charting his life in Central Europe during the turbulent first half of the century, *Crowds and Power*, a brilliant work on mass psychology, and his extraordinary novel **Auto-da-Fé** (1935). Its original German title is *Die Blendung*, which means "The Blinding," and this is certainly appropriate since the book describes a mind in the process of losing its capacity to see the world as it really is. Canetti's working title for the novel was *Kant Catches Fire*, and indeed the titles of the novel's three sections, *A head without a world*, *Headless world*, and *The world in the head*, have a distinctly Kantian flavour. Peter Kien, a renowned and immensely erudite sinologist, is a man of strict self-discipline and regular habits who leads a reclusive existence, venturing outside his apartment housing his vast personal library only to take his

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

regular morning constitutional. Carrying everything he requires in his head, he has no need for contact with the outside world. But Kien makes the mistake of marrying his housekeeper, Therese, a scheming woman who, being physically far stronger than he, finally throws him out of his apartment. Cast from his beloved library into a hostile world for which his hermetic life has left him totally unprepared, he loses his reason, being eventually reduced to leading a degraded existence as a kind of prisoner in the caretaker's flat. On learning of Kien's misfortunes, his brother George, a psychiatrist whom Kien has not seen for many years, hastens to help him. But George fails to grasp the serious nature of his brother's mental illness and, after buying off Therese, merely reinstates him in his library. There Kien suffers a total mental collapse, and incinerates both his books and himself:

*When the flames reached him at last, he laughed out loud, louder than he had ever laughed in his life.*

As Wilde's **The Picture of Dorian Gray** (see below) warns against the dangers of extreme aestheticism, so **Auto-da-Fé** warns against those of extreme intellectualism. Peter Kien is the literary intellectual carried to its ultimate limits, a mind so detached from the world that it recognizes nothing other than itself. Confronted with the harshness of reality, Kien's solipsistic dream is shattered into fragments; an intellectual Humpty-Dumpty, Kien is incapable of reassembling these fragments into a coherent whole.

\*

Like Broch, in his youth the Austrian writer *Robert Musil* (1880–1942) had studied mathematics and philosophy and his



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

novels show the influence of both. His greatest work is the vast unfinished novel *The Man Without Qualities* (1930-). The novel explores one year in the life of a Viennese intellectual—a kind of latter-day Hamlet—who cannot commit himself to a career, and who is engaged in a search for authenticity in a world of crumbling cultural values. Musil's semi-autobiographical novel *Young Törless* (1906), written when the author was 22, is set in a military academy in a desolate corner of the Austro-Hungarian empire. It is a compelling parable on the subject of power and its misuse, a prefiguring in miniature of the Nazi world. But it is also a *Bildungsroman*, the story of the intellectual awakening of an intelligent adolescent, who comes to question the authority of his teachers. It contains several remarkable passages on mathematics and philosophy, one of which I quote here:

*During the mathematics period Törless was suddenly struck by an idea.*

*For some days past he had been following lessons with special interest, thinking to himself: 'If this is really supposed to be preparation for life, as they say, it must surely contain some clue to what I am looking for, too.'*

*It was actually of mathematics that he had been thinking and this even before he had had those thoughts about infinity.*

*And now, right in the middle of the lesson, it had shot into his head with searing intensity. As soon as the class was dismissed he sat down beside Beineberg, who was the only person he could talk to about such things.*

*'I say, did you really understand all that stuff?'*

*'What stuff?'*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*'Yes. It's not particularly difficult, is it? All you have to do is remember that the square root of minus one is the basic unit you work with.'*

*'But that's just it. I mean, there's no such thing. The square of every number, whether it's positive or negative, produces a positive quantity. So there can't be any real number that could be the square root of a minus quantity.'*

*'Quite so. But why shouldn't one try to perform the operation of working out the square root of a minus quantity, all the same? Of course, it can't produce any real value, and so that's why one calls the result an imaginary one. It's as though one were to say: someone always used to sit here, so let's put a chair ready for him today, too, and even if he has died in the meantime, we shall go on behaving as if he were coming.'*

*'But how can you when you know with certainty, with mathematical certainty, that it's impossible?'*

*'Well, you just go on behaving as if it weren't so, in spite of everything. It'll probably produce some sort of result. And after all, where is this so different from irrational numbers – division that is never finished, a fraction of which the value will never, never, never by finally arrived at, no matter how long you may go on calculating away at it? And what can you imagine from being told that parallel lines intersect at infinity? It seems to me if one were to be over-conscientious there wouldn't be any such thing as mathematics at all.'*

*'You're quite right about that. If one pictures it that way, it's queer enough. But what is actually so odd is that you can really go through quite ordinary operations with imaginary or other impossible quantities, all the same, and come out at the end with a tangible result!'*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*'Yes, yes, I know all that just as well as you do. But isn't there still something very odd indeed about the whole thing? I don't quite know how to put it. Look, think of it like this: in a calculation like that you begin with ordinary solid numbers, representing measures of length or weight or something else that's quite tangible – at any rate, they're real numbers. And at the end you have real numbers. But these two lots of real numbers are connected by something that simply doesn't exist. Isn't that like a bridge where the piles are there only at the beginning and at the end, with none in the middle, and yet one crosses it just as surely and safely as if the whole of it were there? That sort of operation makes me feel a bit giddy, as if it led part of the way God knows where. But what I really feel is so uncanny is the force that lies in a problem like that, which keeps such a firm hold on you that in the end you land safely on the other side.*

*Beineberg grinned. 'You're starting to talk almost like the chaplain, aren't you? You see an apple – that's light-waves and the eye and so forth – and you can stretch out your hand to steal it – that's the muscles and the nerves that set them in action – but between these two there lies something else that produces one out of the other, and that is the immortal soul, which in doing so has committed a sin ... ah yes, indeed, none of your actions can be explained without the soul, which plays upon you as upon the keys of a piano ...' And he imitated the cadences in which the chaplain was in the habit of producing this old simile. 'Not that I find all that stuff particularly interesting.'*

*'I thought you were the very person who would find it interesting. Anyway, it made me think of you at once because – if it's really impossible to explain it – it almost amounts to a piece of evidence for what you believe.'*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*'Why shouldn't it be possible to explain? I'm inclined to think it's quite likely that in this case the inventors of mathematics have tripped over their own feet. Why, after all, shouldn't something that lies beyond the limits of our intellect have played a little joke on the intellect? But I'm not going to rack my brains about it: these things never get anyone anywhere.'*

\*

Rationalism and Romanticism, Mind and Nature, the Apollonian and the Dionysian<sup>6</sup>: the problem of reconciling these fundamental dichotomies is the underlying theme of the later novels of the German writer *Hermann Hesse* (1877-1962). Hesse, whose father and grandfather were both missionaries in India, had originally intended to follow in their footsteps, but ran away from theological school in his youth. The theme of rejection of authority is an important one in his early work. He was also strongly influenced by Oriental mysticism and Jungian depth psychology. We shall consider four of his later novels: **Siddhartha** (1922), **Steppenwolf** (1927), **Narziss and Goldmund** (1930), and **The Glass Bead Game** (1943).

**Siddhartha**, written on Hesse's return from India, is the story of a man in search of self-realization. Siddhartha, born the son of a Brahmin during the time of the Buddha (560-480 B.C.), is strongly drawn to the idea of living as a wandering ascetic. Leaving home while still a youth, he takes up the practice of disciplines which give him great mental and bodily control. Finding that this self-control nevertheless still falls short of the self-realization he seeks, he goes to hear the preaching of Gautama, the Buddha. Gautama's doctrines confirm the

---

<sup>6</sup> These are Nietzsche's terms for the ordered and rational; and the sensuous and passionate, respectively.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

conclusion already drawn by Siddhartha: that the purpose of asceticism is just to test the will, and is therefore not essential to self-realization. The Buddha teaches that, in order to escape the burden of the body and the "wheel of rebirth," the adept must achieve a state of complete detachment from all human faculties. Although Siddhartha accepts the truth of this, he doubts whether this is the correct path to enlightenment for him, and so presses on with his search. Rejecting self-denial, he tries the path of sensuality and worldly success: he makes much money, buys a magnificent house, and takes a beautiful courtesan for his mistress. Finding that he is still no closer to self-enlightenment, he is plunged into despair and attempts to kill himself. He fails, but facing up to his lack of fulfilment gives him the strength to renounce his success, and he becomes a wanderer once more. This time, however, his wanderings take him only to a nearby river, by whose banks lives the local ferryman, another seeker after truth. Siddhartha joins him and again takes up a life of spiritual discipline. When the courtesan dies, Siddhartha discovers that he has a son, whom he takes in and brings up. But at maturity the boy finds that he has nothing in common with his father, and leaves home. Siddhartha overcomes his misery at this loss, accepts the fact that there is no real communication with other human beings, even those one loves most, and finally returns to his contemplation of the river.

Thus Hesse's novel ends on a note of resignation: after all his fruitless searching, Siddhartha comes stoically to accept that the only enlightenment lies in recognizing that, like the river, life is a flux devoid of any ultimate meaning.

**Steppenwolf** takes the form of the journal of a middle-aged man, Harry Haller, who leads an isolated existence in some furnished rooms in a comfortable middle-class household. A

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

small private income spares him the necessity of going out to work. In his youth he had been a poet but his inspiration has gradually evaporated and he now finds himself in a kind of spiritual vacuum. He despises bourgeois existence, but seems to be incapable of overcoming his dependence on the comforts it provides. He feels that he ought to be contented, but it is precisely contentment that he finds intolerable; he has a wild longing for strong emotions and sensations, and rages internally against the sterility of his life. Haller's journal opens on what begins as a typical day, in which he takes his morning walk and warm bath, does his breathing exercises, but "finds it convenient to omit the thought exercises." Disgusted with the little he has accomplished, in the evening he repairs to an inn to take a glass of wine. On his way there, something strange seems to happen: he passes a wall containing a mysterious door, over which flickers an electric sign bearing the words "Magic Theatre: Not for Everybody. For Madmen Only." The door fails to open and he continues on to the inn. Later, on his way home, he encounters a man with a sandwich board bearing the words "Anarchist Evening Entertainment. Magic Theatre. Not for Everybody." When Haller asks where this entertainment is to take place, the man responds by handing him a booklet which he thrusts into his pocket. On returning home, he opens it to find to his astonishment that it is entitled "Treatise on the Steppenwolf. Not for Everybody." (It is obviously Haller's own work, so it is hard for the reader to determine when Haller is recording the truth and when he is indulging in wish-fulfilment.)

The Treatise is an analysis of Haller's predicament. He is a man who has split himself into two persons: a civilized man and a wolf-man. The civilized man is a cultured bourgeois: he treasures poetry and music, order and cleanliness, and invariably takes

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

lodgings in houses with spotless kitchens. His other half is a primitive who revels in the other world, the world of darkness, of open spaces and lawlessness, and regards the world of convention as an absurd joke. This divided psyche, characteristic of artists and visionaries (so the Treatise says) can be unified for a time, and repose attained, by artistic achievement or saintliness; but rarely is this resolution permanent. It is the stimulus provided by these creative "split personalities" that prevents the bourgeois world from dying of self-stultification. And in fact the idea that the psyche splits into just two is itself an oversimplification: every ego is really a continuum of different "selves".

When Haller sees that the Treatise merely confirms what he already suspected, that his nature dooms him to a life of frustration, he is plunged into despair. He resolves to commit suicide rather than allowing himself again to sink so low. But, through a series of romantically improbable events, Haller does in the end find salvation. He locates the man with the sandwich board who tells him the name of the tavern housing the "Magic Theatre." Haller goes there and meets a girl who awakens him to a life of the senses, which he comes to understand has remained dormant within him. In the end he finds his way to the Magic Theatre, where he relives his dreams, and comes to accept that life is a game that he can learn to play better.

Towards the end of the Treatise we find the following passage, in which the Romantic image of human nature is presented in the form of a Heraclitean opposition between body and soul:

*Man is not by any means of fixed and enduring form. He is much more an experiment and a transition. He is nothing else than the narrow and perilous bridge between nature and spirit.*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*His innermost destiny drives him to the spirit and to God. His innermost longing draws him back to nature, the mother. Between the two forces his life hangs tremulous and irresolute. What is commonly meant by the word "man" is never anything more than a transient agreement, a bourgeois compromise.*

The protagonist of **Steppenwolf** decides finally that these dual aspects of his nature are irreconcilable and that the only solution is to follow the Epicurean injunction to live life to its fullest.

**Narziss and Goldmund** is another study of the dichotomy between Mind and Nature. Narziss is a teacher at the medieval German monastery of Mariabronn. Brilliant and dedicated, he becomes convinced that his favourite pupil Goldmund is unsuited to the monastic life. Narziss leads Goldmund to understand that they must each fulfil themselves in different ways: so Narziss withdraws into a life of contemplative asceticism and Goldmund quits the cloisters for the turmoil of the world outside. Under the tutelage of a master-craftsman, Goldmund becomes a sculptor of joyously life-affirming works. His wanderings take him through the plague where he witnesses universal death. Convinced that the world is a hell, he returns to Mariabronn where Narziss is now Abbot. Goldmund re-enters the cloister, not as a monk, but as a lay-brother, and spends his remaining days in the monastery carving sculptures of saints and gargoyles. There he dies, in the end having failed, it would seem, to attain self-fulfilment. But Narziss, looking at the statues, realizes that through these Goldmund actually had, without his being aware of it, achieved his goal of entering the realm of the permanent and spiritual.

In **The Glass Bead Game**, his last novel, Hesse examines the opposition between reason and emotion within his vision of a future society. Some years hence the state supports an elite



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

hierarchy of intellectuals, the Castalian order. The order's function is wholly Apollonian – to preserve intellectual and spiritual values within a turbulent world. The supreme activity in Castalia is the playing of the intricate Glass Bead Game, a kind of abstract fusion of the essences of all the arts and sciences. Joseph Knecht, an adept of this game, is elevated to the highest position in Castalia, that of *Magister Ludi*, the Master of the Game. After a time Knecht comes to feel uncomfortable with the emotional aridity of a life spent wholly within an intellectual elite. In a long letter to the Castalian authorities he warns that the the order runs the risk of succumbing to conceit and complacency, and requests that he be transferred to an ordinary school. When his request is turned down, he resigns his post and ventures into the world outside Castalia. Eventually he becomes the tutor of a boy whose liveliness and love of the natural world makes a great impression on him. When the boy dives into a glacial lake, Knecht, fired with a new feeling of youthfulness, does the same. The cold and exertion prove too much for his aging body, and he drowns.

In these four novels each of Hesse's protagonists seeks a resolution of the conflict between emotion and reason raging within his soul, but in the end not one of them finds it. They cannot rise above the Heraclitean flux, even though they are granted occasional glimpses of a timeless spiritual world in which, were it only attainable, all troubles would melt away. In a note to **Steppenwolf** written not long before his death, Hesse emphasizes how important this is:

*...among readers of my own age I also repeatedly found some who...strangely enough perceived only half of what I intended. These readers, it seems to me, have recognized themselves in the Steppenwolf, identified themselves with him,*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*suffered his griefs, and dreamed his dreams; but they have overlooked the fact that this book knows of and speaks of many things, besides Harry Haller and his difficulties, about a second, higher, indestructible world beyond the Steppenwolf and his problematic life. The 'Treatise' and all those spots in the book dealing with matters of the spirit, of the arts and the 'immortal' men oppose the Steppenwolf's world of suffering with a positive, serene, superpersonal, and timeless world of faith. This book, no doubt, tells of grief and needs; still, it is not a book of a man despairing, but of a man believing.*

This Platonic vision animates all of Hesse's work.

\*

The work of the Czech novelist (but who wrote in German) *Franz Kafka* (1883-1924) occupies a unique position in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature. The characters of his novels and stories are engaged in a ceaseless struggle to understand an ultimately incomprehensible world.

In Kafka's most famous short story **Metamorphosis** (1912), the central character, Gregor Samsa, a commercial traveller, wakes one morning from uneasy dreams to find himself transformed into a gigantic insect. His family, with whom he lives, overcome their initial horror at his new form, but never come to full acceptance of the situation. They are on the point of turning him out when he dies, and they return to their normal routine as if nothing whatsoever had happened. Gregor's mysterious transformation is never explained; he is given no choice but to accept the situation and make the best he can of what remains of his life.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

The unnamed narrator of Kafka's story **The Great Wall of China** (pub. 1931) muses on the unfathomability of the decrees of the mandarins which has led to the building of the wall; the country is so vast and messages from the imperial capital take so long to arrive that he is not even certain of the identity of the reigning Emperor. He relates a parable: the Emperor on his death bed has sent a message to you alone, you, the humble subject cowering in the remotest distance from the imperial sun. The messenger immediately sets out on his journey: a powerful and indefatigable man, he cleaves his way through the vast throng assembled in the imperial palace. How vainly he wears out his strength; still he is only making his way through the chambers of the innermost palace; never will he get to the end of them; and even if he does, he must still fight his way next down the stairs; after that the courts would have to be crossed; and after the courts the second outer palace enclosing the first; and once more stairs and courts; and again another palace; and so on for thousands of years. And if at last he should do the impossible and burst through the outermost gate, the imperial capital would lie before him, the centre of the world, crammed to bursting with its own refuse. No one could force a way through that, least of all somebody bearing a message from a dead man. But you sit at your window as evening falls and dream that it were all true.

The protagonist Josef K. of **The Trial** (1925) is ostensibly arrested, but remains free to go about his normal business, being required only to report to the court premises each Sunday morning for "interrogation." These interrogations lead nowhere and K. eventually learns that they are only preliminary hearings conducted at the level of the lowest court, which does not have the authority of granting a final acquittal. This power is reserved for the highest Court, which is inaccessible to him and to everyone

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

else. In the end, two functionaries of the Court appear at his lodgings, take him to a stone quarry, and stab him to death. Josef K. dies entirely mystified: he never learns the reason for his arrest, and is not even certain whether the so-called "Court" has a genuine legal status. The sole glimmer of enlightenment granted him comes in the form of a parable related to him by a priest, in some mysterious way connected with the Court: Before the Law stands a doorkeeper on guard. To this doorkeeper there comes a man from the country who begs for admittance to the Law. But the doorkeeper says that he cannot admit the man at the moment; later, possibly, but not at that moment. Since the door leading to the Law stands open and the doorkeeper has stepped aside, the man bends over to peer through the entrance. The doorkeeper, seeing this, says, "If you are so strongly tempted, try to get in without my permission. But note that I am powerful. And I am only the lowest doorkeeper. From hall to hall keepers stand at every door, each more powerful than the one before." The doorkeeper gives the man a stool and lets him sit by the door, where he waits indefinitely. He continually begs the doorkeeper for admittance, but is told each time that he cannot yet be admitted. Years pass; the man grows old, and still he has not passed through the doorway. Finally, on the verge of death, the man beckons to the doorkeeper and asks him "Since everyone strives to attain the Law, why in all these years has no one but myself come seeking admittance?" The doorkeeper, perceiving that the man is at the end of his strength and his hearing is failing, bellows into his ear, "No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended only for you. I am now going to shut it."

In **The Castle** (1926), the principal character K. arrives in a village lying in the shadow of the castle of the mysterious Count

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

Westwest. K. claims that he has been engaged by the Count to survey his lands, but no one in the village is able to confirm this. Despite unceasing effort, K. never succeeds in gaining access to the castle, or in meeting his elusive employer. The novel remained unfinished, but it is believed that Kafka intended to end it by having the putative Land Surveyor die worn out from his struggle to make sense of the situation. Around his death-bed the villagers were to assemble, and from the castle itself word was to come that though K.'s legal claim to reside in the village was not valid, yet, taking certain additional circumstances into account, he was to be permitted to live and work there.

Kafka's universe is one in which the individual must struggle constantly against ubiquitous, elusive, and anonymous powers which seem to determine, and yet at the same time oppose, his every step. While unremarkable on the surface, it is a world whose underlying order is not just unknowable – its denizens can never be certain whether an underlying order *actually exists*. One does not know whether the deity – if any – presiding over this world calculates or plays dice, but if the latter, they are thrown where they cannot be seen. Perhaps Count Westwest of **The Castle** never existed: how can one be sure? All attempts to get to the bottom of things invariably lead to infinity: the Emperor's messenger must thrust his way through an unending sequence of palaces and courtyards; an endless number of doors and doorkeepers lie between the supplicant and his Law. The status of Kafka's protagonists is never more than provisional, and what little status they possess is subject to cancellation without notice: in **Metamorphosis** the transformed Gregor Samsa is never certain whether his family are about to turn him out into the street; in **The Trial** Josef K. never learns of what he is accused; in **The Castle** K. never receives confirmation of his appointment

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

as Land Surveyor. Like Winston Churchill's Russia, Kafka's dreamlike vision may truly be described as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."

### III. Russian Literature

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY WAS the golden age of the Russian novel, its giants Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy towering above all. Less celebrated but still an important Russian writer of the day was *Ivan Turgenev* (1818–1883). His best known and politically most interesting novel is **Fathers and Sons** (1862), in which is portrayed the conflict between the older generation and the radical “new man” Turgenev saw as emerging. Indeed the original, but later discarded epigraph to the novel was taken from what Turgenev identified as “a contemporary conversation”:

*Young Man to Middle-Aged Man: “You had content but no force.”*

*Middle-Aged Man to Young Man: “And you have force but no content.”*

The novel’s main character, the brilliant, nihilistic, young medical researcher Bazarov, may be seen as one of the first in a long literary line of angry young men. Invited by a fellow student and disciple, Arkady, to stay at his father’s country house, Bazarov immediately comes into conflict with Arkady’s uncle, a former army officer, now a pompous, touchy old-fashioned dandy, living out his life in decorous retirement. Irritated by the old man’s conventional attitudes, Bazarov provocatively describes himself and his allies as “nihilists”, by which he means that he, and those who think like him, reject everything that cannot be established by the positivistic methods of natural science. Truth alone matters: what cannot be established empirically is “romantic rubbish” which an intelligent man will extirpate without compunction. Bazarov is sweeping in his condemnation of such

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

irrational nonsense, which, in his view, includes all that cannot be reduced to quantitative measurement – literature and philosophy, the beauty of art and of nature, tradition and authority, religion and intuition, conservatism and liberalism, populism and socialism. Bazarov would replace all these delusions with strength, willpower, energy, utility, work, and unremitting criticism of all that exists. For the revolutionary Bazarov, the first job is one of demolition; only after the whole rotten structure of the old world has been razed to the ground can something new be built upon it. His position is essentially that attributed to Marx: “Anyone who makes plans for after the revolution is a reactionary”.

Bazarov has been called the first Bolshevik: he wants radical change and would not shrink from the use of brute force in its pursuit. But in the end Bazarov’s principles are eroded by his human nature: he falls in love with a cold, clever, well-born society beauty, is rejected by her, suffers deeply, and not long after succumbs to an infection caught while dissecting a cadaver in a village autopsy. He dies stoically, wondering whether his country had any real need of him and men like him, whether he might not be, in fact, “superfluous to requirement”. Bazarov falls not through failure of will or intellect, but through blind fate. Turgenev later wrote of Bazarov in a letter:

*I conceived him as a sombre figure, wild, huge, half-grown out of the soil, powerful, nasty, honest, but doomed to destruction because he still stands only in the gateway to the future...”*

\*



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*Fyodor Dostoyevsky* (1821-1881) is the master of the psychological novel—indeed Nietzsche acknowledged Dostoyevsky as “the only psychologist from whom I learned anything.” He was arrested in 1849 as a member of a socialist group, condemned to death, and taken to execution which was commuted at the last minute. Sentenced instead to five years’ hard labour, he began to suffer from epilepsy, perhaps as a result. His *The House of the Dead* (1862) is a restrained but moving account of his experiences in prison.

Dostoyevsky’s great works **Crime and Punishment** (1866), **The Idiot** (1869), **The Devils** (1872), and **The Brothers Karamazov** (1880) are widely regarded as pinnacles of the novelist’s art. They are, in the words of a Russian critic, “philosophy in action”. Dostoyevsky wrote with compelling power about social injustices, the mystery of life, and the thrall of the irrational. His handling of these themes is, above all, moral. In the character Prince Myshkin of **The Idiot** Dostoyevsky attempts to portray a truly good man, a saint whose simplicity of character is incapable of grasping the destructiveness of passions in the world. The influence of German idealist philosophy can also be detected in Dostoyevsky’s work. The character Raskolnikov in **Crime and Punishment**—with his notions of superior and inferior human beings, the superior ones having the right to commit breaches of morality, while the inferior ones are obliged to adhere to the rules—has often been regarded as an embodiment of the Nietzschean concept of the superman. But a more likely source is the looming influence of Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* with its concept of the world-historical individual transcending moral categories in pursuit of the tasks set by the *Weltgeist*.

Dostoyevsky’s novella **Notes from Underground** (literally: “Notes from beneath the floorboards”, or “Memoirs from a

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

mousehole", 1864) may be taken as a kind of prelude to his last great novels. It is by any reckoning is a remarkable work, an inspired polemic against the whole tradition of social philosophy from Plato and Aristotle, through Locke to Rousseau and John Stuart Mill, which holds that the perverseness of human beings is attributable to the corrupting influence of society, rather than to human nature itself. The unnamed narrator of this book, an irascible government clerk, is the forerunner of all the alienated antiheroes of 20th century literature. He begins by claiming that he is a wicked man, but then, as if to demonstrate his perverseness, admits that this is a lie told out of wickedness. He goes on to say, that in truth he "never succeeded in becoming anything, neither wicked nor good, neither a scoundrel nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect." In some of the most striking passages of the book, he defends the right of the individual human being to be perverse against all rational calculation:

*You see: reason...is a fine thing... but reason is only reason and satisfies only man's reasoning capacity, while wanting is a manifestation of the whole of life...*

*...there is one case, one only, when man may purposely, consciously wish what is stupidest of all: namely, to have the right to wish for himself what is stupidest of all and not be bound by an obligation to wish for himself what is intelligent.*

*It is precisely his fantastic dreams, his most banal stupidity, that he will wish to keep hold of, with the sole purpose of confirming to himself (as if that were so very necessary) that human beings are still human beings and not piano keys, which, though played upon with their own hands by the laws of nature*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*themselves, are in danger of being played so much that it will be impossible to want anything except when it is decreed by the calendar. And more than that: even if it should indeed turn out that he is a piano key, if it were even proved to him mathematically and by natural science, he would still not come to reason, but would do something contrary on purpose, out of ingratitude alone, essentially to have his own way!*

Rambling, occasionally incoherent, and yet defiant, the narrator's monologue in **Notes from Underground** is a defense of the primacy of the individual human consciousness against constituted authority. In this novel, Dostoevsky anticipates the 20<sup>th</sup> century existentialist movement in philosophy and literature, with its emphasis on our free choice to make ourselves what we are.

The philosophical novel found fertile soil in the Russian character. It has been observed that the Russian has always had difficulty in distinguishing between life and thought, the practical and the abstract. For the true Russian, ethical and metaphysical problems form life's core, and such problems are accordingly vital elements in any fiction seriously intended to put up a mirror to life. In this respect Dostoevsky was indeed a true Russian. "Send me Hegel," he wrote to his brother from Siberia on his release from prison, "my life depends on it."

The central figure of **Crime and Punishment** is Raskolnikov, a young student who commits a murder out of principle. From complex, motives which remain obscure to him, he murders an old woman moneylender, together with her sister who unexpectedly comes on the scene while the act is being committed. No evidence connects him with the crime, but he becomes mentally disturbed by the commission of the murder and

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

his odd behaviour excites the detective in charge of the case. In true Russian style, he confesses to the crime before his guilt is actually established, and is sentenced to 8 years in Siberia. He is followed there by the girl Sonya who has been living as a prostitute to support her family. At first Raskolnikov regrets less his having committed a murder than what he recognizes as his own weakness in confessing to it; but after suffering an illness in the prison he comes, through Sonya's influence, to repent his crime

After committing the murder Raskolnikov reflects on death:

*Where was it I read about a man sentenced to death who, one hour before his execution, says or thinks that if he had to live on some high rock, on a cliff, on a ledge so narrow that there was only room enough to stand there, and if there were bottomless chasms all round, the ocean, eternal darkness, eternal solitude, and eternal gales, and if he had to spend all his life on that square yard of space – a thousand years, an eternity – he'd rather live like that than die at once! Oh, only to live, live, live! Live under any circumstances, – only to live! How true it is! Good Lord, how true it is! Man's a scoundrel! But anyone who calls man a scoundrel is an even bigger scoundrel himself!*

At the core of **Crime and Punishment** is the analysis of the motives underlying the murder and of its impact on the murderer, a theme which serves to embody the wider problem of the relationship of the ego to the surrounding world, of the individual to society, the basic problem of ethics and metaphysics alike. The fundamental moral question of **Crime and Punishment** is: does Raskolnikov fail to "stand firm", and confess to the murder merely out of his own weakness, or because of the presence of a

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

spiritual essence indwelling in all of us which, in the end, causes him to reject the role of amoral superman? For indeed, according to Raskolnikov's own testimony, his intention in committing the murder was to prove himself a superman, to assert his right to transgress moral conventions. As he declares,

*I wanted to kill without casuistry, to kill for its own sake, for myself alone. I did not want in this matter to lie even to myself. I did not kill to help my mother – that's nonsense. I did not kill, in order, having got money and power, to become a benefactor to humanity. Nonsense! I just killed; killed for my own sake, for myself alone. ...Money was not the chief thing I needed when I killed her but something else...I wanted to know, and to know quickly, whether I was a worm like everyone else, or a man. Shall I be able to transgress, or shall I not? Shall I be able to stoop down and take, or not? Am I a trembling creature, or have I the right?*

This declaration, close in spirit to certain of Nietzsche's utterances, shows the impact that German post-Kantian idealism had made on Dostoevsky. He seems to have grasped that the later idealists provided nothing on which to base a durable morality. For if, as they maintained, phenomena have no source other than human consciousness, if the seat of all reality lies in the human ego, if, in short, all object is subject, how in that case can there exist any external standard or sanction of conduct? Does it not then follow that one's supreme obligation is to oneself, and one's highest calling the elaboration and assertion of one's own personality?

In **Crime and Punishment** Dostoevsky demonstrates, with great art, the essential bankruptcy of such a philosophy of self-assertion. But the concluding sentences of the book show that he

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

recognizes that he has fallen short of a real solution to the problems he raises:

*Here begins a new story—the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his rebirth, of the gradual transition from one world to another, and of the revelation to him of a new, hitherto quite unknown reality. This might form the subject of a new story, but our present tale is ended.*

Dostoevsky never wrote his “new story” which was to tell of the regeneration of Raskolnikov. Instead he created **The Idiot**—his vision of the ethical ideal. In a letter to his niece he set out the scope and purpose of the novel:

*The idea of the story is my old favourite idea, but so difficult that I for long did not dare to attempt it, and if I have attempted it now, it is certainly because I found myself in a desperate situation. The principal conception of the novel is to depict the positively good man. There is nothing in the world more difficult, particularly nowadays. Of all writers (not merely our own, but European writers too), those who have attempted to depict the positively good have always missed the mark. For it is an infinite task. The good is an ideal, and both our ideal and that of civilized Europe is still far from having been worked out. In the whole world there is only one positively good man, Christ... Of the good types in Christian literature, the most perfect is Don Quixote. But he is good only because at the same time he is ridiculous. The Pickwick of Dickens (an infinitely weaker conception than Don Quixote but still immense) is also ridiculous and succeeds in virtue of this. A feeling of compassion is produced for the much ridiculed good man who does not know his own worth, and thus perhaps sympathy is evoked in the*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*reader. This rousing of compassion is the secret of humour. Jean Valjean [of Hugo's Les Miserables] is also a powerful attempt; but he arouses sympathy by the immensity of his misfortune and the injustice of society to him. In my novel there is nothing of the kind, and I am terribly afraid that it will be a complete failure.*

There is in fact hardly a great work of literature more elusive of description than **The Idiot**. The hero, Prince Myshkin, a scion of an ancient Russian house, suffers from epileptic fits which, from early youth, have impaired his health and his mental faculties. (As we have observed, Dostoevsky himself suffered from the same malady.) He returns to Russia half-cured in order to take up an inheritance. Two women fall in love with him, the young daughter of a general and the discarded mistress of a rich merchant. Half-loving both, pity inclines him to marry the latter; but she, in an effort to forestall his attempt at self-sacrifice, escapes at the last moment to another suitor, who, goaded beyond endurance by jealousy, murders her. The prince and the murderer spend a night together in vigil by the putrefying corpse. The murderer is sent to Siberia (as so often in Dostoevsky's novels), while the general's daughter marries a rogue who soon deserts her. At the last the prince returns to Switzerland in a state of physical exhaustion and renewed mental derangement.

**The Idiot** is the most tragic and yet also the most serene of Dostoevsky's works, its theme the clash between Myshkin's strange, visionary world and the quotidian *umwelt* occupied by the rest of us, the opposition between the real and the ideal.

In Myshkin we have the most fully realized embodiment in literature of the Russian ethical ideal. His holiness, his ignorance, his epilepsy, his episodes of insanity, all of which are masterfully fashioned by Dostoevsky (in particular the description of

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

Myshkin's burgeoning mania, culminating in an epileptic fit, is a literary *tour-de-force*) make his character the greatest incarnation in Russian literature of the Pure Fool—the simple man whose seeming folly confounds the wisdom of established authority. Coleridge said of Don Quixote that in him is realized “the personification of the reason and the moral sense, divested of the judgment and the understanding”. This characterization is equally applicable to Prince Myshkin.

But Myshkin personifies a passive, as opposed to an active, ethical ideal. The supreme Christian virtue he possesses is the essentially passive virtue of humility. Nevertheless, while this humility is achieved through self-abasement and suffering, in Dostoevsky's hands it leads ultimately to a form of salvation. Myshkin represents the moral superiority of suffering over action.

The realm of transfigured values into which Dostoevsky leads us in **The Idiot** is a realm free of the exigencies of the self. In presenting his readers with the ideal of pure self-sacrifice embodied in Prince Myshkin Dostoevsky continues to prosecute the war—began in **Crime and Punishment**—against the rationalist advocates of “enlightened self-interest”, a doctrine which, as a moralist, he saw as no better than pure selfishness. In a spiritual sense, **The Idiot** is the sequel projected by Dostoevsky in **Crime and Punishment**. Myshkin is Raskolnikov purified, now “seraphically free of taint of personality”.

Dostoevsky had come to conceive an interest in “socialists” and “nihilists” as the result of a visit to the Geneva Congress of the League of Peace and Freedom in September 1867. In nihilism—the anarchic revolutionary movement advocating the rejection of all established beliefs and institutions—Dostoevsky discerned a political form of Raskolnikov's “enlightened self-interest”. In Dostoevsky's eyes the nihilist is the public, political



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

manifestation of the Raskolnikov of private life; so, equally, the ethical theory which, on an individual level, led to Raskolnikov's crime, leads socially to revolution. In **The Devils** Dostoevsky projects the purely ethical problem of **Crime and Punishment** onto a political canvas.

**The Devils** centres on the activities of a small provincial group of Russian political extremists bent on overthrowing the Tsarist government, by violent means if necessary. The group's prime mover, Peter Verkhovensky, was modelled on an actual revolutionary named Nechaev, who in 1869, along with a number of his co-conspirators, murdered one of their comrades whose cooling ardour for the revolutionary cause had led them to fear betrayal at his hands. This episode, which horrified all Russia, is portrayed in Dostoevsky's novel by the murder of the character Shatov. In the end the conspiracy is broken by the authorities, and several of the characters have committed suicide.

**The Devils** has been taken as a demonstration of Dostoevsky's profound prophetic insight into revolutionary mentality; indeed, after the revolution of 1905, Dostoevsky was called "the prophet of revolution". The novel certainly contains a number of passages which would seem to bear this out: witness, for example, the character Shigalev's declaration that

*My starting point is unlimited freedom, my conclusion unlimited despotism.*

To this may be added Verkhovensky's words:

*A generation or two of debauchery is now indispensable – unparalleled, vulgar debauch, when man turns into a filthy, cowardly, cruel, selfish reptile, that's what we need; and a nice*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*fresh drop of blood just to accustom people... Well, then the turmoil will begin. It will be such a tossing as the world has never seen. The face of Russia will be darkened, and the land will mourn for its old gods.*

But alongside quotations such as these must be placed one of the novel's most moving passages, which links up with the biblical quotation serving as its epigraph, and from which its title derives. This is the scene at the deathbed of Stepan Trofimovich, Verkhovensky's father. During his last moments he is read the story of the unclean devils who entered into the swine. The dying man's eyes are opened, and he perceives, as in a vision, that Russia is the man afflicted of devils, that he himself, his son Peter, and the other radicals and nihilists, are the swine into which the devils have entered and who are rushing headlong down a steep place into the sea. He sees that on their ignominious passing Russia will sit purified and transfigured at the "feet of Jesus". This was indeed Dostoevsky's vision for the future of Russia.

**The Devils** is a curious mixture of satire and moral seriousness. The novel contains a number of caricatures of actual people of Dostoevsky's acquaintance, including his famous contemporary Turgenev. But the nihilists themselves are portrayed with deadly earnestness. Peter Verkhovensky, the novel's counterpart of the real nihilist Nechaev, is presented by Dostoevsky as the literal embodiment of a theory. Stavrogin, another of the novel's central characters, is a kind of evolved Raskolnikov, one who has lost his faith in the glorification of self as the acme of morality but continues, in a blasé manner, to follow the dictates of self-interest, at the same time ridiculing both himself and his lost faith. A disillusioned antihero burdened with romantic ennui, he is a familiar figure in literature. The character Kirillov, a kind of

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

logical fanatic, uses an interesting argument to justify his resolution to kill himself. For the Christian, Death is the last enemy to be vanquished; for the superman, the final enemy is the fear of death. In overcoming this fear, he achieves complete mastery over himself and his will becomes supreme. He becomes the man-god, the antithesis to the God-man of Christianity. But there is just one way for man to overcome the fear of death, namely, to defy it—by killing himself. So it is through death alone he can achieve godhead. It follows that suicide is the crowning achievement in the religion of the superman. Kirillov's suicide is, in Dostoevsky's eyes, the logical conclusion of Raskolnikov's ethical theory. It is with Kirillov that Dostoevsky's treatment of the ethical issue of the superman first begins to acquire religious overtones. Indeed henceforth religion came to dominate Dostoevsky's thought and work.

Some of the ideas adumbrated in **The Devils** appear in Dostoevsky's last novel, **The Brothers Karamazov**. This monumental work was described by the author as "the culminating point of my literary activity" and praised by Freud as "the most magnificent novel ever written". By the time it was written, Dostoevsky had come to adopt a religious outlook close in its essentials to the tenets of the Russian Orthodox church: in **The Brothers Karamazov** Dostoevsky sets out to proclaim his long-delayed faith to the world.

Dostoevsky had long before envisaged writing a novel which was to have been entitled *The Life of a Great Sinner*. So far as can be inferred from the vague hints in Dostoevsky's letters and notebooks, the hero of the *Great Sinner* was to have been a passionate, but unscrupulous man, an unbeliever, indeed, an atheist; he was to reside for a number of years in a monastery from which he was finally to emerge transformed. In **The**

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

**Brothers Karamazov** the protagonist of Dostoevsky's unrealized conception has refracted into the three eponymous brothers: Dmitri Karamazov is the man of sinful passions, Ivan an intellectual sceptic; it is Alyosha, the youngest brother (and the novel's nominal hero), who has been brought up in the monastery and returns to the world bringing the light of the Christian ideal, as Dostoevsky saw it, into the quotidian world. Two main themes animate the novel, of which the second gradually comes to loom the larger: the debate between Ivan, representing the principle of evil – the dark – and Alyosha, the type of the Christian ideal – the light; and the redemption of Dmitri through sin and suffering.

The central elements of the plot of **The Brothers Karamazov** (which Dostoevsky seems to have provided almost as an afterthought to its original conception) is the murder of Karamazov *père*, a revolting but nevertheless impressive monster of lust and debauchery. He and Dmitri have been rivals for the same woman. Words and blows have been exchanged, and threats uttered in the hearing of all, so that, when the old man is found murdered, suspicion naturally falls on Dmitri. But the murderer is in fact the old man's illegitimate son Smerdyakov, who is led to commit the crime under the malign influence of Ivan's cynical unbelief. A cruder version of Ivan, Smerdyakov is unrestrained by conscience and puts Ivan's principles into practice: while Smerdyakov actually killed old Karamazov, in principle Ivan was the true murderer. Smerdyakov hangs himself; Dmitri is condemned, as with so many of Dostoevsky's principals, to Siberia, for the murder of which he is entirely innocent. And Ivan is driven to insanity by awareness of his own essential guilt.

Dostoevsky intended the core of his novel to be the long debate, spoken and unspoken, between Ivan and Alyosha. This begins in one of the early chapters where they respond to their

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

father's half-mocking question "Is there a God?" with opposite and equally emphatic answers. In support of his rejection of religious belief, Ivan quotes from the Russian press of the day heart-rending stories of cruelty to innocent children, and goes on:

*Listen to me: I took only children to make my case clearer. I don't say anything about the other human tears with which the earth is saturated from its crust to its centre – I have narrowed my subject on purpose. I am a bug and I acknowledge in all humility that I can't understand why everything has been arranged as it is. I suppose men themselves are to blame: they were given paradise, they wanted freedom and they stole the fire from heaven, knowing perfectly well that they would become unhappy, so why should we pity them? Oh, all that my pitiful earthly Euclidean mind can grasp is that suffering exists, that no one is to blame, that effect follows cause., simply and directly, that everything floes and finds its level – but then this is only Euclidean nonsense. I know that and I refuse to live by it! What do I care that no one is to blame, that effect follows cause simply and directly and that I know it – I must have retribution or I shall destroy myself. And retribution not somewhere in the infinity of space and time, but here on earth, and so that I could see it myself. I was a believer, and I want to see for myself. And if I'm dead by that time, let them resurrect me, for if it all happens without me, it will be too unfair. Surely the reason for my suffering was not that I as well as my evil deeds and sufferings may serve as manure for some future harmony of somebody else. I want to see with my own eyes the lion lie down with the lamb and the murdered man rise up and embrace his murderer. I want to be there when everyone suddenly finds out what it has all been for. All religions on earth are based on this desire, and I am a believer. But then there are the children, and what am I to do*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*with them?... Listen: if all have to suffer as to buy eternal harmony by their suffering, what have the children to do with it?... If the sufferings of children go to make up the sum of sufferings which is necessary for the purchase of truth, then I say beforehand that the entire truth is not worth such a price. And, finally, I do not want a mother to embrace the torturer who had her child torn to pieces by his dogs! She has no right to forgive him for the sufferings of her tortured child. ..She has no right to forgive him for that, even if her child were to forgive him! And if that is so, if they have no right to forgive him, what becomes of the harmony? Is there in the whole world a being who could or would have the right to forgive? I don't want harmony. I don't want it, out of the love I bear to mankind. I want to remain with my suffering unavenged and my religion unappeased, even if I were wrong. Besides, too high a price has been placed on harmony. We cannot afford to pay so much for admission. And therefore I hasten to return my ticket of admission. And indeed, if I'm an honest man, I'm bound to hand it back as soon as possible. This I am doing. It is not God that I do not accept. I merely most respectfully return him the ticket.*

In this indictment Dostoevsky's own voice can be heard, and he seems to have accepted its validity as far as it goes. No answer is supplied to Ivan's objections. Indeed his objections are unanswerable, at least in rational terms. In **Notes from Underground** Dostoevsky had already insisted that humanity was fundamentally non-rational, and in **Crime and Punishment** he had disposed of the attempt to find a rational basis for ethics. The fruitless struggles of Ivan Karamazov to find a rational solution to the problem of suffering are, on his own admission, mere "Euclidean nonsense", the product of Ivan's "poor earthly

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

Euclidean mind”<sup>7</sup>. The basis of life is something quite different. “I live,” confesses Ivan, “because I want to live, even in despite of logic.” In response all Alyosha can say is that we must love life, since it is only by loving life that we can attain any understanding of its meaning.

The pinnacle of **The Brothers Karamazov** is attained in Ivan's tale of *The Grand Inquisitor*. Jesus returns to earth during the heyday of the Inquisition to visit the common people. Just as he resurrects a little girl from her coffin, the aged Cardinal, the Grand Inquisitor himself, appears, attended by his guards. He orders that Jesus be seized and cast into prison. In the ensuing examination the Inquisitor declares that the Church, recognizing that Jesus's ethical standards are too lofty for the masses, has replaced ethics and self-sacrifice by miracle, mystery, and authority. So in returning to walk among the people Jesus is in fact meddling with the established order of his own Church. The Inquisitor accordingly has no choice but to decree that he be burnt upon the morrow. The prisoner, who has remained silent throughout the Inquisitor's discourse, kisses him gently on the lips as if in acquiescence. The Inquisitor, startled, opens the door and tells the prisoner to go and never to return. The prisoner thereupon departs.

In making Ivan accept what he considered to be the ultimate policies of the Catholic Church, Dostoevsky actually intended *The Grand Inquisitor* to be an indirect attack on socialism. In the course of his disquisition the Interrogator contrasts Jesus' refusal to turn stones into loaves – on the grounds that the people would come to be dependent on such miracles and thereby lose

---

<sup>7</sup> Dostoevsky here shows his acquaintance with the idea of a geometry obeying laws other than Euclid's, a possibility which had been put forward by the Russian mathematician Lobachevsky early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and which was well known to Russian intellectuals by the 1880s.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

their freedom—with the Church's position: "Feed them first and then demand virtue of them!" Dostoyevsky himself commented:

*By the stones and loaves of bread, I meant our present social problems. Present-day socialism in Europe and in our country as well sets Christ aside and is first of all concerned about bread. It appeals to science and maintains that the cause of all human misfortune is poverty, the struggle for existence and the wrong kind of environment.*

Despite his somewhat reactionary intentions, in *The Grand Inquisitor* Dostoevsky transcends political divisions and gives us a parable of universal significance.

\*

*Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy* (1828-1910) is one of the giants of European literature. His great novel **War and Peace** (1863-9) is a masterpiece of subtle character analysis combined with a panoramic view of Russian upper-class society during the period of the Napoleonic wars. It is also a major novel of ideas, in which Tolstoy sets forth his views on the philosophy of history, and the nature of human freewill.

At the time of writing **War and Peace** Tolstoy was much preoccupied with the problem of historical causation. He had come to reject the "great man" theory of history, according to which the cause of any historical event may be traced to the volitions of a small number (often just one) of powerful individuals. He argues, for example, that the ultimate retreat of Napoleon's army from Russia was not, as usually claimed by



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

historians, the result of a brilliant manoeuvre devised by Russian generals of genius, but rather

*the manoeuvre was, in reality, never conceived of as a whole but came about step by step, incident by incident, moment by moment, as the result of an infinite number of the most diverse conditions, and was only seen in its entirety when it was a fait accompli and belonged to the past.*

To counteract what Tolstoy saw as the simplistic and tendentious analysis of history in terms of the effect of the wills of “great men”, he advocates the use of the methods of the infinitesimal calculus, as presented in the following remarkable passage immediately following the description of the Battle of Borodino:

*Absolute continuity of motion is not comprehensible to the human mind. Laws of motion of any kind become comprehensible to man only when he examines arbitrarily selected elements of the motion; but at the same time, a large proportion of human error comes from the arbitrary division of continuous motion into discontinuous elements. There is a well known, so-called sophism of the ancients consisting in this, that Achilles could never catch up with a tortoise he was following, in spite of the fact that he traveled ten times as fast as the tortoise. By the time Achilles has covered the distance that separated him from the tortoise, the tortoise has covered one tenth of the distance ahead of him: when Achilles has covered that tenth, the tortoise has covered another hundredth, and so on forever. This problem seemed to the ancients insoluble. The absurd answer (that Achilles could never overtake the tortoise) resulted from this: that motion was divided into discontinuous elements,*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*whereas the motion both of Achilles and of the tortoise was continuous. By adopting smaller and smaller elements of motion we only approach a solution of the problem, but never reach it. Only when we have admitted the conception of the infinitely small, and the resulting geometrical progression with a common ratio of one tenth, and have found the sum of this progression to infinity, do we reach a solution of the problem.*

*A modern branch of mathematics having achieved the art of dealing with the infinitely small can now yield solutions in other more complex problems of motion which used to appear insoluble.*

*This modern branch of mathematics, unknown to the ancients, when dealing with problems of motion admits the conception of the infinitely small, and so conforms to the chief condition of motion (absolute continuity) and thereby corrects the inevitable error which the human mind cannot avoid when it deals with separate elements of motion instead of examining continuous motion.*

*In seeking the laws of historical movement just the same thing happens. The movement of humanity, arising as it does from innumerable arbitrary human wills, is continuous.*

*To understand the laws of this continuous movement is the aim of history. But to arrive at these laws, resulting from the sum of all those human wills, man's mind postulates arbitrary and disconnected units. The first method of history is to take an arbitrarily selected series of continuous events and examine it apart from others, though there is and can be no beginning to any event, for one event always flows uninterruptedly from another.*

*The second method is to consider the actions of some one man – a king or a commander – as equivalent to the sum of many individual wills; whereas the sum of individual wills is never expressed by the actions of a single historic personage. Historical*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*science in its endeavour to draw nearer to truth continually takes smaller and smaller units for examination. But however small the units it takes, we feel that to take any unit disconnected from others, or to assume a beginning of any phenomenon, or to say that the will of many men is expressed by the actions of any one historic personage, is in itself false.*

*It needs no critical exertion to reduce utterly to dust any deductions drawn from history. It is merely necessary to select some larger or smaller unit as the subject of history – as criticism has every right to do, seeing that whatever unit history observes must always be arbitrarily selected.*

*Only by taking infinitesimally small units for observation (the differential of history, that is, the individual tendencies of men) and attaining the art of integrating them (that is, finding the sum of these infinitesimals) can we hope at arriving at the laws of history.*

*The first fifteen years of the nineteenth century in Europe present an extraordinary movement of millions of people. Men leave their customary pursuits, hasten from one side of Europe to the other, plunder and slaughter one another, triumph and are plunged in despair, and for some years the whole course of life is altered and presents an intensive movement which first increases and then slackens. What was the cause of this movement, by what laws was it governed? asks the mind of man. The historians, replying to this question, lay before us the sayings and doings of a few dozen men in a building in the city of Paris, calling these sayings and doings "the Revolution"; then they give a detailed biography of Napoleon and of certain people favourable or hostile to him; tell of the influence some of these people had on others, and say: that is why this movement took place and those are its laws.*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*But the mind of man not only refuses to believe this explanation, but plainly says that this method of explanation is fallacious, because in it a weaker phenomenon is taken as the cause of a stronger. The sum of human wills produced the Revolution and Napoleon, and only the sum of those wills first tolerated and then destroyed them.*

*“But every time there have been conquests there have been conquerors; every time there has been a revolution in any state there have been great men,” says history. “Yes, indeed, in every case where conquerors appear there have been wars,” human reason replies, “but this does not prove that the conquerors were the cause of the wars, or that it is possible to discover the factors leading to warfare in the personal activity of a single man.” Whenever I look at my watch and see the hand pointing to ten I hear the bells beginning to ring in the church close by; but I have no right to assume that because the bells start ringing when the watch hand reaches ten the movement of the bells is caused by the position of the hands on my watch.*

*When I see a steam-engine move I hear the whistle, I see the valves opening and the wheels turning; but I have no right to conclude that the whistle and the turning of wheels cause the movement of the engine.*

*Peasants say that a cold wind blows in late spring because the oaks are budding, and it is a fact that a cold wind does blow when the oak is coming out. But though I do not know what causes the cold winds to blow when the oak-buds unfold, I cannot agree with the peasants that the unfolding of the oak-buds is the cause of the cold wind, for the force of the wind is altogether outside the influence of the buds. I see only a coincidence of occurrences such as happens with all the phenomena of life, and I see that however long and however carefully I study the hands of the watch, the valve and the wheels of the engine, and the oak-*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*bud, I shall never find out what makes the bells ring, the locomotive move and the wind blow in spring. To do that I must completely change my point of observation and consider the laws regulating steam, bells and the wind. The historians must do likewise. And experiments in that direction have already been made.*

*To elicit the laws of history we must leave aside kings, ministers and generals, and select for study the homogeneous, infinitesimal elements which influence the masses. No one can say how far it is possible for man to advance in this way towards an understanding of the laws of history; but it is obvious that this is the only path to that end, and that the human intellect has not, so far, applied in this direction one-millionth of the energy which historians have devoted to describing the deeds of various kings, general, and ministers, and propounding reflections of their own concerning those deeds.*

The Epilogue to **War and Peace** is a philosophical disquisition in which Tolstoy sets forth in some detail his views on the nature of historical causation, human freewill and consciousness. He argues that an abstract notion such as "power" cannot be taken as causing historical events on pain of circularity:

*What causes historical events? Power.*

*What is power? Power is the collective will of the masses vested in one person.*

*On what condition is the will of the people delegated to one person? On condition that that person expresses the will of the whole people.*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*That is, power is power. That is, power is a word whose meaning we do not understand.*

Rather, Tolstoy suggests, power is just a relation,

*the relation that exists between the expression of the will of a person and the execution of that will by others.*

He concludes:

*We are able to give a direct and positive reply to those two essential questions of history: (1) what is power; (2) what force produces the movement of nations?*

*(1) Power is the relation of a given person to other persons, in which the more this person expresses opinions, theories and justification of the collective action the less is his participation in that action.*

*(2) The movement of nations is caused not by power, nor by intellectual activity, nor even by a combination of the two, as historians have supposed, but by the activity of all the people who participate in the event, and who always combine in such a way that those who take the largest direct share in the event assume the least responsibility, and vice versa.*

*Morally, power appears to cause the event; physically, it is those who are subordinate to that power. But, inasmuch as moral activity is inconceivable without physical activity, the cause of the event is found neither in the one nor the other but in the conjunction of the two.*

*Or, in other words, the concept of a cause is not applicable to the phenomenon we are examining.*

*In the last analysis we reach an endless circle -- that uttermost limit to which in every domain of thought the human*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*intellect must come if it is not playing with its subject. Electricity produces heat; heat produces electricity. Atoms attract and atoms repel one another.*

*Speaking of the interaction of heat and electricity and of atoms we cannot say why this occurs, and we say that such is the nature of these phenomena, such is their law. The same applies to historical phenomena. Why do wars or revolutions happen? We do not know. We know only that to produce the one or the other men must form themselves into a certain combination in which all take part; and we say that this is the nature of men, that this is a law.*

In the last few sections of Tolstoy's Epilogue he turns from the problem of historical causation to what he regards as a more fundamental problem – the problem of problems – that of the individual human being's freewill, and its relationship to consciousness. He observes that

*If the will of every man were free, that is, if every man could act as he pleased, all history would be a series of disconnected accidents... again, if there is a single law controlling men's actions, freewill cannot exist, for man's will would then be subject to that law.*

*In this contradiction lies the problem of free will...*

*The problem lies in the fact that if we regard man as a subject of observation from whatever point of view - theological, historical, ethical or philosophical - we find the universal law of necessity to which he (like everything else that exists) is subject. But looking upon man from within ourselves - man as the object of our own inner consciousness of self - we feel ourselves to be free.*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*The inner consciousness is a source of self-cognition distinct from and independent of reason. With his reason man observes himself, but only through self-consciousness does he know himself. And without self-consciousness no observation or application of reason is possible.*

In this last passage we see the influence on Tolstoy of German idealist philosophy, especially that of Schopenhauer, in which consciousness is something primordial, a given. Schopenhauer's influence becomes even more evident in the passages that follow:

*In order to understand, to observe, to draw conclusions, man must first of all be conscious of himself as living. A man is only conscious of himself as a living being by the fact that he wills; he is conscious of his volition. And his own will – which is the very essence of his life – he is and cannot but be conscious of as being free.*

*If on submitting himself to observation man perceives that his will is directed by a constant law (say he observes the imperative need of taking food, or the way the brain works, or whatever it may be) he cannot regard this consistent direction of the will otherwise than as a limitation of it. But a thing can only be limited if it is free to begin with. Man sees his will to be limited just because he is conscious of it in no other way than as being free.*

*You tell me I am not free. But I have just lifted my arm and let it fall. Everyone understands that this reply, however illogical, is an irrefutable demonstration of freedom.*

*The reply is the expression of a consciousness that is not subject to reason.*



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*If the concept of freedom appears to the reason as a senseless contradiction, like the possibility of performing two actions at one and the same instant of time, or the possibility of an effect without a cause, that only proves that consciousness is not subject to reason.*

Like the narrator in **Notes from Underground** (but in a much more reasoned manner), Tolstoy ridicules the idea that the mental life of human beings is reducible to natural science:

*Only in our conceited age of the popularization of knowledge – thanks to that most powerful engine of ignorance, the diffusion of printed matter – has the question of the freedom of the will been put on a level on which the question itself cannot exist. In our day the majority of so-called 'advanced' people – that is, a mob of ignoramuses – have accepted the result of the researches of natural science, which is occupied only with one side of the question, for a solution of the whole problem.*

*They say and they write and they print that the soul and freedom do not exist, since the life of man is expressed by muscular movements and muscular movements are conditioned by the working of the nervous system...They say this with no inkling that thousands of years ago that same law of necessity that they are now so strenuously trying to prove by physiology and comparative zoology was not merely acknowledged by all religions and all thinkers but has never been denied. They do not see that the role of the natural sciences in this matter is merely to illumine one side of it. For even if, from the point of view of observation, reason and the will are but secretions of the brain, and if man following the general law of evolution developed from lower animals at some unknown period of time, all this will only elucidate from a fresh angle the truth already admitted thousands*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*of years ago by all religious and philosophical theories - that from the standpoint of reason man is subject to the laws of necessity; but it does not advance by a hair's breadth the solution of the question, which has another, opposite, side, founded on the consciousness of freedom.*

Tolstoy concludes the Epilogue to *War and Peace* with a meditation on the connection between history and human freewill:

*History examines the manifestation of man's freewill in connection with the external world in time and in dependence on cause; that is, it defines this freedom by the laws of reason. And so history is a science only insofar as this freewill is defined by those laws.*

*The recognition of man's freewill as a force capable of influencing historical events, that is, as not subject to laws, is the same for history as the recognition of a free force moving the heavenly bodies would be for astronomy.*

*Such an assumption would destroy the possibility of the existence of laws, that is, of any science whatever. If there is even one heavenly body moving freely then the laws of Kepler and Newton are negated and no conception of the movement of the heavenly bodies any longer exists. If there is a single human action due to freewill then not a single historical law can exist, nor any conception of historical events.*

*History is concerned with the lines of movement of human wills, one extremity of which is hidden in the unknown while at the other end men's consciousness of freewill in the present moment moves on through space and time and causation.*

*The more this field of movement opens out before our eyes*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*the more evident do the laws of the movement become. To discover and define those laws is the problem of history.*

*From the standpoint from which the science of history now regards its subject, by the method it now follows – seeking the causes of phenomena in the freewill of man – a scientific statement of those laws is impossible, for whatever limits we may set to man's freewill, as soon as we recognize it as a force not subject to law the existence of law becomes impossible.*

*Only by reducing this element of freewill to the infinitesimal, that is, by regarding it as an infinitely small quantity, can we convince ourselves of the absolute inaccessibility of causes, and then instead of seeking causes history will adopt as its task the investigation of historical laws.*

*Research into those laws was begun long ago and the new methods of thought which history must adopt are being worked out simultaneously with the self-destroying process towards which the old kind of history with its perpetual dividing and dissecting of the causes of events is tending.*

*All human sciences have gone along this path. Reaching the infinitesimal or infinitely small, mathematics – the most exact of the sciences – leaves off dividing and sets out upon the new process of integrating the infinitesimal unknown. Abandoning the concept of causation, mathematics looks for laws, i.e. the properties common to all the infinitely small unknown elements.*

*The other sciences, too, have proceeded along the same path in their thinking, though it has taken another form. When Newton formulated the law of gravitation he did not say that the sun or the earth had a property of attraction. What he said was that all bodies, from the largest to the smallest, have the property of attracting one another; that is, leaving on one side the question of the cause of the movement of bodies, he expressed the property common to all bodies, from the infinitely large to the infinitely*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*small. The natural sciences do the same thing: putting aside the notion of cause, they seek for laws. History, too, is entered on the same course. And if the subject of history is to be the study of the movements of nations and humanity, and not descriptions of episodes in the lives of individuals, it too is bound to lay aside the notion of cause and seek the laws common to all the equal and indissolubly interconnected infinitesimal elements of freewill.*

In *Some Words about War and Peace*, published in 1868, Tolstoy amplifies his remarks on freedom and necessity:

*Taking a broad view of history we are in indubitably convinced of a sempiternal law by which events occur. Looking at it from a personal point of view we are convinced of the opposite.*

*A man who kills another, Napoleon who orders the crossing of the Niemen, you or I handing in a petition to be admitted to the army, or lifting or lowering our arm, are all indubitably convinced that our every action is based on reasonable grounds and on our own freewill, and that it depends on us whether we do this or that. This conviction is inherent in us and so precious to each of us, that in spite of the proofs of history and the statistics of crime (which convince us of absence of freedom in the actions of other people) we extend the consciousness of our freedom to all our actions.*

*The contradiction seems insoluble. When committing an act I am convinced that I do it by my own free will, but considering that action in its connection with the general life of mankind (in its historical significance), I am convinced that this action was predestined and inevitable. Where is the error?*

*Psychological observations of man's capacity for retrospectively supplying a whole series of supposedly free reasons for something that has been done...confirm the*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*supposition that man's consciousness of freedom in the commission of a certain kind of action is erroneous. But the same psychological observations prove that there is another series of actions in which the consciousness of freedom is not retrospective, but instantaneous and indubitable. In spite of all that the materialists may say, I can undoubtedly commit an act or refrain from it if the act relates to me alone. I have undoubtedly by my own will just raised and lowered my arm. I can at once stop writing. You can at once stop reading. I can certainly, by my own will and free from all obstacles, transfer my thoughts to America, or to any mathematical problem I choose. Testing my freedom I can raise and forcibly lower my hand in the air. I have done so. But near me stands a child and I raise my hand above him and want to lower it with the same force onto the child. I cannot do this. A dog rushes at the child, and I cannot refrain from lifting my hand at the dog. I am on parade, and cannot help following the movement of the regiment. In action I cannot refrain from attacking with my regiment or from running when all around me run – I cannot. When I appear in court as the defender of an accused person, I cannot help speaking or knowing what I am going to say. I cannot help blinking when a blow is directed at my eye.*

*So there are two kinds of actions: some that do and others that do not depend on my will. And the mistake causing the contradiction is due only to the fact that I wrongly transfer the consciousness of freedom (which properly accompanies every act relating to my ego, to the highest abstractions of my existence) to actions performed in conjunction with others and dependent on the coincidence of other wills with my own. To define the limits of freedom and dependence is very difficult and the definition of those limits forms the sole and essential problem of psychology, but observing the conditions of the manifestation of our greatest*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*freedom and greatest dependence, we cannot but see that the more abstract and therefore the less connected with the activity of others our activity is, the more free it is; and on the contrary, the more our activity is connected with other people the less free it is.*

*The strongest, most indissoluble, most burdensome, and constant bond with other men is what is called power over others, which in its real meaning is only the greatest dependence on them.*

Tolstoy's **Anna Karenina**, which has been acclaimed the greatest novel ever written, begins with one of the most famous first lines in literature:

*All happy families are alike, but an unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion.*

**Anna Karenina** is a vast panorama of contemporary life in Russia and of humanity in general. The tragedy of Anna, who sacrifices her husband and son for love, and who eventually commits suicide, is presented in contrast with the spiritual journey of Lyovin, who is a faithful reflection of Tolstoy himself. Like Tolstoy, Lyovin attacks contemporary society, fashionable liberalism, drawing-room religion—he opposes the world which, in his words, “distorts all religious feelings and inevitably crushes the generous enthusiasm of the mind.”

Lyovin is racked by the conflict between feeling and reason. In Lyovin's philosophical anxiety Tolstoy portrays the secret tragedy of a generation whose fear of death had rendered their very lives meaningless. Indeed,

*Lyovin, a happy father and husband, in near perfect health, was several times so near suicide that he had to hide a rope*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*lest he be tempted to hang himself and would not go out with a gun for fear of shooting himself.*

Tolstoy had written in a letter:

*Once a man has realized that death is the end of everything, then there is nothing worse than life either.*

In the one chapter of the novel that carries a title, “Death”, Lyovin is present at his brother Nikolai’s passing, paralleling the death of Tolstoy’s own brother:

*[Nikolai’s] sufferings, growing more and more severe, did their work and prepared him for death. He could not lie comfortably in any position, could not for a moment forget himself. There was no part of his body, no limb, that did not ache and cause him agony. Even the memories, the impressions, the thoughts within this body aroused in him the same aversion as the body itself. The sight of other people, their remarks, his own reminiscences – it was all a torture to him... All his life was merged in this one feeling of suffering and desire to be rid of it.*

*It was evident that he was undergoing a transformation which would make him look upon death as the fulfillment of his desires, as happiness. Hitherto each individual desire aroused by suffering or privation, such as hunger, fatigue, thirst, had brought enjoyment when gratified. But now privation and suffering were not followed by relief, and the effort to obtain relief only caused fresh suffering. And so all desires were merged in one – the desire to be rid of all this pain and from its source, the body.*

For Lyovin,

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*the sight of his brother, and the presence of death, revived in [hi] the sense of horror in the face of the enigma, together with the nearness and inevitability of death, which had seized him [before]. Only now the feeling was still stronger... – he felt even more incapable of apprehending the meaning of death, and its inevitability rose up before him more terrible than ever.*

But Lyovin does, in the end, find a kind of salvation – through the wisdom of an illiterate peasant who tells him that man must love, not for his needs, but for God and his own soul. Lyovin sees then that reason has taught him nothing – all that he knows has been revealed to him by the heart. This religious note echoes the mental processes then taking place in Tolstoy's own mind – as he was soon to confess: "I knew also that the standard of good and evil was not what people said or did, not progress, but myself and my own heart." But one cannot help feeling that Lyovin will soon relapse into doubt, that, as with Tolstoy himself, Lyovin's effacement of the intellect is a temporary expedient. At the end of the novel Lyovin asks himself:

*Well, what is it that troubles me? ...Yes, the one obvious unmistakable manifestation of the Deity is the law of good and evil disclosed to men by revelation which I feel in myself and in the recognition of which I do not so much unite myself as am united, whether I will or no, with other men into one body of believers which is called the Church. But the Jews, the Muslims, the Confucians, the Buddhists – what of them?... Can those hundreds of millions of human beings be deprived of that greatest of blessings without which life has no meaning?... But what is it that I want to know?... I want to grasp the relation of the Deity of all the different religions of mankind. I am seeking to fathom the*



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*general manifestation of God to the universe with all its stars and planets. What am I about? Knowledge, certain, unattainable by reason, has been revealed to me, to my heart, and here I am obstinately trying to express that knowledge in words and by means of reason. ...Do I not know that it is not the stars that are moving?... But seeing the stars change place and not being able to picture to myself the revolution of the earth, I am right in saying the stars move.*

*And the astronomers – could they have understood and calculated anything if they had taken into account all the complicated and varied motions of the earth? All the marvellous conclusions they have reached about the distances, masses, movements and disturbances of the celestial bodies are based on the apparent movements of the stars round a stationary earth – on that very movement I am witnessing now, that millions have witnessed during long ages, that has been and always will be the same, and that can always be trusted. And just as the conclusions of the astronomers would have been idle and precarious had they not been founded on observations of the visible heavens in relation to a single meridian and a single horizon, so all my conclusions would be idle and precarious if not founded on that understanding of good and evil which was and always will be alike for all men, which has been revealed to me by Christianity and which can always be trusted in my own soul. I have no right to try to decide the question of other religions and their relations to the Deity; that must remain unfathomable to me.*

He concludes:

*This new feeling has not changed me, has not made me happy and enlightened all of a sudden as I dreamt it would... But be it faith or not – I don't know what it is – through suffering*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*this feeling has crept...imperceptibly into my heart and has lodged itself firmly there....*

*I shall still embark on useless discussions and express my opinions inopportunistically; there will still be the same wall between the sanctuary of my inmost soul and other people, even my wife...I shall still be as unable to understand with my reason why I pray, and I shall still go on praying – but my life now, my whole life, independently of anything that can happen to me, every minute is no longer meaningless as it was before but has a true meaning of goodness with which I have the power to invest it.*

Despite the affirmation of faith in Lyovin's closing sentence, one cannot help agreeing with Dostoevsky's observation:

*Lyovin's mind is over-restless. He will lose his faith again...he will tear himself on some mental nail of his own making.*

In 1899 Tolstoy's last novel, **Resurrection**, appeared. In this work Tolstoy strove to put into the form of a novel the spiritual "conversion" he had undergone after finishing **Anna Karenina** (and which he had already described in didactic works such as **A Confession**). In **Resurrection** Tolstoy aimed to reproduce in artistic form the resurrection of fallen man, but, not recognizing the Christian conception of resurrection, he describes instead a man undergoing a process of spiritual regeneration. The novel's central figure, Prince Nekhlyudov, after Pierre Bezukhov in **War and Peace** and Lyovin in **Anna Karenina** Tolstoy's last great literary self-portrait, serves on the jury at the trial for murder of a prostitute, whom he recognizes as the innocent young girl,

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

Maslova, he once loved, and then seduced and abandoned. Nekhlyudov is conscience-stricken, and when Maslova is convicted and transported to Siberia, he gives up everything to follow her there, in the end undergoing a kind of spiritual transformation:

*That night [the novel concludes] an entirely new life began for Nekhlyudov, not so much because he had entered into new conditions of life, but because everything that had happened to him from that time on was endowed with an entirely different meaning for him. How this new chapter of his life will end, the future will show.*

As with Raskolnikov at the end of **Crime and Punishment**, this hints at a sequel, and, indeed, six months after he finished the work, Tolstoy noted in his diary: "I terribly want to write an artistic, not a dramatic but an epic continuation of *Resurrection*: the peasant life of Nekhlyudov." This sequel was never written.

In **Resurrection** Tolstoy attacks both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian penal system. After a somewhat sarcastic description of a prison church service, Tolstoy observes, in a passage deleted by the government censor:

*And to not one of those present, from the priest down..., did it occur that this Jesus Whose name the priest repeated in wheezy tones such an endless number of times, praising Him with outlandish words, had expressly forbidden everything that was being done there; that He had not only prohibited the senseless chatter and the blasphemous incantation over the bread and wine but had also, in the most emphatic manner, forbidden men to call other men their master or to pray in temples, and had commanded each to pray in solitude; had forbidden temples*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*themselves, saying that He came to destroy them and that one should worship not in temples but in spirit and in truth; and above everything else He had forbidden not only sitting in judgement on people and imprisoning, humiliating, torturing and executing them, as was done here, but had even prohibited any kind of violence, saying that He came to set at liberty those who were captive.*

*It did not occur to any one of those present that everything that was going on there was the greatest blasphemy, and a mockery of the same Christ in Whose name it was all being done. No one seemed to realize that the gilt cross with the enamel medallions at the ends, which the priest held out to the people to kiss, was nothing else but the emblem of the gallows on which Christ had been executed for denouncing the very things now being performed here in His name. It did not occur to anyone that the priests, who imagined they were eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ in the form of bread and wine, were indeed eating His body and drinking His blood – but not in little bits of bread and in the wine, but first by misleading “these little ones” with whom Christ identified Himself and then by depriving them of their greatest blessing and subjecting them to the most cruel torments, by concealing from them the good things that He had brought them.*

*The priest performed his functions with an easy conscience because he had been brought up from childhood to believe that this was the one true faith which had been held by all the saints that had ever lived and was held now by the spiritual and temporal authorities. He did not believe that the bread became flesh, or that it was good for the soul to pronounce a great number of words, or that he had really devoured a bit of God – no one could believe that – but he believed that one ought to believe it. But the main thing that confirmed him in this faith was the*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*fact that, in return for fulfilling the demands of this faith, for eighteen years now he had been drawing an income which enabled him to support his family, and send his son to high-school and his daughter to the school for the daughters of clergy. The subdeacon believed in these things even more firmly than the priest, since he had entirely forgotten the substance of the dogmas of this faith, and only knew that the warm water for the wine, prayers for the dead, the Hours, a simple thanksgiving service and a choral thanksgiving service – everything had its fixed price which devout Christians gladly paid, and therefore he called out his “Have Mercy, Have Mercy”, and sang and read just what he had to sing and read as a matter of course, just as another man sells wood or flour or potatoes. The prison superintendent and the warders, though they had never either known or tried to find out what the dogmas of the faith consisted in, believed that one must believe in this faith because the higher authorities and the Tsar himself believed in it. Besides, they felt dimly (they could never have explained why) that this creed was a justification of their cruel duties. But for this creed it would have been harder for them – impossible, even – to employ all their energies tormenting people, as they did now with a perfectly easy conscience...*

*The majority of the prisoners (with the exception of a few who saw through the deception practised on those who adhered to this faith, and laughed at it in their hearts) – the majority of them believed that these gilded ikons, candles, chalices, vestments, crosses, repetitions of incomprehensible words, “Jesu most sweet” and “Have mercy”, possessed a mystic power by means of which a great many comforts might be obtained, in this life and the life to come. Though most of them had made several attempts – by means of prayers, special services, candles – to get the goods of this life, and their prayers had remained unanswered, each of them was firmly convinced that their lack of success was*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*accidental and that the establishment, approved by learned men and by archbishops, must be a thing of the greatest importance, and indispensable, if not for this life, at any rate for the hereafter.*

Passages such as these excited the ire of the Church authorities to such a degree that, in February 1901, they formally excommunicated Tolstoy.

Tolstoy is equally vehement in his strictures against the Russian penal system, and, by implication, the whole idea of legally sanctioned imprisonment. Towards the novel's end Nekhlyudov reflects on his experience of accompanying the convicts on their way to exile or incarceration in Siberia:

*To know that somewhere, far away, one set of people are torturing another set by subjecting them to every kind of humiliation, inhuman degradation and suffering; and for three months to have been a constant eye-witness of that defilement and agony inflicted on one set of people by another – are two very different things. And Nekhlyudov was experiencing this. More than once during the last three months he had asked himself: Am I mad, that I see what others do not see, or are they mad who are responsible for all that I see? Yet the people (and there were so many of them) who did the things that so bewildered and horrified him behaved with such calm assurance – not only that what they were doing was necessary but that it was highly important and valuable work – that it was difficult to believe them all mad. Nor could he admit that he was mad himself, for he was conscious of the clearness of his thoughts. Consequently, he found himself in a continual state of perplexity.*

*What he had seen during the past three months had left him with the impression that from the whole population living in freedom the government in conjunction with the courts picked*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*out the most highly strung, mettlesome and excitable individuals, the most gifted and the strongest – but less crafty and cautious than other people – and these, who were not one whit more guilty or more dangerous to society than those who were left at liberty, were locked up in gaols, halting-stations, hard-labour camps, where they were confined for months and years in utter idleness, material security, and exile from nature, from their families and from useful work. In other words, they were forced outside all the conditions required for a normal and moral human existence. This was the first conclusion that Nekhlyudov drew from his observations.*

*Secondly, these people were subjected to all sorts of unnecessary degradations in these establishments – chains, shaven heads and infamous prison clothing; that is, they were deprived of the main inducements which encourage weak people to lead good lives: regard for public opinion, a sense of shame and a consciousness of human dignity.*

*Thirdly, with their lives in continual danger from the infectious diseases common in places of confinement, from physical exhaustion and from beatings (to say nothing of exceptional occurrences such as sunstroke, drowning and fire), these people lived continually in circumstances in which the best and most moral of men are led by the instinct of self-preservation to commit (and to condone in others) the most terribly cruel actions.*

*Fourthly, these people were forced to associate with men singularly corrupted by life (and by those very institutions, especially) – with murderers and malefactors who acted like leaven in dough on those not yet corrupted by the means employed.*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*And fifthly and finally, all the people subject to these influences were instilled in the most effective manner possible – namely, by every possible form of inhuman treatment practised upon themselves, by means of the suffering inflicted on children, women and old men, by beatings and floggings with rods and whips, by the offering of rewards for bringing a fugitive back, dead or alive, by the separation of husbands from wives and putting them to cohabit with other partners, by shootings and hangings – it was instilled into them in the most effective manner possible that all sorts of violence, cruelty and inhumanity were not only tolerated but even sanctioned by the government when it suited its purpose, and were therefore all the more permissible to those who found themselves under duress, in misery and want.*

*All these institutions seemed to have been devised for the express purpose of producing a concretion of depravity and vice, such as could not be achieved in any other conditions, with the ultimate idea of disseminating this concretion of depravity and vice among the whole population. “It is just as if the problem had been set: to find the best and surest means of corrupting the greatest number of people,” thought Nekhlyudov, as he tried to penetrate to the heart of what happened in gaols and halting-stations. Every year hundreds and thousands of people were brought to the utmost pitch of depravity and, when completely corrupted, they were set free to spread up and down the country the corruption they had learned in prison.*

*In the prisons of Tumen, Ekaterinaburg, Tomsk, and at the halting-stations along the way, Nekhlyudov saw how successfully the objects society seemed to have set itself were attained. Simple ordinary men brought up in the tenets of Russian social, Christian, peasant morality abandoned these principles and acquired new prison ideas, founded mainly on the theory that any outrage to or violation of the human personality,*



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*any destruction of the same, is permissible if profitable. In the light of what was done to them, people who had been in prison came to see and realize with every fibre of their being that all the moral laws of respect and compassion for man preached by religious and moral teachers were set aside in real life, and that therefore there was no need for them to adhere to them either... During the journey Nekhlyudov had discovered that tramps who escaped into the marshes would incite comrades to escape with them, and then murder them and eat their flesh. He saw a live man who had been accused of this and admitted it. And the most appalling thing was that these were not isolated instances but cases that recurred continually.*

*Only by the special cultivation of vice as was carried out in these establishments could a Russian be brought to the state of these tramps who (anticipating Nietzsche's doctrine) considered everything permissible and nothing forbidden, and spread this teaching first among the convicts and then among the people in general.*

*The only explanation of all that was done was that it aimed at the prevention of crime, at inspiring fear, at correcting offenders and at dealing out to them "natural punishment", as the books expressed it. But in reality nothing of the sort was achieved. Crime, instead of being prevented, was extended. Offenders, instead of being frightened, were encouraged, and many of them – the tramps, for example – had gone to gaol of their own accord. Instead of the correction of the vicious, there was a systematic dissemination of all the vices, while the need for punishment, far from being softened by the measures taken by the government, nurtured a spirit of revenge among the masses where it did not exist before.*

*"Then why do they persist in what they are doing?" Nekhlyudov asked himself, and found no answer..*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*And what surprised him was that none of all this had happened accidentally, by mistake once only, but that it had been going on for centuries, with the single difference that in the old days men had had their nostrils slit and their ears cut off; then a time came when they were branded and fastened to iron rods; and now they were manacled, and transported by steam instead of in carts.*

*The official argument that the conditions which excited his indignation arose from the imperfection of the arrangements at the places of confinement and deportation, and could all be improved as soon as prisons were built in accordance with modern methods, did not satisfy Nekhlyudov, because he felt that the things which aroused his indignation were not caused by more or less perfect arrangements at the places of detention. He had read of modern prisons with electric bells, where executions were done by electricity...and the perfected system of violence revolted him all the more.*

*What revolted Nekhlyudov most of all was that there were men in the law-courts and in the ministries who received large salaries taken from the people for referring to books written by other officials like themselves, actuated by like motives, fitting to this or that statute actions that infringed the laws which they themselves had framed, and in accordance with these statutes of theirs went on sending people to places where they would never see them again and where those people were completely at the mercy of cruel, hardened inspectors, gaolers and convoy soldiers, and where they perished, body and soul, by the million.*

*Now that he had a close acquaintance with prisons and halting-stations, Nekhlyudov saw that all the vices which developed among the convicts – drunkenness, gambling, brutality and all the dreadful crimes committed by the inmates of the prisons, and even cannibalism itself – were neither accidents nor*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*signs of mental or physical degeneration (as certain obtuse scientists have declared, to the satisfaction of the government) but that they were the inevitable result of the incredible delusion that one group of human beings has the right to punish another. Nekhlyudov saw that cannibalism began, not in the Siberian marshes but in ministerial offices and government departments: it only found consummation in the marshes. He saw that...all the lawyers and functionaries from usher to minister were not in the least concerned about justice or the good of the people, about which they talked: all they cared about were the roubles they were paid for doing the things that caused all this degradation and misery.*

Not surprisingly, this savage indictment also fell to the censor's scissors.

During the composition of **War and Peace** Tolstoy had written to an acquaintance: "The aim of an artist is not to resolve a question irrefutably, but to compel one to love life in all its manifestations" – an opinion that Oscar Wilde would likely have endorsed. Judging from the didactic nature of the Epilogue, however, it seems clear that by the time the novel was completed Tolstoy's views in this regard had begun to change. The mature Tolstoy in fact came to believe that all art has a moral purpose, namely, to convey in the simplest and most effective way the doctrine of universal love. (It is of interest to note that as a young boy his elder brother had told him of a little green stick which he had buried in the forest on his father's estate; on it was engraved a secret formula which, once revealed, would inaugurate a golden age of universal love.) In his **Confession** of 1879 he describes the intellectual crisis which led to his rejection of orthodox religion, and in a number of subsequent works, for example *Religion and Morality* (1893), *What is Religion and What is its Essence* (1902) and

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*The Law of Love and the Law of Violence* (1908) he outlines his new beliefs. While retaining the ethical content of (early) Christianity and the conception of a supreme being, Tolstoy rejects its supernatural elements. He shows how Christ's teaching has been perverted by the authorities of Church and State to justify the use of violence in upholding their own institutions, themselves based on coercion. His beliefs were presented in a popular form in parables and stories of remarkable trenchancy: many of these are collected in **Twenty-Three Tales** (1906).

Tolstoy's later views on aesthetics are presented in *What is Art?* of 1896. Here he puts forward the view that the goal of a genuine artist is the achieving of emotional communion, so that art itself is a vehicle through which the artist "infects" other people with the feelings he himself has experienced. If this "infection" is confined solely to a small number of persons of the same class as the artist, it is negligible and inferior art; if the appeal extends to mankind in general, but the feelings thus communicated are evil, it is genuine but evil art; if the feelings are good, it is good art. If they are the highest feelings possible, the religious feelings of love and compassion, it is the highest form of all, religious art. The application of these standards led Tolstoy to reject or minimize the greater part of modern art and literature, including his own earlier work. He came to reject the "superfluous detail" of realism, not only because it limited the appeal of literature but because it had ceased to satisfy him aesthetically.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

### IV. French Literature

THE FRENCH SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT of the later 19<sup>th</sup> century included the poets *Arthur Rimbaud* (1854-91), *Paul Verlaine* (1844-96), *Stéphane Mallarmé* (1842-98), *Charles Baudelaire* (1821-67), the dramatist and short story writer *Villiers de l'Isle-Adam* (1840-89), and the novelist *Joris-Karl Huysmans* (1848-1907). These writers had reacted against both the descriptive precision and objectivity of realism, whose greatest representative in France was *Gustave Flaubert* (1821-80), and the scientific materialism and determinism of the naturalist movement centred around *Émile Zola* (1840-1902). Rejecting the Naturalist precept that literature should be a "slice of life", the symbolists focused on the subjective, treating the objects of the external world not as things in themselves but as symbols for the evocation of mood. In this respect Huysman's **A Rebours** ("Against the Grain", or "Against Nature", 1884) is the symbolist novel *par excellence*.

Des Esseintes, the principal character of this fascinating, virtually plotless novel, is the effete descendant of an old aristocratic family. Suffering from *ennui*, he resolves to overcome it by the cultivation of increasingly refined and *outré* tastes and sensations. To this end he purchases a isolated villa and has it fitted out to his exact specifications: his living-room has walls bound like books in morocco leather, ebony bookshelves and bookcases, windows paned with bottle-glass; the chimney-piece is a triptych of illuminated manuscripts of poems by Baudelaire. His dining room is designed to resemble a ship's cabin, and is equipped with ingenious mechanisms designed to produce all the sensations of a long sea-voyage, yet at the same time sparing him the tedious necessity of having to leave home. ("Travel, indeed,

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

struck him as being a waste of time, since he believed that the imagination could provide a superior substitute for the vulgar reality of actual experience.") Des Esseintes withdraws into his Xanadu, intending to lead the life of a cultured anchorite. But in the end he falls ill and reluctantly follows his doctor's urging to abandon his solitary existence and return to a normal life.

In Wilde's **The Picture of Dorian Gray** (see below) we find the following passage, referring to the yellow-backed French novel lent to the hero by Lord Henry Wotton:

*It was the strangest book he had ever read. It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed.*

We have it on Wilde's own testimony that the book in question is **À Rebours**. And the above passage rather mischievously implies that the book had a bad influence on his hero. But Des Esseintes is far from being a Dorian Gray: unlike the latter, he simply wishes to indulge his recherché tastes in solitude. He is the nineteenth century forerunner of the virtual reality buff.

Huysmans also wrote a tetralogy of quasi-autobiographical novels: *La Bas* (1891), *En Route* (1895), *La Cathédrale* (1898), and *L'Oblat* (1903). These chart the spiritual journey of Durtal, a solitary, agonized, alienated character, a thinly disguised version of the author himself. In each of these novels Durtal is engaged in a constant search for something of worth in what he sees as a valueless world. In *La Bas*, a dark tale of occultism, satanism, and impiety, Durtal is initially adrift in a sea of doubt. Seeking the

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

divine in the depths of evil and in the furthest reaches of human consciousness, he dabbles in black magic and conducts weird pseudoscientific experiments. (Huysmans himself had first-hand knowledge of the occult underworld thriving in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris and drew on it freely in writing *La Bas*.) In *En Route*, Durtal is morally and spiritually healed, and led back to God through art and aesthetic inspiration. By the end of the novel he has retired to a Trappist monastery. In *La Cathédrale*, Chartres cathedral serves as a symbol for Durtal's repudiation of the modern world, and in *L'Oblat* Durtal's spiritual odyssey reaches its culmination in his embracing of Roman Catholicism.

\*

The great French novelist *Honoré de Balzac* (1799-1850) is celebrated as the creator of the *Comédie Humaine*, a vast collection of interlinked novels and stories, of which about ninety were completed in under twenty years. His early novel **La Peau de Chagrin** (the Shagreen Skin, 1831) is a variation on the Faustian theme of the devil's pact. Its protagonist, Raphael, takes up gambling in an effort to satisfy his craving for excitement. He loses everything, and as a result is tempted to commit suicide. As he wanders about Paris waiting for an appropriate moment in which to cast himself into the Seine, he is invited into an antique shop containing what seems to him all the treasures of the past. In the midst of these he encounters an old man, who gives him a talisman in the form of a wild ass's skin. On this is indelibly engraved a message to the effect that the wishes of its owner will be granted, but that, with each granted wish, the skin will shrink commensurately. Raphael cannot resist the temptation put before him, and, after employing the skin to give him power and riches

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

finds that it has contracted to an alarming degree. He resolves to conserve his energy and curb his desires, but still the skin shrinks. He consults doctors and scientists, all to no avail. Finally the skin shrivels to the point that not a single further wish is allowed him. Despite extreme debilitation, Raphael allows his passion for his lover to be rekindled one last time, the skin dwindles to nothing, and he dies.

The central theme of **La Peau de Chagrin** is the dilemma that each of us may have to face: whether to live "for the moment," restlessly pursuing one's desires, with all the attendant risks, or to curb one's passions and opt for a sober, sheltered existence. To will, or not to will? For the Byronic Raphael even suicide is preferable to the latter option, but in choosing the former he thereby seals his own fate. Balzac himself regarded his novel as a warning against the corrupting influences of early nineteenth century commerce, a theme to which he was to return continually in his later work.

\*

*Henri Barbusse* (1873–1935) is best known for his novel *Le Feu* ("Under Fire", 1916), based on his experiences during the First World War. But his most remarkable achievement is **L'Enfer** ("Hell", 1908), a highly focused study of voyeurism. A young man staying in a French hotel discovers a hole in the wall above his bed, through which he can see and hear the occupants of the next room. Before long he has become obsessed with the study of the hidden lives of his neighbours, and spends his every waking hour at his peep-hole. Through it he witnesses the whole gamut of human activity at first hand: childbirth, first love, marriage, adultery, lesbianism, illness, religion and death. He hears the



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

voices of his fellow human beings whispering, screaming, pleading, arguing, exulting and dying. He muses on the question of his own existence and that of the world:

*What am I? What am I? ...I must find an answer to this question, because another question hangs from it like a threat: What is to become of me?*

*Thought is the source of everything. It is with thought that we must always begin...But am I not the victim of an illusion? I hear myself object that what is in me is the image, the reflection, the idea of the universe. Thought is only the phantasm of the world lent to each of us. The universe exists objectively outside me, independently of me, on so huge a scale that it reduces me to nothingness as if I were dead already. And if I am indeed nonexistent, or if I shut my eyes, it makes no difference: the universe will still exist.*

*No. That is not true. I do not know whether the universe has any reality apart from me. What I do know is that its reality occurs only through the instrumentality of my thought, and that in the first place it exists only through the concept I have of it. It is I who have brought the stars and the centuries into being, I who have evolved the firmament in my head. I cannot emerge from my mind. I have no right to do so, without falling into error or falsehood. I have no power to do so, either. Try as I may to struggle as if to escape from myself, I cannot invest the world with any reality other than that of my imagination. I believe in myself and I am alone, since I cannot emerge from myself. ... What could possibly convince me that beyond the impassable frontiers of thought the universe has an existence separate from my own?*

*I turn to metaphysics, which is not a science: it lies outside the scientific domain, and is closer to art, seeking like art for absolute truth – for if a picture is powerful and a poem is beautiful, that is thanks to truth. I read through books. I consult savants and thinkers.*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*I gather together the whole arsenal of certainties that has been collected by the human mind... and I read this very truth which was imposing itself on me: It is impossible to deny our concept of the world, but it cannot be proved to exist outside the concept we have of it.*

*No, there is no certainty that that truth which begins in us, continues elsewhere; and when, having uttered the phrase which no one after him has even considered denying – “I think, therefore I am” – the philosopher tried, step by step, to argue the existence of something real outside the thinking creature, he moved further and further away from certainty. Of all the philosophy of the past, nothing remains but this clear statement which sets within each one of us the principle of existence: of all human research, nothing remains but this immense discovery which I had already read as in a book in the difference and the solitude of each face. The universe, as it seems to appear to us, proves only ourselves, who believe we see it. The external universe, by which I mean the terrestrial globe with its eleven types of movement in space... – all this is a mirage and an hallucination.*

*And in spite of the voices which, even from our inner depths, cry out against what I have just dared to think, as a mob cries out against beauty; in spite of the sage who, while admitting that the universe is an hallucination, adds without proof that it is “a true hallucination” – I maintain that the eternity and the infinity of the universe are two false gods. It is I who have endowed the universe with these exorbitant qualities, which exist in me (I must have endowed it with them since, even if it possessed them, I could not prove the presence of what cannot be proved, and would have to contribute them from my own resources, to complete the limited concept I have of it).*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*Nothing can prevail against the absolute statement that I exist and cannot emerge from myself, and that all things – in space, time or reason – are only ways of imagining reality...*

*Everything is in me, and there are no judges, no limits, and there are no bounds to me. The de profundis, the striving not to die, the desire that declines as its cry rises, these things have not ceased. It is in unrestricted liberty that the incessant mechanism of the human heart operates (always something new, always). It is such an unreserved effusion that even death is effaced by it. For how could I imagine my own death, except by emerging from myself and considering myself as if I were not I, but another?*

*We do not die...Each being is alone in the world... There is only one thing we can say: I am alone. ...And yet our infinite misery is indistinguishable from pride and even happiness – proud, icy happiness. Is it with pride or joy that I begin to smile in the first glimmer of dawn, beside the fading lamp, as I gradually come to realize that I am universally alone?...*

Only when he has probed every circle of the hell of human existence does he cease his metaphysical musings, pack his bags and return to the masquerade of everyday life.

\*

The philosophy of *Jean-Paul Sartre* (1905-1980) permeates his literary output, which includes novels, plays, and short stories. As a philosopher Sartre assigned a central role to the opposition between consciousness and the outer world; this opposition provides the underlying theme for his first novel **Nausea** (1938). Its protagonist Roquentin is an author who endures voluntary exile in the French provincial town of Bouville (literally:

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

"Mudville") in order to pursue his researches into the life of the Marquis de Rollebon, an eighteenth-century diplomat. Each of the novel's principal characters starts out with the belief that the world has just that structure that he or she imputes to it, but is in the end forced to abandon that belief. Thus the Autodidact, a pathetic and hopeless "humanist," dedicates himself to mastering the whole of knowledge by reading alphabetically through the volumes of a provincial library, as if the world were a matter of arrangement; Roquentin's ex-mistress, Anny, bases her life on the romanticized idea of "privileged situations" engendering "perfect moments," as if living were a matter of poetry. Roquentin himself is subject to bouts of nausea that he projects into the outer world, as if that world were just an embodiment of his own sensations, of his own mode of description. Sitting in a café, the nausea is brought on by seeing a man in a blue shirt against a chocolate-coloured wall:

*The Nausea is not inside me: I feel it out there in the wall ... everywhere around me. It makes itself one with the café, I am the one who is within it.*

For Roquentin the outer world of objects has an unstable, shifting character. An afternoon spent in fruitless research in the local library leads him to write in his journal:

*The inconsistency of inanimate objects! The books were still there, arranged in alphabetical order on the shelves...usually, powerful and squat, along with the stove, the green lamps, the wide windows, the ladders, they dam up the future. As long as you stay between these walls, whatever happens must happen on the right or the left of the stove. Saint Denis himself could come*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*in carrying his head in his hands and he would still have to enter on the right, walk between the shelves devoted to French Literature and the table reserved for women readers. And if he doesn't touch the ground, if he floats ten inches off the floor, his bleeding neck will be just at the level of the third shelf of books. Thus these objects serve at least to fix the limits of probability. [But] today they fixed nothing at all: it seemed that their very existence was subject to doubt, that they had the greatest difficulty in passing from one instant to the next...I felt surrounded by cardboard scenery which could quickly be removed...Frightened, I looked at these unstable beings which in an hour, in a minute, were perhaps going to crumble...I suppose it is out of laziness that the world is the same day after day. Today it seemed to want to change. And then anything, anything could happen.*

And later he writes of time:

*I looked anxiously about me: the present, nothing but the present. Furniture light and solid, rooted in its present, a table, a bed, a closet with a mirror – and me. The true nature of the present revealed itself: it was what exists, and all that was not present did not exist. The past did not exist. Not at all. Not in things, not even in my thoughts. It is true that I had realized a long time ago that mine had escaped me. But until then I had believed that it had simply gone out of range. For me the past was only a pensioning off: it was another way of existing, a state of vacation and inaction; each event, once it had played its part, put itself politely into a box and became an honorary event: we have so much difficulty imagining nothingness. Now I knew: things are entirely what they appear to be – and behind them...there is nothing.*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

Then, as he sits on a bench in a park staring at the roots of a chestnut tree, Roquentin achieves what in Zen Buddhism is called *Satori*—a shattering of experience in which the meaning of existence is revealed to him. At the same time, he comes to understand the true nature of his nausea:

*The Nausea has not left me...but I no longer have to bear it, it is no longer an illness or a passing fit: it is I.*

*So I was in the park just now. The roots of the chestnut tree were sunk in the ground just under my bench. I couldn't remember it was a root any more. The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use and the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, stooping forward, head bowed, alone in front of this black, knotty mass, entirely beastly. Then I had this vision.*

*It left me breathless. Never, until these last few days, had I understood the meaning of the term 'existence.' I was like the others...I said, like them, 'The ocean is green; that white speck up there is a seagull,' but I didn't feel that it existed or that the seagull was an 'existing seagull'; usually existence hides itself...Even when I looked at things, I was miles from dreaming that they existed: they looked like scenery to me. I picked them up in my hands, they served me as tools, I foresaw their resistance. But all that happened on the surface. If anyone had asked me what existence was, I would have answered in good faith that it was nothing, simply an empty form which was added to external things without changing anything in their nature. And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer...I understood that I had found the key to Existence, the key to my nausea, to my own life.*

With that, Roquentin decides to abandon his sterile attempt at biography and to leave Bouville.

**Nausea** is philosophy incarnate, a novel in which the ultimate philosophical problem, the problem of existence, plays a role as important as that of any of its human characters.

Sartre's philosophical outlook was strongly influenced by the ideas of the German philosopher *Edmund Husserl* (1859–1938), the creator of the philosophy known as *phenomenology*. The chief tenet of this philosophy—a descendant of Kant's transcendental idealism—is that the only things which are given directly to us, that we can know completely, are objects of *consciousness*. It is these with which philosophy, and indeed all knowledge, must begin. In Husserl's words,

*Consciousness has a being of its own...[it is] a region of Being which is in principle unique, and can become the field of a new science – the science of Phenomenology.*

Initially, Sartre was concerned to develop Husserl's phenomenological methods and apply them to the study of the imagination. For Sartre the imagination held a special interest not only because of its use in creating ideal worlds which contrast with the real one, but also through the fact that he regarded the exercise of the imagination as the paradigmatic manifestation of *human freedom*<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> Compare Coleridge's observation:

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

Imagination is an aspect of consciousness, and the nature of consciousness forms the principal theme of Sartre's chief philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Here Sartre argues, following Descartes, that the contents of consciousness belong to a different philosophical category from that of the physical world and that consciousness ultimately reduces to *self*-consciousness. Sartre calls those aspects of human life which involve consciousness in this sense the *for itself* (*pour-soi*); physical facts, which are independent of consciousness comprise what he calls the *in itself* (*en-soi*): in this we hear distant echoes of Kant's division of the world into phenomena and noumena. Physical facts "are what they are", and satisfy the ordinary laws of logic. But according to Sartre this is not true for consciousness; here things "are what they are not and are not what they are."

Sartre saw the *self*—the subject of consciousness—as emerging from the formation during childhood of what he calls a "fundamental project" which gives unity to the person's life. This formation constitutes a choice which is freely made by the individual person, and is indeed "the fundamental act of freedom."<sup>9</sup>

The issue of freedom recurs continually in Sartre's literary output. His trilogy of novels *The Age of Reason*, *The Reprieve* (both 1947), and *Iron in the Soul* (1949), collectively entitled *Roads to Freedom*, explore the nature of personal freedom against the backdrop of the fall of France during the Second World War. His play *Huis Clos* ("No Exit") of 1944 is a depiction of Hell as a psychic torment, a dialogue of endless futility, in which three characters find themselves locked up in a room together in perpetuity—the ultimate loss of freedom. It is in this play that we

---

*A single thought is that which it is from other thoughts, as a wave of the sea takes its form and shape from the waves which precede it.*

<sup>9</sup> Later, however, he was to abandon this view.



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

find Sartre's most famous phrase *L'enfer c'est les autres*, "Hell is other people," uttered by the male character when all three finally grasp that there will be no escape from their confinement. In his short story *The Wall* (1939), the principal character, a political prisoner, is to be shot unless he reveals the whereabouts of the leader of his political group. He chooses not to do so, and instead sends his captors off to the cemetery on what he intends as a wild-goose chase—fully expecting to be shot on their return, not having found the man they were seeking. To his surprise they release him, because by sheer chance the leader happened to be hiding in that very cemetery. The central character of Sartre's story *Erostratus* (based on a Greek legend) wishes to be free to despise his fellow human beings, and threatens to kill some of them at will. After firing a few shots at random, he locks himself in the lavatory of a café, intending to use the last remaining bullet on himself. But he finds that he is not free to do this, and surrenders himself to the judgment of society. In *The Childhood of a Leader*, the principal character chooses to become a fascist, believing that that this will define him both to himself and in the eyes of other people.

In *What is Literature?* (1949) Sartre sets out his literary manifesto: a justification of the writer, and of the act of writing, in existentialist terms. For Sartre a piece of writing is a commitment, an enterprise through which the writer engages with his age. He emphasizes the writer's social responsibility, and deprecates the social indifference and irresponsibility associated with purely "academic" writing.

Sartre described himself as a representative of what he called "atheistic existentialism" — whose essential principle is that, in the absence of God, human beings are just what they make of themselves. The core of his philosophical position is presented

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

with great clarity in the following passages, reminiscent of Tolstoy, from *Existentialism and Humanism* (1948):

*Our point of departure is...the subjectivity of the individual...At the point of departure there cannot be any other truth than this, I think, therefore I am, which is the absolute truth of consciousness as it attains to itself. Every theory which begins with man, outside of this moment of self-attainment, is a theory which thereby suppresses the truth, for outside of the Cartesian cogito, all objects are no more than probable, and any doctrine of probabilities which is not attached to a truth will crumble into nothing. In order to possess the probable one must possess the true. Before there can be any truth whatever, then, there must be an absolute truth, and there is such a truth which is simple, easily attained and within the reach of everybody; it consists in one's immediate sense of one's self.*

*In the second place, this theory alone is compatible with the dignity of man, it is the only one which does not make man into an object. All kinds of materialism lead one to treat every man, including oneself, as an object - that is, as a set of predetermined reactions, in no way different from the patterns of qualities and phenomena which constitute a table, or a chair or a stone. Our aim is precisely to establish the human kingdom as a pattern of values in distinction from the material world. But the subjectivity that we thus postulate as the standard of truth is no narrowly individual subjectivism, for as we have demonstrated, it is not only one's self that one discovers in the cogito, but that of others too. Contrary to the philosophy of Descartes, contrary to that of Kant, when we say 'I think' we are attaining to ourselves in the presence of the other, and we are just as certain of the other as we are of ourselves. Thus the man who discovers himself directly in the cogito also discovers all the others, and discovers*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*them as the condition of his own existence. He recognizes that he cannot be anything (in the sense in which one says one is spiritual, or that one is wicked or jealous) unless others recognize him as such. I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself except through the mediation of another. The other is indispensable to my existence, and equally so to any knowledge I can have of myself. Under these conditions, the intimate discovery of myself is at the same time the revelation of the other as a freedom which confronts mine, and which cannot think or will without doing so either for me or against me. Thus, at once, we find ourselves in a world which is, let us say, that of "inter-subjectivity". It is in this world that man has to decide what he is and what others are.*

\*

*Simone de Beauvoir* (1908–1986) was closely associated with Sartre and played a leading part in the existentialist movement. Her novels reflect many aspects of existentialist thought and the characteristic social and political dilemmas of French left-wing intellectuals before and after the Second World War. Her novel **L'Invitée** (1943, *She Came to Stay*) embodies the existentialist notion of a character becoming fully conscious of herself as a free, undetermined being through the commission of a wholly autonomous act. **Le Sang des Autres** (1944, *The Blood of Others*) draws on events of the 1930s and of the French wartime Resistance movement to illustrate the supreme importance of freedom in life, a freedom which demands great courage, since God is deemed not to exist and so the reasons for living are for human beings themselves to create. Her most ambitious novel, **Les Mandarins** (1954), is a vivid evocation of life in French

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

intellectual circles in the 1940s, in which the many characters are treated with acute psychological insight.

\*

The underlying theme of much of the work of *Albert Camus* (1913-1960) is the problem of human responsibility in a universe devoid of human values. This problem is explored with great lucidity in his first novel *L'Etranger* (*The Outsider*, 1942). Meursault, a young man employed as a clerk in Algiers, leads the life typical of a middle-class bachelor—cooking his evening meal for himself in his small apartment, spending weekends with his girlfriend, going to the movies, lying on the beach. He would seem to be the epitome of ordinariness except for one curious trait of character: he apparently lacks the basic emotions and reactions (hypocrisy included) which society requires of him. Thus he observes the facts of life and death objectively, from the outside. In a confrontation on the beach with some young men, Meursault, threatened with a knife, kills one of them. At his later trial for murder his dispassionateness makes an unfavourable impression on the judge, and he is condemned to death, less for the killing than for the fact that he never says more than he feels and refuses to behave in the way demanded by society.

Irritated by the complacency of the priest sent to share his last moments, Meursault bursts out:

*Then, I don't know what it was, but something seemed to break inside me, and I started yelling at the top of my voice. I hurled insults at him, I told him not to waste his rotten prayers on me...in a sort of ecstasy of joy and rage I poured out on him all the thoughts that had been shimmering in my brain. He seemed*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*so cocksure, you see. And yet not one of his certainties was worth one strand of a woman's hair. Living as he did, like a corpse, he couldn't even be sure of being alive. It might look as if my hands were empty. Actually, I was sure of myself, sure about everything, far surer than he; sure of my present life and of the death that was coming. That, no doubt, was all I had; but at least that certainty was something I could get my teeth into - just as it had got its teeth into me. I'd been right, I was still right, I was always right. I'd passed my life in a certain way, and I might have passed it in a different way, if I'd felt like it. I'd acted thus, and I hadn't acted otherwise; I hadn't done x, whereas I had done y or z. And what did that mean? That, all the time, I'd been waiting for this present moment, for that dawn, tomorrow's or another day's, which was to justify me. Nothing, nothing had the least importance, and I knew quite well why. He, too, knew why. From the dark horizon of my future a sort of slow, persistent breeze had been blowing towards me, all my life long, from the years that were to come. And on its way that breeze had leveled out all the the ideas that people tried to foist on me in the equally unreal years I then was living through. What difference could they make to me, the death of others, or a mother's love, or his God; or the way that one decides to live, the fate one thinks one chooses, since one and the same fate was bound to 'choose' not only me but thousands of millions of privileged people who, like him, called themselves my brothers. Surely, surely he must see that? Every man alive was privileged; there was only one class of men, the privileged class. All alike would be condemned to die one day; his turn, too would come like the others'.*

In the end Meursault faces the prospect of the extinction of his life with equanimity, opening his heart to “the benign indifference of the universe,” which he recognizes as being so much like himself.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

He has grasped that, for him, and so for everybody else, there is nothing beyond the experience of having lived: one is born, one lives one's life, and one dies. That is all.

In 1955 Camus made the following remarks apropos *The Outsider*:

*A long time ago, I summed up The Outsider in a sentence which I realize is extremely paradoxical: "In our society any man who doesn't cry at his mother's funeral is liable to be condemned to death." I simply meant that the hero of the book is condemned because he doesn't play the game. In this sense, he is an outsider to the society in which he lives, wandering on the fringe, on the outskirts of life, solitary and sensual. And for that reason, some readers have been tempted to regard him as a reject. But to get a more accurate picture of his character, or rather one that conforms more closely to his author's intentions, you must ask yourself in what way Meursault doesn't play the game. The answer is simple: he refuses to lie. Lying is not only saying what isn't true. It is also, in fact especially, saying more than is true and, in the case of the human heart, saying more than one feels. We all do it, every day, to make life simpler. But, contrary to appearances, Meursault doesn't want to make life simpler. He says what he is, he refuses to hide his feelings and society immediately feels threatened. For example, he is asked to say that he regrets his crime, in time-honoured fashion. He replies that he feels more annoyance about it than true regret. And it is this nuance that condemns him.*

*So for me Meursault is not a reject, but a poor and naked man, in love with a sun that leaves no shadows. Far from lacking all sensibility, he is driven by a tenacious and therefore profound passion, the passion for an absolute and for truth. The truth is as*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*yet a negative one, a truth born of living and feeling, but without which no triumph of the self or over the world will ever be possible.*

*So one wouldn't be far wrong in seeing *The Outsider* as the story of a man who, without any heroic pretensions, agrees to die for the truth. I also once said, and again paradoxically, that I tried to make my character represent the only Christ that we deserve. It will be understood, after these explanations, that I said it without any intention of blasphemy but simply with the somewhat ironic affection that an artist has a right to feel towards the characters he has created.*

Camus is sometimes described as an existentialist, but he is only linked with that movement through his early friendship with the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, and through the adoption by the existentialists of Camus's early use of the term "absurd" to describe those facets of human existence which defy reason. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) Camus poses the ultimate question in respect of this notion, namely, sensing the absurdity of human existence and unable to come to terms with the universe, why do human beings not simply commit suicide? Camus answers with a passionate acceptance of the human condition. Even Sisyphus, whom the gods had condemned to roll a rock ceaselessly to the top of a mountain, whence it would fall back under its own weight, even Sisyphus, Camus says,

*teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He, too, concludes that all is well. The universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

Thus Sisyphus, like Meursault, rises above the futility of his existence and comes to terms with a godless universe.

Camus had said from the beginning that the absurd must be regarded not as an end, but as a point of departure. His thinking—strongly influenced by his experiences in the French resistance during the Second World War—increasingly took the form of a rejection of nihilism and an affirmation of moral coherence, from the loss of which, he claimed, the sense of the absurd actually arises. This rejection and affirmation takes the form of a humane stoicism in his novel *The Plague* (1947) in which the human predicament is presented against the backdrop of an epidemic in the Algerian city of Oran during the German occupation of France. Here the plague itself does not only betoken the underlying irrationality of life; it is also symbolic of the oppression suffered by the French people under the German occupation. Camus himself noted in 1942:

*I want to express, by means of the plague, the suffocation from which we have all suffered, and the atmosphere of menace and exile in which we have lived. I want at the same time to extend this interpretation to the notion of existence generally.*

Camus's last novel, *The Fall* (1956) takes the form of a confession by Clamence, an erstwhile Paris attorney who has abandoned his career and taken up a shadowy existence in the Amsterdam underworld. During his years in Paris, Clamence revelled in his success. But his complacency is shattered one night when he hears a derisory laugh while walking over a bridge on his way home. He cannot avoid the feeling that he is being laughed at, not just by a single human being, but by the world at



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

large. This marks his “fall” from the Eden of his youth. Later Clamence reveals the reason for his extreme reaction; the fact that while crossing a bridge on an earlier occasion he had made no attempt to rescue a young woman whom he had seen leap into the water, and whose cries for help he had clearly heard. He had been able to dismiss his cowardly behaviour until hearing the derisory laugh, which has the effect of shattering his self-respect, so casting him into a universe suddenly become hostile. He leaves Paris and exiles himself in Amsterdam, a city he hates for its cold and dampness, but which he chooses as a means of self-mortification. Here he becomes what he terms a “judge-penitent”, a role in which he regains a measure of self-confidence. As a “judge-penitent” Clamence initially confesses his shortcomings to a stranger so as to turn the tables and judge the *stranger’s* guilt.

Clamence’s cowardly act has forced him to realize that he is not the virtuous being he supposed himself to be. Soon he decides that his guilt is absolute, that his *every* act he formerly saw as virtuous is tainted with a profound and ineradicable egotism. Finding this weight of guilt unbearable, he projects it outwards so as to enmesh everybody in culpability, thereby assuaging his own feelings of blame. He wishes to become the avatar of a new religion of guilt and slavery that will rule the world and relieve him of the responsibility for his own actions –

*But on the bridges of Paris I too learned that I was afraid of freedom. So hurrah for the master, whoever he may be, to take the place of heaven’s law.... In short, you see, the essential thing is to cease being free and to obey, in repentance, a greater rogue than oneself. When we are all guilty, that will be democracy.*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

Camus wrote *The Fall* at a time of disillusionment with leftwing political thought in postwar France. Clamence's career was intended as a satire on what Camus saw as the self-induced political impotence of the left-wing radicals of his day. In showing how Clamence's guilt feelings lead to his embracing of tyranny, Camus was actually satirizing the tendency of leftwing intellectuals—Sartre in particular—to expiate their shame over their bourgeois origins by embracing the tyrannical politics of the Soviet Union.

\*

*Georges Perec* (1936–1982) was a French novelist, poet and literary innovator noteworthy for works of formal complexity and intricacy of structure. He made his debut as a novelist in 1965 with *Les Choses* ("Things"), which charts the early 1960s in France—a world unsettled by Algeria and De Gaulle, but soon to be thrown into even greater turmoil. The rise of consumerism, and its attraction and emptiness are fully explored, as are the other dramatic changes society at that time was undergoing. In 1967 Perec joined the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (*Oulipo*), a group of writers and mathematicians devoted to exploring the creative potential of formal rules, and in syntactical puzzles such as anagrams, palindromes, and mathematical word games. It was in this spirit that Perec produced *La Disparition* (1969, "A Void"), a detective novel in which the central puzzle is the disappearance from the alphabet of the letter *e*, and *Les Reventes* (1972) which was written without using the vowels *a*, *i*, *o*, *u* but included *e*. His greatest novel is **La Vie mode d'emploi** (1978, "Life: A User's Manual"). This novel takes the form of a colossal jigsaw of more than 100 interwoven stories concerning the occupants of a Paris

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

apartment building, itself reputedly suggested by a Saul Steinberg drawing of a New York apartment house stripped of its façade. The novel's jigsaw structure pivots on the actions of one of its characters, Percival Bartlebooth, an eccentric English millionaire bent on subjecting his life to strict artistic and formal control. devoting ten years to the study of watercolour painting, he spends the next twenty travelling the world and painting pictures of numerous ports. Bartlebooth despatches his daubs to Paris, where he has engaged a master of the fretsaw, one Winckler, to mount them on boards and cut them into intricate puzzles. In an attempt to emulate the *Ouroboros* consuming its own tail Bartlebooth intends to dedicate his remaining twenty years to the reassembly of these puzzles, and then, in a final act of negation, to bleach the reconstituted scenes so as to obliterate all traces of the original paintings and return to the initial *tabula rasa*. But Bartlebooth's death, before he has completed all 500 of his jigsaw puzzles, breaks the intended symmetry: –

*Bartlebooth is seated at his puzzle. He is a thin, old man, almost fleshless, with a bald head, a waxy complexion, blank eyes, dressed in a washy blue wool dressing gown tied at the waist with a grey cord. His feet, in goat-kid moccasins, rest on a fringe-edged silk rug; his head is very slightly tipped back, his mouth is half open, and his right hand grips the armrest of the chair while his left hand, lying on the table in a not very natural way, in not far short of a contorted position, holds between thumb and index finger the very last piece of the puzzle.*

*It is eight o'clock on the evening of the twenty-third of June nineteen seventy-five. Seated at his jigsaw puzzle, Bartlebooth has just died. On the tablecloth, somewhere in the crepuscular sky of the*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*439<sup>th</sup>puzzle<sup>10</sup>, the black hole of the sole piece not filled in has the almost perfect shape of an X. But the ironical thing, which could have been foreseen long ago, is that the piece the dead man holds is shaped like a W.*

**Life: A User's Manual** is a labyrinthine masterpiece.

---

<sup>10</sup> A prime number, chosen for that reason by Perec, one would surmise.

## V. Literature in Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish

THE ARGENTINIAN WRITER *Jorge Luis Borges* (1899-1986) avoided the novel, asserting that "the compilation of vast books is a laborious and impoverishing extravagance." He is known for his poetry, and for his philosophical short stories, a genre he virtually invented. In these elegant fantasies, none exceeding a few pages in length, Borges juggles with consummate skill such metaphysical themes as the nature of reality, time and infinity. In **The Library of Babel** (1941), for example, Borges describes a universe taking the form of a vast library, arranged in hexagonal cells. Some of the books in it make sense, others are nothing but gibberish, but they all have exactly the same number of pages and the same number of lines per page. The inhabitants of this universe are divided on the question of whether every possible combination of letters of the alphabet is represented in the Library, but they have not so far come across two identical books. This fact has suggested to some that no pair of identical books exists, in which case the Library, and so the universe, must be finite. The story's narrator, however, prefers to believe that the Library is limitless but periodic: an eternal voyager, traversing it in any direction would find, after many centuries, that the same volumes are repeated in the same sequence. But the question remains unresolved.

In **The Circular Ruins** (1941) a wizard withdraws into a ruined temple with the intention of dreaming a man into existence. After prolonged effort he succeeds in dreaming a young man - whom he regards as his son - complete down to the smallest detail. But the wizard has dreamt the young man slumbering, and cannot rouse him. Frustrated, he falls asleep and

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

dreams. In his dream the god Fire, whose temple it is, reveals that he can magically animate the dreamed young man in such a way that only the god itself and the dreamer would know him to be a phantom, all else believing him to be a man of flesh and blood. The god will do this on condition that the young man be initiated into the cult of fire and sent in its furtherance to a second ruined temple downstream. The wizard agrees and, "in the dream of the dreaming man, the dreamed one awakes." The wizard carries out his end of the bargain, and sends his son to the other temple, taking care first to obliterate in him all memory of his years of apprenticeship to prevent him from becoming aware that he is a phantom. Many years pass, the wizard grows old, and he hears rumors of a charmed man in a distant temple capable of walking on fire without harm. Remembering that Fire and himself were the only ones to know that his son was a phantom, the wizard is happy at first. Then it occurs to him that this invulnerability to fire might cause his son to become aware that he is just a simulacrum. But his worries come to an abrupt end when the ruined temple is engulfed by a jungle fire. Accepting that his time has come to die, he walks into the flames. They do not burn him, and he finally realizes that he is himself an illusion, that he is being dreamt by someone else.

The protagonist of **The Secret Miracle** (1943), the author Jaromir Hladik, is arrested in Prague by the Gestapo in early 1939 and sentenced to be shot by firing squad. He imagines his coming execution over and over again, at first trying to convince himself that the concrete circumstances of dying are less dreadful than the conception of dying itself. Later he reflects that reality tends not to coincide with forecasts about it, and, with the desperate logic of the doomed, infers that to foresee a circumstantial detail is to prevent it happening. Faithful to this conclusion, he invents, so

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

that they will not occur, the most ghastly particulars, but comes to fear that they might prove prophetic after all. On the last night before his execution, he prays that he might be granted one more year to complete his *magnum opus*, an unfinished tragedy. Towards dawn he falls asleep and dreams that he finds God in one of the letters printed on a map of India; on touching it, a voice booms: "The time for your work has been granted." On waking, Hladik is conducted to the execution site in the prison courtyard. He sees the members of the firing squad assemble and raise their rifles, but at the very moment the command to fire is given, the universe seems to stand still. Nothing moves, and he himself is paralyzed. At first he thinks that time itself has come to a halt, but he soon realizes that, were this the case, his own thinking would also have ceased. After a "day" of immobility he finally grasps that God has granted him the requested year by performing a secret miracle, known only to him: he will die at the appointed hour, but in his mind a year will elapse between the command to fire and its realization. During the passage of the "year," standing immobile in the courtyard, he finishes his drama in his head; at the very moment of its completion he is cut down by a hail of bullets from the rifles of the firing squad.

The title character of **Funes, the Memorios** (1942) is a man with a memory capacious enough to encompass the world. The narrator of Borges' story first encounters Ireneo Funes as a boy known for eccentricities, such as solitariness and a remarkable trick of always knowing the time, like a watch. A few years later he hears that Funes has been crippled by a fall from a horse and now never leaves his bed. In a letter Funes informs the narrator that he has begun the study of Latin and requests the loan of a couple of classical texts and a dictionary; these are duly sent. One evening the narrator goes to Funes' family's house to retrieve his

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

books; he is told by Funes's mother that Ireneo is in the back room, in the dark, for "he knows how to pass the dead hours without lighting the candle." As the narrator approaches the back room, he hears Ireneo's voice speaking in fluent Latin: the words prove to be a *verbatim* recitation of a chapter from one of the volumes that he has come to collect. Ireneo then embarks on a discourse which lasts beyond daybreak. He says that, before being thrown from the horse, he was like everybody else, a somnambulist without memory. But the fall has shocked him into a new state of awareness: not only his present sensations, but even his oldest and most trivial memories have assumed an almost intolerable brilliance and immediacy. His perception and memory are now infallible. He informs the narrator that he has more memories in himself alone than all men have ever had. He can recall the exact shape of a cloud seen fleetingly a decade ago, and can compare it mnemonically with the marbled grain of the cover a book seen just once. Each of these memories is linked endlessly with other sensations: muscular, thermal, auditory, tactile. He has elaborated a new, and, to him, simpler, system of naming numbers: in place of seven thousand fourteen, he employs the monosyllable "train"; for five hundred he now says "nine." In fact, he is attempting to develop a scheme for naming all the details of his past experience. But the narrator observes that this very capacity to recollect and discriminate among the tiniest details has made Funes almost incapable of grasping general concepts. For instance, it is not only difficult for him to understand that the generic term "dog" embraces a diversity of specimens of differing sizes and forms; he is also disturbed by the fact that a dog seen from behind at one moment should bear the same name as it does when seen from the front a minute later. If thinking is to forget a



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

difference, to generalize, to abstract, then Funes has become incapable of thought.

As dawn breaks, the narrator realizes, with dismay, that each one of his words, and now his gestures as well, will live on indelibly in Funes' memory. Two years later Funes dies.

It is a remarkable fact, by the way, that Funes has a counterpart in real life whose existence was certainly unknown to Borges. In *The Mind of a Mnemonist* (1965) the distinguished Russian psychologist A.R.Luria describes the case of S.V. Sherskevskii (whom he identifies as "S."), a man whose memory was studied over a period of decades. S. had a Funes-like capacity of eidetic recall in which synesthesia – leakage between the senses – played an important role: he would "see" sounds, "taste" feelings, etc. He also shared with Funes the difficulty of grasping general ideas.

\*

*Fernando Pessoa* (1888–1935) was a Portuguese poet and the author of **The Book of Disquiet**, which was not published until 1982. This purports to be the journal of Bernardo Soares, one of Pessoa's alter egos, whose personality Pessoa described as being "not different from mine, rather a simple mutilation of it." The book, a disjointed but fascinating assemblage of quasi-symbolist reveries, cynical epigrams, depressive musings, and reflections on ennui, is unique in literature. Here are some extracts from this extraordinary work:

*We should monotonize existence so existence isn't so monotonous. We should turn everyday life into something anodyne so the tiniest thing would be amusing. Right in the middle of my dull,*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*uniform, useless, everyday work, there arise in me visions of escape, dreamed vestiges of faraway islands, festive gatherings in groves inside parks from other eras, other landscapes, other feelings, another me.*

*The monotony, the dull sameness of the same days, the absence of difference between today and yesterday – I hope things may stay like that forever, and that I have my soul alert to enjoy the fly that amuses me by flying by chance before my eyes, the peal of laughter that floats up from the street, the vast sense of liberation that it's time to shut up the office, the infinite repose of a day off.*

*I have cultivated several personalities within myself. I constantly cultivate personalities. Each of my dreams, immediately after I dream it, is incarnated into another person, who then goes on to dream it, and I stop.*

*To create, I destroyed myself; I made myself external to such a degree that within myself I do not exist except in an external fashion. I am the living setting in which several actors make entrances, putting on several different plays.*

*After seeing with what lucidity and logical coherence certain mad people (the systematized insane) justify their crazy ideas to themselves and others, I have lost forever my certainty about the lucidity of my lucidity.*

*Everything that exists exists perhaps because something else exists. Nothing is, everything coexists... I feel that I would not exist, at this moment – that I would not exist, at least, in the way in which I am existing, with this current consciousness of myself, which because it is conscious and present is in this moment entirely myself – if that lamp were not burning over there, a beacon that signals nothing in its false privilege of height. I feel this because I don't feel anything. I think this because this is nothing. Nothing, nothing, part of the night and the silence and what I with them am of nothing, of the negative, of*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*intervals, of space between myself and me, a thing, the forgetting of some god...*

\*

**The Stone Raft** (1986) and **Blindness** (1995) by the Portuguese writer *José Saramago* (1922–, Nobel Prize 1998), are “disaster” novels in the form of powerful allegories showing how fragile our social structures are, and that, once these collapse, nothing remains but the courage and values of a few compassionate individuals.

In **The Stone Raft**, the Iberian peninsula, quite inexplicably, breaks away from the rest of continental Europe and begins to drift into the Atlantic Ocean as if it were a kind of raft. The result, predictably, is pandemonium. Tourists panic; crowds gather on French cliffs to watch the newly formed island as it sails by. In the midst of the chaos five people are drawn together by a sequence of odd events which are in some obscure way connected with the rupture of the continent. One of the characters scratches the ground with an elm branch, causing all the local dogs, formerly silent, to commence barking, an occurrence which, according to legend, is a sign of the impending end of the world. At the same time another character picks up a heavy stone on the beach and throws it, expecting it to fall no more than a few paces away. Instead it miraculously rises high in the air, hits the surface of the water, and bounces off into the distance. Simultaneously with these events, a third character rises from his chair; as his feet touch the floor he becomes aware that the earth is trembling, a vibration which he continues to feel through the soles of his feet. A fourth character, crossing a deserted plain, suddenly finds himself accompanied by a flock of starlings, which proceed to

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

follow him everywhere. The fifth character finds an old wool sock in an attic, and, having nothing better to do, begins to unravel it. Hours later she is still unravelling it; the long strand of blue wool is still unwinding, yet the sock does not appear to get any smaller. The lives of these five become intertwined as they set out on an odyssey to an unknown destination, reflecting the incomprehensible drifting of the peninsula, which, at the novel's close, has come to what seems to be a temporary halt in the middle of the South Atlantic.

In his introduction to the ancient Chinese book of oracles the *I Ching*, the psychoanalyst C. G. Jung uses the term *synchronicity* to characterize the principle underlying its method of divination. By this term Jung means taking the coincidence of events in space and time as signifying something more than mere chance, namely, a noncausal interdependence or pre-established harmony among objective events, both with respect to each other, and with respect to the subjective state of the observer. Thus, according to Jung, the *I Ching's* rendering of the hexagrams produced by throwing yarrow stalks or coins is a reflection in some essential respect of the state of the world at the moment they are thrown. In **The Stone Raft** the curious events occurring at the same time as the peninsula breaks away can all be seen as instances of Jungian synchronicity. Each reflects the rupture, but there appears to be no causal connection among them.

In **Blindness**, the inhabitants of a city are struck by a mysterious epidemic of "white blindness", whose victims become sightless, not by being plunged into darkness, but instead by sudden immersion into a kind of milky sea. The first man to succumb to the illness sits in his car, waiting for the lights to change. He is taken to an eye doctor, who cannot make sense of the phenomenon, and who soon goes blind himself. The blindness

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

spreads, sparing no one. The civil authorities confine the blind to a vacant mental hospital secured by armed guards under instruction to shoot anyone trying to escape. Inside, the criminal elements among the blind tyrannize over the rest. The compound is set ablaze, and the blind escape into what has become a deserted city, strewn with litter and rotting corpses. The air is permeated with the stench of decay. The sole eyewitness to this nightmare is the doctor's wife, who has feigned blindness in order to join her husband in the compound. She guides seven strangers through the deserted streets. Eventually they regain their sight, but at that very moment she loses hers.

The source of the blindness is never identified, and its departure is as sudden and mysterious as its arrival. Immediately before going blind the doctor's wife states her belief that people did not *actually* go blind, but rather that they *are* blind, blind but seeing, blind people who can see, but who fail to see. So the blindness is initially figurative, as in Swift's line:

*There's none so blind as they that won't see.*

Saramago shows how, once people are *made aware* of their blindness, chaos results.

\*

The Spanish writer *Miguel de Unamuno* (1864–1936) was initially influenced by German idealist philosophy, particularly by Hegel. But later his chief concern was the conflict between Faith and Reason: this conflict is most eloquently presented in his best-known work *The Tragic Sense of Life* of 1913. In this work he

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

grapples with the existential problem of death, finally achieving a sort of stoical resignation.

Unamuno's novels took the form of parables. In **Abel Sanchez** (1917), a modern treatment of the tragedy of Cain and Abel, Unamuno argues that Cain's passionate envy of Abel is an expression of his urge to live, an urge to immortalize himself. **St. Emmanuel the Good, Martyr** (1933), is the story of an unbelieving saint, or, at least, one who believes that he does not believe, and yet is regarded as a saint.

\*

*Italo Calvino* (1923–85) was one of Italy's leading novelists, a writer of great ingenuity and charm. His novels bristle with ideas. **Our Ancestors** (1980) is a trilogy comprising *The Cloven Viscount* (1951), *Baron in the Trees* (1957), and *The Nonexistent Knight* (1959). In the first of these a viscount is bisected by a Turkish cannonball on the plains of Bohemia, the two halves then proceeding to live separate lives; in the second, a baron retires to the trees for the rest of his days; in the third, one of Charlemagne's knights is an empty suit of armour, which persuades itself that it is a man and carries on through its own willpower. Each story has a moral theme: in the *Viscount*, that of incompleteness, and the barrenness of life; in the *Baron*, that of isolation and the difficulties of living with others; in the *Knight*, that of duty and obligation. Each also contains oblique references to the intellectual climate of the time at which it was written: in the *Viscount*, dislike of the political divisions of the Cold War; in the *Baron*, the problem of the intellectual's political commitment in a time of shattered illusions; in the *Knight*, criticism of the "organization man" in mass society.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

Calvino's **T-zero** (1967), comprises a number of ingenious stories, reminiscent of Borges, in each of which the characters are caught in a spatio-temporal paradox. In the title story, a hunter and a lion are trapped in a Zenonian perpetual present. In *The Chase*, a chain of assassins and victims are linked in mutual pursuit, trapped forever in rush-hour traffic. In *The Night Driver*, two estranged lovers travel perpetually along endless parallel highways. In *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Edmond Dantès, imprisoned in the Chateau d'Îf, observes the Abbé Faria tunnelling endlessly from cell to cell, never succeeding in effecting an escape. Dantès spends his time in constructing an imaginary fortress which is truly escape-proof, arguing that, if it is identical with the real one, then escape is truly impossible; but if not, then one only has to identify the point at which the imagined fortress fails to coincide with the real one: at this point there will be a possibility of escape.

The title character of **Mr. Palomar** (1983) meditates on the nature of the universe, from its most superficial to its most profound aspects. Stars and planets, birds, grass, food, iguanas, pre-Columbian art, all assume for him a kind of heightened reality, as if never seen before. Mr. Palomar is a consciousness trying to decode the message underlying the everyday world.

## VI. Literature in English

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT SHELLEY (1797-1851) was the daughter of the political philosopher William Godwin and the novelist and pioneer feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. In 1816 she married the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. The theme of her famous Gothic novel **Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus**, published in 1818, is of course familiar from the numerous film, television and other versions of the original tale. In it, the young Swiss scientist Victor Frankenstein becomes convinced that the idea of the "spark" of life has a scientific basis; he succeeds in demonstrating this by assembling human remains into a grotesque but functional body, and shocking it into life. The resulting creature is pathetically eager to be loved, despite the fact that its appearance horrifies all who see it. When its maker refuses to create a mate for it, the creature goes on a rampage in which Frankenstein's wife and brother are killed. Determined to destroy his creation, Frankenstein pursues it across the world, until, in a final confrontation deep in the Arctic, Frankenstein perishes, his mind gone. The creature, consumed with grief over the death of its creator, and yearning for its own annihilation, disappears into the frozen wastes.

In **Frankenstein** several themes may be discerned. Written during the period in which modern science began its irreversible transformation of human life, it may be taken as an early warning against the misuse of science, an issue which has achieved a new urgency in our time. The creature may be viewed as an embodiment of *Jean-Jacques Rousseau's* idea of the natural man, innocent at birth, but corrupted by exposure to the world's evils. Another possible interpretation is that the creature represents the evil latent in human beings, so needing nothing more than the



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

opportunity to exist in order to become a monster. In any event, the novel (which some critics regard as the first true work of science fiction) is unquestionably the first taking as its major theme the relationship between humanity and science, and the dangers therein.

\*

As the author of “Treasure Island”, “Kidnapped”, and similar novels of adventure, *Robert Louis Stevenson* (1850-94) gained his greatest fame as a writer for the young. However, **The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde** (1886) stands apart as a true novel of ideas. In this archetypal story of dual personality, Henry Jekyll, a respected and affluent doctor with a penchant for scientific experimentation, secretly develops a drug designed to separate the good and evil aspects of his nature:

*If each, I told myself, could be but housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable; the unjust might go his way, delivered from the aspirations and remorse of his more upright twin; and the just could walk steadfastly and securely on his upward path, doing the good things in which he found his pleasure, and no longer exposed to disgrace and penitence by the hands of this extraneous evil. It was the curse of mankind that these incongruous faggots were thus bound together – that, in the agonized womb of consciousness, these polar twins should be continuously struggling.*

The drug’s effect is to transform Jekyll into the repellent form of Mr Hyde, the embodiment of all his evil characteristics. To begin with, resuming the identity of Jekyll is easy, but in time this

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

proves more difficult, and eventually he finds himself reverting spontaneously into Hyde, who engages in numerous (but unspecified) depravities. Finally Jekyll's supplies of the transforming drug are exhausted and he cannot manage to reproduce the formula. By this time Hyde is being hunted by the police for murder, and Jekyll, now desperate, commits suicide. The body found in Jekyll's laboratory is that of Hyde, but Jekyll's written confession establishes that the two are in fact variants of a single person.

Like **Frankenstein**, **Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde** may be read as a Faustian warning against the dangers of penetrating too deeply into the mysteries of our own nature. As a variation on the theme of the *doppelgänger*, or double (which is frequently encountered in literature) it also raises the problem of the nature of personal identity and responsibility: is the "real" protagonist Jekyll or Hyde, and is Jekyll responsible for Hyde's crimes? In their metamorphic relationship, Jekyll and Hyde may also be taken as pre-Freudian manifestations of the psychological concepts of the ego and the id. **Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde** is in fact one of the earliest novels to employ ideas from the developing science of abnormal psychology.

\*

The English writer *Thomas Love Peacock* (1785-1866) is best known for his series of satirical novels in which various philosophical, political, and social attitudes are lampooned. In these novels narrative takes second place to a wicked parody of Socratic dialogue or Platonic symposium in which representative minds of the day debate each other across the groaning boards of their well-heeled country hosts. **Headlong Hall** (1815) is a direct

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

result of Peacock's membership of the circle of writers and intellectuals centred around the poet Shelley. "Perfectibilians", "Deteriorationists", vegetarians, phrenologists all appear in a comic bacchanale at Squire Headlong's ancestral home. In **Nightmare Abbey** (1818) Peacock punctures the Romantic Movement, with parodies of Coleridge, Byron and Shelley. **Crotchet Castle** (1831) targets the political economists, employing exaggeration and ridicule against the "advanced" ideas of Mill and Bentham, against scientific progress and the March of Mind. In **Gryll Grange** (1860) Peacock finds new targets for satire in social science, competitive examinations, environmental pollution, and the dubious benefits of Victorian technological progress. One of the characters offers the gloomy prognostication that "the ultimate destiny of science may be to exterminate the human race."

\*

*Oscar Wilde* (1854-1900) was celebrated as a playwright, aesthete, and wit. His only novel **The Picture of Dorian Gray** (1891), while containing witticisms in abundance, is also a serious moral fable. In the course of having his portrait painted by his friend Basil Hallward, the wealthy young aesthete Dorian Gray meets Lord Henry Wotton, a hedonist whose epigrammatic brilliance greatly impresses the young man. At the very moment that Lord Henry is expatiating on the supreme importance of retaining one's youth and beauty, Hallward completes the portrait. On seeing it Dorian expresses the wish that he could remain always as he now is, and that the picture itself age in his place. This perverse aspiration is strangely fulfilled. Dorian abandons himself over the years to every depravity that his mind

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

can devise, bringing misery and disgrace to all associated with him, and yet retains his ageless good looks. It is in fact the picture, locked away in an attic, which bears the marks of degeneration, and the face it portrays appears as if it is being slowly eaten away by the leprosy of sin. Dorian finally shows the picture to Hallward, who at first refuses to believe that it is his work. When Hallward recognizes it he is horrified by what it signifies, and urges Dorian to repent. In a fit of resentment at Hallward, Dorian murders him. Dorian comes to blame the picture itself for leading him astray, and takes a knife to it. His servants hear a crash and a cry and, upon gaining entrance to the attic, find on the wall a portrait of their master as he was in his youth, and, on the floor, a withered and loathsome old man with a knife through his heart.

Beneath the surface brilliance and *fin-de-siècle* decadence of Wilde's novel is to be found, as in **La Peau de Chagrin**, a powerful version of the Faust theme, now reworked so as to warn against the dangers of taking the doctrines of aestheticism – "Art for Art's sake" – and of hedonism – "Pleasure for Pleasure's sake" – to extremes. It is of interest to note that, with his love of paradox, Wilde prefaces his novel with a series of aphorisms (e.g., "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.") which uphold the aestheticism that is impeached in the book itself.

\*

*Joseph Conrad* (1857–1924), born a Pole with original name Jozef Korzeniowski, became one of the greatest English novelists. In his novels Conrad's chief concern is the behaviour of human beings *in extremis*. In **Lord Jim** (1900), the character Jim is first mate on the steamship *Patna*. During a voyage to Mecca, the ship,

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

with its complement of pilgrims, strikes a submerged object. When, in an effort to save their own skins, the crew begins to lower a lifeboat, Jim at first appears to be an idealistic onlooker, but then, on impulse, jumps into the water: the meaning of this action forms the pivot of the novel. Ironically, the ship manages to stay afloat and at the subsequent Court of Inquiry Jim—the only member of the crew to submit himself to judgment—is disgraced by being stripped of his Master's certificate. Jim takes a position as agent at the remote trading post of Patusan. The serenity he finds there is disrupted by the arrival of a gang of bloodthirsty thieves. Jim pledges to the Patusan chieftain that he will ensure that the thieves depart peacefully, but he is proved horribly wrong when the chieftain's son is killed as a result of his misplaced trust. But Jim ultimately takes responsibility for his actions, sacrificing himself to be shot by the angry and grieving chieftain. In **Lord Jim** Conrad holds his own inquiry into Jim's case, probing the sources of his weakness, the "idealized selfishness" of his romanticism, and the larger implications of Jim's leap—the "doubt of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct", the recognition that "nobody is good enough", that, in the end, all will fail the test.

**Heart of Darkness** (1902) is a devastating attack on colonialism and a journey into a man's soul. It takes the form of a story told by a trading agent, Marlow, to four friends as they wait on a ship for the tide to turn. Employed by a European trading company, Marlow had been earlier dispatched to a river in Africa where he was to replace a steamer captain killed by natives in an absurd quarrel over two black hens. His meeting the representatives of Western civilization only compounds the ominousness and unreality of the situation. The atrocious suffering of the native workers witnessed by Marlow goes entirely

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

unnoticed by his colleagues, who are in Africa solely to extract its ivory. Marlow hears of a man called Kurtz, an agent whose success in acquiring ivory has become legendary, and who has a reputation for general cultivation and idealism. When Marlow finally meets Kurtz, the latter is on his deathbed. Expecting to find in Kurtz an exemplar of Western altruism, Marlow instead discovers a man who has adopted the natives' rites and set himself up as their god. Marlow grasps the chilling truth about Kurtz's behaviour when he sees that the posts outside Kurtz's hut are decorated with human skulls. Paradoxically, Marlow retains a certain admiration for Kurtz, whose dying words, "The horror! The horror!", reveal that he has seen the darkness in his own soul.

In **The Secret Agent** (1904), Conrad examines the tangled lives and loyalties of a group of revolutionary anarchists. In a manner both ironic and mocking Conrad depicts contradictory and self-seeking motives both within the police force and in the anarchist world, as if one were a reflection of the other. Mr. Verloc's run-down Soho shop and his marriage to Winnie provide cover for his secret life as a double agent. He supplies information to the Russian *agent provocateur* Vladimir, to Inspector Heat of Scotland Yard and at the same time colludes with an underworld of anarchists. Vladimir conspires to upset the tolerant status quo between the Liberal Establishment and the revolutionary groups. Acting on Vladimir's orders, Verloc furnishes himself with explosives from the sinister American "Professor" and enlists Winnie's hapless brother Stevie as an accomplice in an attack on the Greenwich observatory. Stevie's horrifying death in Greenwich Park demolishes Verloc's dependence upon both extremism and the banal domesticity provided by his wife. When Verloc who confesses to Winnie his role in Stevie's death, she stabs him with a carving knife, thereby drawing her into the circle

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

of violence. She attempts to leave the country with the anarchist Ossipon, but he deserts her on learning of Verloc's murder. Driven to madness, Winnie leaps from the deck of a Channel ferry.

The secret agent of the novel's title is ultimately not a single person but an agency working secretly within society – anarchy itself.

In **Under Western Eyes** (1911) the young student Razumov's quiet life in St. Petersburg is disrupted by the appearance at his flat of Victor Halden, a revolutionary idealist who has just assassinated a minister of state. Although Razumov agrees to shelter Halden, his loyalties subsequently swing towards the Tsarist state. He betrays Halden to the police, only to find that he himself has fallen under the autocracy's suspicion. He is dispatched as a secret agent to Geneva to spy on its community of Russian exiles. There his solitary nature hardens into moral isolation. Razumov is regarded as a hero by his fellow-exiles: before his capture Halden had written to his mother and younger sister, Natalya, praising his fellow-student. Natalya's innocent devotion to the man she believes tried to help her brother makes Razumov's guilt the bear. He is repelled, further, by the cynical idealism of the revolutionaries. When he attempts to break free of this life of deceit, confessing both to Natalya and to the revolutionaries, he brings ghastly retribution on himself. The revolutionaries burst his eardrums, and he is struck down and crippled by a train whose approach he cannot hear.

In **Under Western Eyes** Conrad is primarily concerned with Razumov's isolation, betrayal and guilt. But it is also his purpose to show both the "lawlessness of autocracy" and the "lawlessness of revolution". Conrad suggested that

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*the world rests on a very few simple ideas, notably on the idea of Fidelity.*

But in his best work he is sensitive as well to ethical complexities, psychological depths and elemental forces, against which the few “simple ideas” of the above quotation seem to offer but a slender defence. The conflict in his work crystallizes into two recurring images, that of the steersman and the darkness. The steersmen represent the traditional values of “a community of inglorious toil” and “fidelity to a certain standard of conduct”. The darkness engulfing his steersmen signifies not only the elemental forces of nature but also, by analogy, the darker forces within humanity itself. Conrad courageously faced that darkness; and one can only admire the strength of his commitment to the small illuminated area of human solidarity and order, to “mind, will and conscience”.

\*

G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) is best remembered for his detective stories featuring Father Brown, an unassuming Catholic priest with a gift for solving complex mysteries (Chesterton himself became a Catholic in 1922). But he also wrote much nonfiction and a number of novels classifiable as political fantasies. His first novel **The Napoleon of Notting Hill** (1904) begins, in characteristic style, “The human race, to which so many of my readers belong...”. A farce in which the streets of London become the battleground for the opposing armies of South Kensington and Notting Hill, the novel reflects Chesterton’s distaste for the modern world of business and centralized power, and celebrates the romance of an earlier pre-industrial world. **The**



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

**Man Who Was Thursday** (1908)—a kind of comic version of **The Secret Agent**—postulates the existence of a secret society of revolutionaries sworn to destroy the world. These are the seven members of the Central Anarchist Council who, for reasons of security, call themselves by the names of the week. Thursday himself proves to be a police agent. Of this novel Chesterton remarked, not long before his death:

*It was a very melodramatic sort of moonshine, but it had a kind of notion in it; and the point is that it described, first a band of the last champions of order fighting against what appeared to be a world of anarchy, and then the discovery that the master both of the anarchy and the order was the same sort of elemental elf who had appeared to be rather like a pantomime ogre. This line of logic, or lunacy, led many to infer that this equivocal being was meant for a serious description of the Deity; and my work even enjoyed a temporary respect among those who like the Deity to be so described. But this error was entirely due to the fact that they had read the book but had not read the title page. In my case, it is true, it was a question of a subtitle, rather than a title. The book was called "The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare". It was not intended to describe the real world as it was, or as I thought it was, even when my thoughts were considerably less settled than they are now. It was intended to describe the world of wild doubt and despair which the pessimists were generally describing at that date, with just a gleam of hope in some double meaning of the doubt, which even the pessimist felt in some fitful fashion.*

\*

The English writer *L. H. Myers* (1881–1944) is the author of the remarkable tetralogy of philosophical novels collected under the

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

title **The Near and the Far** (1943). In this work, which rivals **The Magic Mountain** in depth and subtlety, Myers uses a society remote from the contemporary world—in this case, the court of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Mogul emperor Akbar— as a backdrop to explore, with deep insight, the moral poverty of the existence of his own era, its failure to reconcile material and spiritual values. Myers sets his story in an idealized past society essentially for the same reasons that Mann set his in a remote sanatorium, for as Myers explains in the Preface,

*In choosing sixteenth-century India as a setting, my object was to carry the reader out of our familiar world into one where I could—without doing violence to his sense of reality—give prominence to certain chosen aspects of human life, and illustrate their significance. It has certainly not been my intention to set aside the social and ethical problems that force themselves upon us at the present time. On the contrary, my hope has been that we might view them better from the distant vantage-ground of an imaginary world.*

Rajah Amar, one of the principal characters of the novel, has embraced Buddhism in what he regards as its authentic form, placing self-discipline above altruism, self-enlightenment above sentiment. He has resolved to sever his worldly and domestic ties and lead the life of a monk. Much of the philosophical discussion in Myers' novel takes place between Amar and Smith, an Englishman whose European rationalism serves to represent the modern world. The exchanges between these two characters remind one of those between Naphta and Settembrini in **The Magic Mountain**. Amar holds intuition and metaphysics above reason:

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*“To ignore philosophical problems is not to abolish them, and in a sense it may be said that every man who thinks at all is willy-nilly a metaphysician... The Jew addressed himself to men’s intuitions and spoke in the language of inspiration. It is this that has given Christ’s utterances their unexampled power. Such power reason will never command, nor is it desirable that it should.”*

To which Smith replies:

*“Well, we have reached, I am afraid, a core of fundamental disagreement. I believe in goodwill guided by reason ; intuitions I hold to be very dangerous guides, and an appeal to them is not easily distinguishable from an appeal to blind prejudice. Prejudice means unreason, and unreason is responsible for most of the follies and cruelties of mankind.”*

But Amar has the better of this argument:

*“I don’t mind admitting that Christian morality requires Christian dogma to support it. But does not every system of ethics require support either from intuitions, which you mistrust, or from metaphysics which you eschew, or from dogma which you will not allow?... The Christian conception of God as a loving father, ultimately near to each human soul, is to my mind a very beautiful one. Very beautiful, too, is the idea of an incarnate God suffering death for the redemption of the human race – and as an example to it. Christianity gives brotherhood to men, and value to every human life. In the place of the Pagan view of the time process as an eternal repetition, it introduces the idea of an end of perfection at last.. The freshness, the hope, the tenderness, the*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*courage, of Christianity – these are what I value; but when I have said that, I must add: I am not a Christian; I am a Buddhist.”*

Later Amar reflects:

*Why does the European fail in detachment? The cause is the difference in temperament – engendered to some extent no doubt by different geographical conditions. In a cold, even in a temperate climate, bodily exertion is pleasanter and more natural than in the tropics, and, unlike exertion in the tropics it produces an agreeable fatigue and an increased capacity for exertion. A habit of body and mind is thus set up which directs a man’s attention outwards and attaches his thoughts to material things. And, because man is a self-explaining, self-justifying animal, men whose minds are thus oriented will adopt a philosophy or view of life which makes their behaviour seem right and reasonable in their own eyes. That the European lives as he does because he finds life good, is simply not true; it is because he lives as he does that he persuades himself that life is good.*

*The Indian is thus not deluded. He recognizes that life is appetite, and that appetite is unrest, anxiety, pain and sorrow. Christianity by urging that the appetitive impulse should be directed to the benefit of others, does much to redeem it; and it is in Christianity of course that the truly religious spirit of Europe has manifested itself. It is absurd of Smith to maintain that Christianity is opposed to the spirit of Europe, when historical evidences are so overwhelmingly against him. It is idle to put forward that Europe has never adopted Christian practice, although Christian precept has been professed. No race, no society, has ever yet succeeded in living up to its religious principles, – the Hindu no more than the European. The*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*difference between us is not one of religiousness but of spiritual insight.*

*I tried to persuade Smith of this, and ended up by saying: "I believe the Westerner to mistake his own values, his own incentive, his own meaning. His mistake will, very likely, be of considerable value to mankind, because in his wanderings he may well find much of cultural utility. It is important, perhaps, that a part should go astray for the sake of a whole. I am very ready to admit that your preoccupation with material things has developed your practical reason far beyond ours. Christianity, too, has developed your hearts. It is now time that you developed the spirit that is in you. The reason and the heart both speak a simpler language than that of the spirit. In one of our earlier talks I said that Buddha addressed himself primarily to the spirit in man. I wish I could persuade you to study Buddhism, for then you would see what I mean."*

At another point in the narrative Amar's son, Prince Jali, muses on the nature of society:

*"It now seems to me like this: if one sees a man struggling at the bottom of a well one is moved to do all one can to pull him out. If a man is starving one's natural impulse is to share one's food with him. Surely, it's only on second thoughts that people don't do these things? Society seems to me to be rather like an organized system of rather mean, second thoughts. In theory, no doubt, society helps men to help one another, but actually it provides every man with arguments for helping himself and not helping others.*

The Prince is given advice by the Guru, one of the principal characters in the last part of the novel:

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*"In my life," said Jali slowly, "I shall be tempted to compromise."*

*"If you are talking of the outward life," returned the Guru, "I should advise you to do so whenever you can."*

*"Is that permissible?"*

*"In practice certainly – in order to avoid unnecessary conflicts – to say nothing of avoiding priggishness and cant. But compromise is not the same as adulteration, and adulteration is not permissible even in the smallest degree."*

*"Adulteration of what?"*

*"Of the basic intention. Intention must never be adulterated; nor does it admit of degrees. A terrible purity of intention is demanded of man."*

**The Near and the Far** is one of the few genuinely philosophical novels in English; long out of print, it deserves to be revived.

\*

The novels of the English writer *Graham Greene* (1904-91) reflect many of the themes of the crime and suspense genre – pursuit, guilt, treachery and failure. But above all he is concerned with the nature of morality. Greene was a convert to Roman Catholicism in 1926 and the concept of "the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God" informs a number of his novels. In **Brighton Rock** (1938), for example, a story set in the town's corrupt underworld, the vicious young ex-Catholic gang leader Pinkie is, because of his upbringing, always in contact with the "possibility" of grace. Yet Ida, the prostitute, although kindly and helpful, is not. She values the distinction between right and wrong, but with no means of judging except experience; while Pinkie at least has access to the means of distinguishing good from evil. Here Greene

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

seems to suggest that the achieving of Grace is the necessary condition for an authentic and meaningful life, and that without it even virtues are of no account.

**The Power and the Glory** (1940), which arose out of Greene's commissioned visit to Mexico in 1937 to report on religious persecution there, is set in the violent conflict of a new revolutionary republic where the Church is outlawed and the priesthood banned. The novel traces the "martyrdom" of a drunken and lecherous priest who rediscovers his integrity: Greene's view seems to be that the violence and decay of the "whisky priest" will in some way result in his resurrection as a man. His opponent, a police lieutenant acknowledged by the priest as a good and honourable man, represents the nonreligious, humanist standpoint. The priest is finally executed, an event imbued with Christlike implications, and the novel closes on a subdued note of triumph at the Church's survival in the face of religious intolerance.

**The Heart of the Matter** (1948) is set in typical Greene territory ("Greenland"), in this case, a physical and moral wilderness in West Africa where the harsh climate and the still harsher struggle for survival furnish the backdrop to an intense moral drama. The central character, Scobie, deputy commissioner of police and a Roman Catholic, falls victim to his own compassion for others: first his unstable wife, and then a young widow with whom he has a doomed affair. Finding himself in debt, he borrows money, which initiates a progressive descent into "hell". His attempts to retrieve his life only compromise him further; when he inadvertently causes the death of his servant, he resolves to commit suicide, a mortal sin in terms of his Catholic creed. He endeavours to conceal this from his wife by fabricating his diary, but the deceit is uncovered after his death, thereby

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

exposing the final tragic paradox in his life. Yet all the while, as a Catholic, Scobie always has the possibility of judging his own actions.

**The Quiet American** (1955) is a more overtly political work, but still exhibits the typical Greene preoccupations with betrayal and guilt. The novel, set in Vietnam during the French colonial war against the Vietminh, revolves around the death of Alden Pyle—the Quiet American of the title—a naïve and high-minded idealist who has arrived in the country as a member of the Economic Aid Mission, “impregably armoured by his good intentions and his ignorance”. The narrator, Thomas Fowler, is a middle-aged English journalist, cynical and detached. Estranged from his wife in England, Fowler lives with an Annamite girl, Phuong. Pyle steals Phuong from Fowler, enticing her by the offer of marriage and a home in America. He has become involved in subversive politics and begins to direct funds to a small guerilla army, headed by a nationalist general, under the mistaken belief that doing so will assist in the struggle against communism. When Fowler learns that the American has played a part in a bomb explosion in a local café, causing horrific injuries, he informs on Pyle, thereby causing the latter’s murder. But, Fowler is uncomfortably aware that his motives are hardly pure, since he is partly driven by jealousy over the loss of his mistress. At the novel’s end Fowler has retrieved Phuong, and now finds himself in a position to marry her, but he is left in the morally ambiguous position of wishing that “there existed someone to whom I could say I was sorry.”

\*



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

The American writer *Jack London* (1876-1916) is best known for his novels ("The Call of the Wild", "White Fang") drawing on his experiences in the Klondike gold rush of 1897.

Jack London's novel **The Sea-Wolf** (1904) describes the downfall of a self-proclaimed Nietzschean superman. Two ferryboats collide in the fog on San Francisco Bay, and Humphrey van Weyden, a dilettant intellectual of independent means, is thrown overboard. He is picked up by a sealing schooner, the *Ghost*, whose captain, Wolf Larsen, presses him into service. Van Weyden becomes fascinated by Larsen's combination of intellect with raw power, but is at the same time repelled by the cruelly ruthless manner in which he tyrannizes his crew, who hate him. Reaching the sealing grounds off Japan, they rescue Maude Brewster, a shipwrecked castaway, who at once becomes the unwilling object of Larsen's attentions. Van Weyden tries to protect her, but Larsen is far too powerful and she and van Weyden flee the ship. They reach a deserted island, but the *Ghost* is driven ashore there. By this time Larsen has been deserted by his crew, and, suffering from cerebral cancer, has gone blind. Van Weyden and Miss Brewster manage to restore the *Ghost* to seaworthiness and set out for civilization; Larsen, defiant to the end, dies on the island.

Wolf Larsen sums up his attitude to life by remarking to van Weyden:

*I believe that life is a mess. It is like yeast, a ferment, a thing that moves and may move for a minute, an hour, a year, or a hundred years, but that in the end will cease to move. The big eat the little that they may continue to move, the strong eat the weak that they may retain their strength. The lucky eat the most and live the longest, that is all. [Those sailors there], they move;*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*so does the jellyfish move. They move in order to eat in order that they may keep moving. There you have it. They live for their belly's sake, and the belly is for their sake. It's a circle; you get nowhere. Neither do they. In the end they come to a standstill. They move no more. They are dead.*

When van Weyden protests at the hopelessness of this view of life, Larsen replies:

*I agree with you. Then why move at all, since moving is living? Without moving and being part of the yeast there would be no hopelessness. But – and there it is – we want to live and move, though we have no reason to, because it happens that it is the nature of life to live and move, to want to live and move. If it were not for this, life would be dead. It is because of this life that is in you that you dream of your immortality. The life that is in you is alive and wants to go on being alive forever. Bah! An eternity of piggishness!*

In Wolf Larsen we have a man who believes in, and has put into practice, a crude version of the doctrine of social Darwinism, with its notion of the "survival of the fittest." Everything that happens to him, even his symbolic blindness, only serves to reinforce his grim view of life.

London was an active, if somewhat unorthodox socialist; his novel "The Iron Heel," set in Chicago, is an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century dystopia, a warning against fascist dictatorship. The novel takes the form of a manuscript discovered by an archeologist living seven hundred years hence, in the fourth century of the Brotherhood of Man which dates from the final triumph of socialism. It tells of the struggles of labour against the forces of plutocracy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; of the gradual economic and

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

political enslavement of the working class, and their underground struggle for justice; of the first great revolt of the submerged masses, and its ruthless suppression by the mercenaries of plutocracy, the Iron Heel. In this novel London analyzed fascism 15 years before it actually came into being: secret police, stormtroopers, the economic and political domination of monopoly capital are all adumbrated with uncanny foresight. But, unlike Orwell of **1984**, London was an optimist, believing that social justice would triumph in the end; and so the future dystopia of *The Iron Heel* is presented as a past epoch.

\*

*Dashiell Hammett* (1894-1961) was the dean of the American "hard-boiled" school of writing and his masterpiece **The Maltese Falcon** (1930) is a crime story which is also a novel of ideas. The novel, whose *mise-en-scène* is the San Francisco of 1928, begins with the beautiful but devious Brigid O'Shaughnessy (calling herself Miss Wonderly) engaging the private detective firm of Spade and Archer to shadow a man, Floyd Thursby, whom she claims - quite falsely, as it turns out - has eloped with her sister. Her aim is to use the detectives in a complex plot to rid herself of Thursby, who is in actuality a former boyfriend, a criminal picked up for protection in her pursuit of the Maltese Falcon, a sixteenth-century jeweled statuette of inestimable value. Having originally arranged with Thursby for them both to wait in San Francisco for the Falcon's arrival by ship, Brigid seeks to eliminate him and so gain sole possession of the Falcon. Thursby himself, the erstwhile bodyguard of a murdered gambler, fears reprisal, and Brigid anticipates that he will try to kill anyone shadowing him; if Thursby were himself to be killed, all well and good, if the

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

shadow were to die, then Brigid will be well placed to finger Thursby for murder. Archer takes on the job of shadow, but Thursby fails to react as Brigid expects, so she resorts to shooting Archer herself. Thursby is later found murdered in his hotel room, and Spade, who comes to be suspected of both murders, is forced to pursue the case out of self-preservation. Caspar Gutman and Joel Cairo, two of Brigid's equally ruthless ex-partners also in search of the Falcon, seek Spade out and make a deal with him to help them obtain it. But the object they finally get their hands on turns out to be a worthless fake. By this time Spade has realized that Brigid was Archer's murderer and that Gutman had sent his bodyguard to kill Thursby. He turns them all in to the police.

Chance and deception reign in Sam Spade's world; even its central object, the Maltese Falcon itself, proves inauthentic. The underlying randomness of this world is vividly depicted by Spade in an account of one of his experiences as a detective, the so-called "Flitcraft episode." Flitcraft is a real-estate executive who has a pleasant house, a new car, and "the rest of the appurtenances of successful American living," including a wife and two sons. One day he goes out to lunch and never returns. Five years later Spade succeeds in locating Flitcraft, who is leading a life virtually indistinguishable from the old one, under the name of Charles Pierce. It turns out that on his way to lunch five years before Flitcraft had almost been hit by a beam falling from an office building in the course of construction. The near escape from possible death made him feel "like somebody had taken the lid off life and let him look at the works," that the "clean, orderly, sane, responsible" life he knew was a sham. Now realizing that life could be ended for him through the chance occurrence of a beam falling, he responds by changing his life at random and simply going away. So he leaves, but after a few years merely comes to

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

duplicate his previous existence. "That's the part of it I liked," Spade says. "He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling." Flitcraft's behaviour is fully in accord with the principle of inductive generalization.

Hammett's choice of the name "Charles Pierce" may well have been intended as a reference to the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who wrote extensively on chance.

\*

Of the American writer *Patricia Highsmith* (1921-95), Grahame Greene had this to say:

*She is a writer who has created a world of her own – a world claustrophobic and irrational which we enter each time with a sense of personal danger. . . . Patricia Highsmith is the poet of apprehension.*

Highsmith's first novel, **Strangers on a Train** (1950), in which two men exchange murders, was influenced by her reading of Camus's **L'Étranger**. In her diaries she describes Camus's novel as "the 20<sup>th</sup> century's annihilation of the individual." Like Camus, she was determined to explore what she saw as the most lamentable feature of her generation: "the absence of personality". Just as Meursault wanders through Camus's novel in an affectless daze, so Highsmith started to think about "a man to whom events become progressively less real", a theme which recurs throughout her work.

In **The Blunderer** (1954), Highsmith explores the void she saw at the core of American society. The novel's central character, Walter Stackhouse, is a typically "other-directed" man—a man,

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

that is, whose beliefs have been entirely moulded by external influences. He is successful, yet, despite his enviable lifestyle, feels alienated. He has come to believe that dissatisfaction is the normal state, that for most people life is a continual failure to attain one's ideals. Walter is drawn into a relationship with Melchior Kimmel, whom he reads about in a newspaper in connection with the murder of his – Kimmel's – wife. As his relationship with his own wife deteriorates, Walter becomes obsessed with the Kimmel case, going over and over its imagined details in his mind. Walter's wife throws herself over a cliff in circumstances echoing the death of Kimmel's wife and Walter falls under police suspicion. But it is Walter's obsession with Kimmel that brings about his downfall. At the novel's climax – as Kimmel stalks Walter through Central Park – Walter is conscious of thinking of nothing, his identity reduced to a vacuum. When Kimmel kills him, his personality simply dissolves.

**The Talented Mr. Ripley** (1955), Highsmith's best-known novel, may be seen as an elaborate variation on the theme of the Double<sup>11</sup>. The book's central character, Tom Ripley, is a man capable of shedding his identity as effortlessly as a snake sheds its skin. Ripley kills one young man, for whom he feels a strong, if unarticulated, homosexual attachment, assumes his identity, and then murders another man with whom he is hardly acquainted at all, on the grounds that he may know too much. Ripley is one of literature's most memorable antiheroes, a cool psychopath indistinguishable on the surface from a "normal" human being. The novel had four sequels.

In 1956 Highsmith confided to her notebook:

---

<sup>11</sup> Highsmith herself states that the novel was partly based on Henry James's *The Ambassadors*. But she also acknowledged the great influence Dostoevsky's novels had on her writing.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*I want to explore the diseases produced by sexual repression. From this unnatural abstinence evil things arise like peculiar vermin in a stagnant well: fantasies and hatreds, and the accursed tendency to attribute evil motivations to charitable and friendly acts.*

This Freudian objective was fully achieved in her novel **Deep Water** (1957), a gripping study of a man driven mad by repression. Vic, the novel's protagonist, tolerates his wife's Melinda's affairs with other men by sublimating his feelings in his work. To his friends he seems to embody success and sophistication. But beneath his mask of respectability lurk darker emotions. Like so many of Highsmith's heroes, Vic is trapped in a fantasy. He deliberately starts a false rumour that he has killed one of Melinda's lovers, but the idea of murder soon becomes a reality, a reality seeming like a dream. The act of murder frees him from his repression and, after drowning a man in a swimming pool at a party, he experiences a new sense of liberation. But the crimes also make Vic feel vastly superior to the common man and he comes to regard himself as a Nietzschean superman. Nevertheless, he is caught in the end.

**Deep Water** may be read as an indictment of the repressive life led by the middle classes in 1950s America. It also has a subtle political subtext critical of the politics of the day with references to the Cold War, H-bomb shelters, and anticommunist paranoia. As Vic says,

*If the Americans go over to the Reds, they call them "turncoats". If the Reds come over to us, they're "freedom-loving". Just depends from which side you're talking.*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

**This Sweet Sickness** (1960), a more explicit treatment of the Double theme, also contains Nietzschean overtones. Its central character, David Kelsey, is so obsessed with his ex-lover, who has married another man, that he creates an alternative identity through whom he feels able to satisfy his repressed desires and live out his dreams of domestic bliss with the fantasy image of his lost love. The name of Kelsey's alter ego, "Neumeister" ("new master" in German) is indicative of Highsmith's interest in the Nietzschean themes of power, guilt, repression and the concept of the superman. Indeed, as Kelsey retreats further into fantasy, so Neumeister the superman (the polar opposite of Walter in **The Blunderer**) comes increasingly to dominate his character. As if following Nietzsche's precepts, Kelsey rejects the banal world of the boarding house he inhabits and begins to see himself as a man superior to the mass of mediocrity surrounding him. He comes to grasp that "nothing was true but the fatigue of life and the eternal disappointment". He accidentally kills his ex-lover's husband in a fight and, on the run from the police, finally finds himself trapped on the window ledge of an apartment block high above Manhattan. Rejecting the idea of being governed by laws not of his own making, he chooses to step into nothingness.

**Edith's Diary** (1977), considered by many to be Highsmith's masterpiece, charts the mental disintegration of a woman who, depressed both by the shallowness of the modern world and the disappointments of her own life, takes refuge in the world of her imagination. By the end of the novel Edith finds difficulty in distinguishing fact from fiction. The political views confided by Edith to her diary are evidently Highsmith's own. Edith regards herself as a left-leaning liberal, someone for whom, unlike the unthinking majority, politics still matters. The American government, she believes, fosters an attitude of apathy,



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

reducing the population to complete political docility. Edith is certain that the banality of the news media conceals an agenda which, particularly vis-à-vis Communism, amounts to nothing less than mass brainwashing. “Readers’ Digest has never failed to print one article per issue about the inefficiency of anything socialized such as medicine,” runs an entry from her diary.

Ultimately Edith, in a spirit of defiance, resists attempts by her ex-husband and a psychiatrist to force her to conform to society’s repressive pressures, and accidentally falls to her death on her stairs by catching the heel of her shoe.

In the early 1980s Highsmith became fascinated and appalled by American Christian fundamentalism and set out to write a novel focusing on the distortions of personality induced in its adherents. The result was **People Who Knock on the Door** (1983). The novel’s central character is an intelligent 17-year-old high school student, Arthur Alderman. His younger brother, Robbie, develops a life-threatening illness, and his father, Richard, prays for Robbie’s recovery; when this occurs, Richard comes to believe that it is due to Christ’s miraculous intervention. As a result, Richard becomes a “born-again” Christian. Richard’s growing obsession with fundamentalism deepens the gulf that has opened between him and Arthur. A crisis develops when Arthur’s girlfriend, Maggie, informs him that she is pregnant. The couple, along with Maggie’s parents, decide that an abortion would be the best solution, but Richard thinks otherwise and does everything in his power to convince Arthur and Maggie of the sinfulness of their actions. But the abortion takes place; Richard throws Arthur out of the family home and proceeds to brainwash Robbie into believing that sex outside wedlock is a mortal sin. Ironically, Robbie later discovers that Richard has himself transgressed by impregnating a fellow church member; he shoots his father dead.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

Highsmith portrays the fundamentalist church as hypocritical, self-serving and linked with American right-wing politics, which she deplored.

\*

Much of *Colin Wilson's* (1931- ) fiction takes the form of unconventional detective stories, larded with philosophical speculation. His first novel **Ritual in the Dark** (1956) was actually written when he was 17 years old but not published until seven years later after the initial success with *The Outsider*, his celebrated account of alienation in literature. The novel contains in embryonic form all the themes with which Wilson has come to be identified—liberation of consciousness, peak experience, murder as an expression of social alienation. The three primary characters of the novel are three types of “outsider”—the physical, represented by the killer (based on the dancer Nijinsky); the intellectual (based on Wilson himself); and the emotional (based on van Gogh). None of these characters seem to be able to find any sort of place in the world in which they live, sensing that it is somehow false, but seeing no real way out of it. **The Glass Cage** (1966) is another journey into the mind of a murderer. Here the detective is a Blake scholar, and the killer a man who murders in order to overcome the emptiness of his life. Wilson's interest in philosophy and abnormal psychology is deployed to good effect in his novel **Necessary Doubt** (1964). Here the central character, Karl Zweig, is a ex-professor of philosophy forced to flee Germany at Hitler's accession and now living in London. One evening he spots a man who looks familiar getting into a taxi along with an elderly gentleman. Zweig soon identifies the man as Gustav Neumann, the son of a deceased colleague, and one of

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

his most brilliant ex-pupils, whom he has not seen for many years. Zweig becomes convinced that Neumann has become a murderer, killing wealthy old men for their money. But in his pursuit of Neumann Zweig begins to suspect that something is going on just beyond his comprehension. Ultimately he discovers that Neumann has developed a drug, neuromysin, which expands human consciousness but which also induces suicidal impulses. While Zweig has come to believe that Neumann has used elderly men as guinea pigs, in the end, rather than turning him into the police, Zweig allows him to go free in order to allow him to perfect his drug. Zweig reveals his reasons for this decision:

*“I believe this: that Gustav has never ceased to be possessed by a vision of his own, and that he has spent his life trying to turn it into a reality. I doubt whether he set out simply to kill those men for money – he is not interested in money. I think that perhaps he hoped to help them. But I think he used them as guinea pigs...”*

*“All I can tell you is why I want him to escape. I began by suspecting that Gustav had become an ordinary criminal, a killer of old men...I was afraid that if he had become a mere criminal, then I was partly responsible – perhaps wholly responsible. I was unwilling to condemn him because I was unwilling to condemn myself... But I was wrong in thinking that he could ever be a mere criminal. The true criminal thinks himself a realist...”*

*“When Gustav’s father and I were students, we shared a common vision – no, not a vision, but a sudden insight. It was this: there were certain moments when I became quite certain that human beings have always made an absurd mistake in interpreting the world. Your senses interpret reality just as a translator translates from one language to another. Well, in this flash of insight, I would understand suddenly that human beings make some subtle mistake when they look at the world. The way we see the world is a lie. That is, it is a complete*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*misconception. I suppose this is what I came to mean by original sin. Now my task as a philosopher has always been to find the source of the error. I was sure that it would require some tiny adjustment – like turning the knob on the side of a microscope – and everything would suddenly rush into focus. And this focus would come to me in brief flashes then everything would blur again, turn into a labyrinth of shadows. Well, I have devoted my life to trying to discovering the principle of this focus. When I was younger, I felt this all the time – I was always aware of the stupid imperfection of my vision, as you might be aware of some fault in a radio set, without knowing how to correct it. Since I have grown older, this feeling has disappeared. It takes a good deal of effort to maintain it. Well, it came back again this evening...I could not believe Gustav had found an answer, for I know his brain is no better than mine. Tonight, when Gustav gave me the taste of neuromysin, I realized I had made a mistake. There is another way. Gustav has spent his life pursuing it. Instead of using his intellect alone, Gustav has returned to the body. He has recognized in fact what I have only recognized in theory – that part of the problem is purely physical.”*

When asked whether, in that case, he feels his own work has been a mistake, Zweig responds:

*“By no means. Gustav’s way can provide the vision, but what good is the vision without purpose. A man needs a lifetime of discipline to make use of such a vision. Why do you suppose the old men committed suicide? Do you think it was a mere physical consequence of the drug? Gustav used a phrase that explained everything. He said that the drug gave him a sensation of existing in a desert of freedom. You can observe the same thing when a schoolboy has a long holiday – he loses all sense of purpose after a while. The freedom bores him. He has no use for so much freedom. It makes him*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*aware of his limitations, of his worthlessness. He has to face the paradox that he doesn't want to return to school, yet he doesn't want an everlasting holiday either. His life becomes devalued. Well, Gustav's drug has the same effect, but magnified a thousand times... Such a desert needs signposts, and I have spent my life making signposts."*

When, finally, Zweig is asked how he knows that Neumann is not deceiving him, his response echoes Wilson's own philosophical convictions:

*"Because there is one thing that cannot be counterfeited – that passion for order...When I was a student I used to go into the university library and look at the work of the philosophers, and think: These men were sick of the meaninglessness of life. They were sick of life slipping away like a confidence trickster and leaving nothing behind. Their works are a protest against the chaos and futility, an attempt to get a grip on life. And yet after more than two thousand years of philosophy, we are not very much wiser. Life is still a confusion. It still escapes us. Yet the true philosophers continue to dream of some simple tool – like a pair of pliers – that will give us a grip on life. This is the passion for order. Gustav has it. He may not yet have solved the problem, but he has made a completely new kind of start. He has given me hope. I had begun to feel stoical about my life – to accept defeat as inevitable. Do you see now why I had to allow him to escape? His drug may be a new beginning..."*

## VII. Science Fiction

WE COME FINALLY TO *science fiction*. This is by definition a literature of ideas, and so furnishes a virtually inexhaustible source of material for discussion. SF has been characterized in provocative terms by the critic Edmund Crispin:

*Science fiction is a reactionary type of reading. It harks back to a literary intention which the Renaissance outmoded and the rise of the novel came near to obliterating – I mean the intention of depicting human beings in their relation to entities having an importance, or at any rate a potency, as great as or greater than the importance or potency of the human animal itself. In science fiction these entities may very occasionally, as in the older literature, be of a religious or quasi-religious nature; but more often they have to do with the laws and potentialities, so far as these are known or can be guessed, of the physical universe which humanity inhabits. Thus, where mainstream fiction, thanks to the monotonously humanist bias of the last five centuries of our culture, has been almost uniformly catatonic in its withdrawal from environment, science fiction seeks to direct man's attention outwards once more – to mitigate the creature's excessive preoccupation with himself and his society by throwing emphasis on the temporariness and precariousness of his situation within the macrocosm.*

I shall consider some of the novels and stories of a number of SF writers, focussing particularly on *H. G. Wells*, *Karel Čapek*, *Olaf Stapledon*, *Philip K. Dick*, *Stanislaw Lem*, and *J. G. Ballard*.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*H. G. Wells* (1866-1933) was one of the creators of science fiction. Many of his most striking ideas, both within and outside the SF genre, occur in his short stories, all of which were written before 1911. In **The New Accelerator** (1903), for instance, a research physiologist develops a drug which speeds up human metabolic processes several thousand times, so that anyone who takes it sees the world as virtually standing still. In **The Plattner Story** (1897) a chemical experiment goes wrong and Plattner, the demonstrator, vanishes in the resulting explosion. Ten days later he reappears, but with his body mirror-reversed: formerly right-handed, he has become left-handed; his heart is now on the right-hand side of his body. The only explanation would appear to be that Plattner was blown by the explosion into a four- (or higher) dimensional space in which he was "turned around" before returning to normal space. In **The Crystal Egg** (1899) a dealer in antiques acquires the mysterious object of the title and discovers that, when illuminated by a single ray of light and viewed from a precise angle, a scene can be clearly discerned within it. In this scene are a number of masts, each surmounted by a similar crystal egg, around which fly a multitude of large bird-like creatures. Every so often one of these creatures alights on a mast and peers intently into the crystal; occasionally the face of one of these creatures, with its great eyes, fills the whole scene. It becomes clear that the crystal egg is transmitting a picture of another world, and that the crystals in that world are devices allowing the flying creatures to view our world. The fact that the sky of this other world contains two moons means that it is probably Mars. In **The Star** (1899) a large object collides with the planet Neptune; the two fuse into a star which heads towards the centre of the solar system. Astronomers fear that it may collide with the earth, and as it draws closer it wreaks havoc on the earth's surface,

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

causing earthquakes and floods. At the last moment, however, it is deflected by the moon and proceeds to fall into the sun. Although humanity survives the ordeal, society has been devastated, and the earth's climate permanently warmed. Martian astronomers, on the other hand, see few changes on the earth's surface and are surprised that the near collision had so small an effect. Mr Fotheringay, the protagonist of **The Man who Could Work Miracles** (1899) finds that he has in some mysterious way acquired the power of having his every wish miraculously granted. Beginning modestly with a few minor miracles, such as transforming his tobacco-jar into a bowl of violets, one night Mr. Fotheringay is encouraged by the local parson, Mr Maydig, to perform bigger feats. So he duly drains a swamp, improves the railway, and, in a reforming zeal, changes all the alcoholic beverages in the vicinity to water. It grows late, and Mr Fotheringay (evidently a man of little imagination) starts to worry about getting to work the following day. Mr Maydig suggests that Mr. Fotheringay, like a latter-day Joshua, stop the hour growing any later by arresting the rotation of the earth. Mr. Fotheringay obliges, but as a result finds himself pitched incontinently into a whirling chaos; for in stopping the earth from rotating he has neglected to arrest the motion of the objects on its surface, which have as a result all been thrown violently forward at high speed. Failing to understand this, and thinking that his miraculous powers have gone wrong, Mr Fotheringay wishes that he be rid of them, and that time run back to the moment immediately prior to their appearance. Thus everything returns to normal, and so in actual fact Mr Fotheringay has never possessed the power to work miracles at all.

Wells' short novel **The Time Machine** (1895) is the first to treat what was to become the major SF theme of *time travel*. The



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

central character invents a machine enabling him to travel in time, which he uses to investigate the future of the human species. He becomes temporarily stranded eight hundred thousand years in the future, where he finds the timid and beautiful Eloi living in what at first seem to be idyllic circumstances, but discovers they are the prey of the degenerate Morlocks, troglodyte descendants of the labouring class. He travels to still more distant eras where he witnesses the extinction of humanity, and the world's final decline as the sun cools.

The problem of humanity's future concerned Wells greatly, as his later writings testify. The split between the Eloi and the Morlocks in **The Time Machine** is an early warning against the perpetuation of social class divisions.

**The War of the Worlds** (1898) is the archetypal story of *alien invasion*. Mars embarks on an invasion of the earth, launching a number of giant cylinders which crash to ground in England. From these issue huge spherical creatures armed with heat-rays and fighting machines, which proceed to devastate the country. Panic spreads as resistance fails and London is destroyed: human beings are powerless against the Martians. Providentially, the Martians succumb to infection by earthly bacteria, which succeed in destroying them where humanity's best efforts fail.

By portraying humanity as being too weak to resist the Martians, Wells administers a sharp corrective to the notion that human society occupies a central position in the cosmic order.

Wells also wrote a number of utopian novels in which he presents his mainly optimistic speculations on the forms that the society of the future might take. In **A Modern Utopia** (1905) he

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

describes a society governed by a technocratic elite<sup>12</sup>, and in one of his later books, **The Shape of Things to Come** (1933), he charts a possible future course of development which might lead to the establishment of the utopian state. But he never managed to resolve the imaginative conflict between his social idealism and his doubts that human beings were capable of achieving spiritual maturity.

\*

*Karel Čapek* (1890-1938) was the foremost Czech writer of the interwar years. He is best known for his play *R.U.R.* (1921) – an acronym for “Rossum's Universal Robots” – in which the word “robot” was first introduced. (In Czech the word means something like “forced labour,” and in the play it applies not to metal robots as we have come to think of them, but to a slave class of quasihuman androids.)

**The Absolute at Large** (1922) is a satire in which a scientist invents an atomic device capable of producing almost free power; its release shakes the world to its foundations, leading to a devastating war. In **Krakatit** (1924) a crank inventor devises an exceptionally powerful explosive, with predictable consequences. Both of these novels illustrate how the ultimate catastrophe can be arrived at by a seemingly casual, unintended route.

Čapek’s **Tales from Two Pockets** (1929) are short stories of detection with a philosophical twist. This philosophical turn is developed further in the trilogy of novels, **Hordubal**, **Meteor**, and

---

<sup>12</sup> It is of interest to note that as a direct response to Wells' optimistic vision in **A Modern Utopia**, *E. M. Forster* (1879-1970) wrote his dystopian story **The Machine Stops** (1909), a powerful depiction of the tragic consequences of becoming over-dependent on the machine.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

**An Ordinary Life** (1933–34), all of are concerned which the nature of individual identity and how it can be known.

Čapek's masterpiece is his last novel **War with the Newts** (1936), a pointed but humorous satire on human shortcomings. A curious, apparently intelligent, sea-dwelling species of salamander or "Newt" is discovered in the South Pacific. Their potential as labourers is soon recognized and a "Salamander Syndicate" set up for their breeding and exploitation; hundreds of millions of them are bred, and they spread all over the world. Recognizing that the Newts are intelligent beings—they even learn to speak human languages—various groups of well-meaning people appear with the intention of conveying to them the benefits of human civilization. A popular philosopher even creates for the Newts a special religious system whose chief article is affirmation of faith in the "Great Salamander": this doctrine fails to take root among the Newts, but finds many adherents among the human population. Finally the Newts, by now having learned much from their human masters, turn the tables on them and begin flooding the continents in an effort to eliminate human beings entirely.

**War with the Newts** is a kind of universal satire: in it Čapek directs his darts at science, religion, nationalism, racism, linguistics, communism, capitalism, businessmen, intellectuals. But, like **Frankenstein** and **Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde** its central theme is the dangerous ability of human beings to meddle in regions where even angels would fear to tread.

\*

In writing his novels *Olaf Stapledon's* (1886-1950) principal concern was to present his ideas on the possibilities of development of mind and society. **Last and First Men** (1930), his

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

most famous novel, is a history, extending over billions of years, of humanity's descendants, told by one of the Last (18<sup>th</sup>) Men working through the “docile but scarcely adequate brain” of one of the First Men (ourselves). Concerning the story he has to tell, the Last Man remarks:

*When your writers romance of the future, they too easily imagine a progress toward some kind of Utopia, in which beings like themselves live in unmitigated bliss among circumstances perfectly suited to a fixed human nature. I shall not describe any such paradise. Instead, I shall record huge fluctuations of joy and woe, the results of changes not only in man's environment but in his fluid nature.*

And it is indeed a remarkable story. In the course of millions of years, the human species remakes itself several times. Five hundred million years hence, the disintegration of the moon forces humanity to migrate to Venus and later still to Neptune (the home of the Last Men), the human body having been redesigned to make it possible to survive the harsh conditions on the Neptunian surface. The cerebral Last Men have developed the technique of entering into any past mind and participating in its experience. Two billion years from now, the Last Men have become aware that, within a few thousand years, the sun will flame out as a nova and extinguish all life in the solar system. They have undertaken the task of disseminating among the stars the seeds of a new humanity, minute spores driven by radiation pressure. They pursue this project even though they know that it is extremely improbable for it to succeed. As their world dies, one of their number delivers a moving epitaph to humanity:

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*Great are the stars, and man is of no account to them...But one thing is certain. Man himself, at the very least, is music, a brave theme that makes music also of its vast accompaniment, its matrix of storms and stars. Man himself in his degree is eternally a beauty in the eternal form of things. It is very good to have been man. And so we may go forward together with laughter in our hearts, and peace, thankful for the past, and for our own courage. For we shall make after all a fair conclusion to this brief music that is man.*

At the beginning of *Star Maker* (1937) we find its narrator, a contemporary man, sitting on a suburban hill musing on the futility of his existence. Looking up into the night sky he feels himself become disembodied, and soars up into space, so embarking on a voyage of cosmic dimensions. He visits many worlds, and becomes part of a communal mind that eventually expands to embrace the entire cosmos. In a blinding vision, the narrator, now identified with this cosmic mind, faces the Star Maker, the creator of all things. The narrator cries out for love, but like Spinoza's God, the Star Maker is above all emotion and judges his work objectively, recognizing its imperfections. In a moment of ecstatic acceptance, the narrator comes to understand this and wakes up on the hill with a strange sense of peace. He sums up what he has learned from his cosmic experience:

*Two lights for guidance. The first, our little glowing atom of community, with all that it signifies. The second, the cold light of the stars, symbol of the hypercosmical reality, with its crystal ecstasy. Strange that in this light, in which even the dearest love is frostily assessed, and even the possible defeat of our half-waking world is contemplated without remission or praise, the human crisis does not lose but gains significance. Strange, that it*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*seems more, not less, urgent to play some part in this struggle, this brief effort of animalcules striving to win for their race some increase in lucidity before the ultimate darkness.*

Stapledon modestly described his novels as "fantastic fiction of a semi-philosophical kind." This description does considerably less than justice to **Star Maker**, in which Stapledon has, with sweeping imagination, synthesized philosophy, science, art, and religion into a powerful vision of the cosmic order.

\*

In his many novels and stories *Philip K. Dick* (1928-1982) returned again and again to the development of three major themes: the nature of the reality underlying the world of appearance, the delineation of "alternative" universes differing from the one we actually inhabit, and the replacement of organic life by mechanical simulacra. His unique way of handling the first theme is exemplified in his stories **We Can Remember It for You Wholesale** (1965) and **The Electric Ant** (1968). In the first of these stories, memory is treated as kind of onion from which successive layers are peeled, revealing deeper and deeper levels of remembered reality. Its principal character, Douglas Quail, calls on Rekal, Incorporated, an agency which uses chemico-hypnotic techniques to implant in its clients totally convincing pseudo"memories" of experiences that they wish to have had. Quail is sedated and the procedure initiated for implanting in him the pseudomemory he has requested – that of having undertaken a mission to Mars as a secret agent. But the technicians uncover what seems to be a genuine memory of such a mission which has been erased from Quail's consciousness: not wishing to meddle in

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

what seems to be government business, they hasten to revive him and send him on his way. It transpires that the military has been monitoring Quail all along, and knowing now that his conditioning has failed, they determine to liquidate him. He manages to convince them that his conditioning might be effectively restored by overlaying the memory of the exciting life of a secret agent with the pseudomemory of something even more exciting and desirable. Quail is accordingly examined by their psychiatrists to determine his ultimate fantasy wish, which turns out to take the form of imagining himself as a small boy preventing, singlehanded, an alien invasion of earth. Quail is then returned to Rekal to have this wish-fulfilment fantasy implanted, but under sedation the fantasy is revealed to be a genuine memory repressed to a level deeper than that of the Martian mission: it was not fantasy at all.

**The Electric Ant** is an intriguing variation on the theme of solipsism. The story's protagonist, Garson Poole, comes to learn that he is not the human being he had always assumed himself to be, but actually a mechanically programmed organic robot – an "electric ant". Depressed at this discovery, he resolves to commit suicide by ripping out the programming mechanism controlling his thoughts and behaviour. Examining himself, he finds a panel in his chest which he pulls off to reveal a tiny spool of tape unwinding imperceptibly over a scanner. He learns that this is not in fact a programming mechanism, but a "reality-supply construct": the true source of all his experience. He grasps that, by controlling this tape, he thereby controls his subjective reality. Intrigued by this possibility, he paints over a section of the tape with opaque varnish; six hours later a number of objects, including the New York skyline, drop out of his visual field, reappearing soon after. Pursuing his researches, he inserts a blank

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

section into the tape; four hours later the fabric of reality begins to unravel for him—colours drain away, material objects turn to smoke. Later, his ordinary perceptions restored, he figures that cutting the tape will have the opposite effect: instead of reducing sensation, he will be subject, in a blinding flash, to every possible stimulus at once. Observed by a friend, he cuts the tape, and is destroyed by the resulting sensory overload. A few minutes later his friend sees *her* reality drain away: she herself, and everything else, were nothing more than impressions on Poole's reality-tape.

The second theme – that of alternative realities – is subtly handled by Dick in his novel **The Man in the High Castle** (1962), whose characters live in a United States that has lost World War II. In this book, which, like most of Dick's novels, eludes synopsis, the country has been divided by the victorious Germans and Japanese, with the exception of a buffer zone in the Rocky Mountains. The novel oscillates between various "realities" all which appear to have equal ontological status. For example, at one moment, a Japanese dignitary finds himself briefly in a San Francisco much more like the one in our world, a world in which, at any rate, the Japanese are clearly not the victorious occupiers of California. Dick varies his theme by introducing a character in the form of a novelist – the eponymous man in the high castle – who has written a book called "The Grasshopper Lies Heavy," depicting a world, similar to, but differing in certain respects from our own, in which the Axis powers have lost the war. One of the characters eventually visits the novelist and forces him to admit that his book was written with the aid of the Chinese *Book of Changes*. When she throws the coins herself, asking the *I Ching* what was supposed to be learned from the book, the resulting hexagram is Chung Fu, "Inner Truth," to which she assigns the literal interpretation that Germany and Japan in reality did lose



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

the war. But the man in the high castle, the author of this "book within a book" is not sure, and Dick leaves the reader to decide which world (if any) is the "real" one.

Dick's third major theme—that of the replacement of organic life by mechanical simulacra—is well served in his novella **Second Variety** (1953). This is set during a future war between the Eastern and Western Blocs in which the remnants of the latter have retreated to the base they have established on the moon, leaving only a handful of their troops on the earth's devastated surface. The Western Bloc continues to prosecute the war by setting up an underground complex of automated factories constructed to produce a stream of robot weapons—the so-called "claws"—designed to penetrate enemy bunkers and kill their occupants. At first the claws are crude and easily destroyed, but the sophistication of their design improves to the point that they begin to turn the tide of the war in the West's favour. Walking through the ruins of a town, Hendricks, an American officer, encounters a ragged young boy whom he decides on impulse to take with him. The two then encounter three Russian soldiers—two men and a woman—who pull out laser pistols. As their enemy Hendricks expects himself to be their target. But instead the Russians shoot the boy who, exploding in a tangle of gears, is shown to be a robot, a "claw" designed to look like a human being. The Russians, Klaus, Rudi, and Tasso, the woman, take Hendricks back to their bunker and explain to him that the underground factories have now begun to turn out robots indistinguishable in appearance from human beings, designed to attack both sides indiscriminately. To their knowledge these come in three varieties, of which the first looks like a wounded soldier, and the third is the ragamuffin David encountered by Hendricks. The form of the second variety they say is unknown to them. Later

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

Klaus shoots Rudi, claiming that he suspected him to be of this second variety, but it turns out on examining the corpse that Rudi is human after all. Suspicion thus falls on Klaus, who is eventually shot by Tasso; he does prove to be a mechanism. In a subsequent attack by a number of Wounded Soldiers and Davids, Tasso destroys them by detonating one of a number of specially designed bombs attached to her belt, but Hendricks is severely injured in the blast. Hendricks decides that he must return to the moon base for help. Believing that Klaus was of the second variety, and so now trusting Tasso, Hendricks allows her to accompany him to the launch site of the one-seat lunar spacecraft, camouflaged nearby, in which he had been conveyed to earth. There Tasso points out to Hendricks that his injuries will probably prevent him from surviving the trip, and convinces him to allow her to go in his place. Once she has taken off, Hendricks walks back to where Klaus was destroyed and idly turns over the robot's metal brain case, finding to his horror the number IV stamped on it, showing that there were four varieties, not three. Hendricks does not have to wait long to confirm what he now knows, too late, to be the form of the second variety, for he is soon attacked by a squadron of identical Tassos, each carrying identical bombs. As he dies, he consoles himself with the thought that the robots have already begun to design weapons to use against each other.

In the bleak world of **Second Variety**, the claws resemble organisms in that their struggle to exist forces them to "evolve." But of course, unlike the evolution of organic life, the "evolution" of these mechanisms is not the result of chance, but of adaptive improvements in their design.

Dick's stories are full of ingenious devices—often taking the form of exotic drugs—introduced for the purpose of

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

subjecting his characters' ideas of reality to dislocation. For example: in **Now Wait for Last Year** (1966), there is a drug with the side effect of carrying its user—in an apparently objective manner—through time; in **Ubik** (1969), an aerosol can dispensing the Absolute; in **Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said** (1974), a psychotropic drug which alters the perceptions not just of users, but of non-users as well; in **Paycheck** (1953), a number of apparently useless objects which turn out to be of pivotal importance for the protagonist, since he has brought them back from the future; in **Faith of Our Fathers** (1967) an antihallucinatory drug causing its users to see the world as it really is; in **Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?** (1968) "empathy boxes" enabling the members of a religious cult to enter their leader's mind; in **The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch** (1965), an hallucinogenic drug, which, taken by a group of people simultaneously, projects them into a shared illusory world. In **A Scanner Darkly** (1977) the gimmick is a "scramble suit" which, by rendering its wearer unidentifiable, causes its principal character, a narcotics agent, to remain unaware that he is spying on himself.

Of all SF writers, Philip Dick was the one most concerned with purely metaphysical questions, and as a result his work occupies a unique place in science fiction as a literature of ideas.

\*

In his SF novels the Polish writer *Stanislaw Lem* (1921- ) has chosen as his principal themes the impact of scientific knowledge on human life, and the challenges to that knowledge that may arise from future discoveries. Lem's mastery of these themes is nowhere better demonstrated than in his novel **Solaris** (1961). Centuries in the future, the planet Solaris is discovered in orbit

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

about two stars of the "Alpha Constellation." Puzzled by the seemingly impossible stability of Solaris's path, scientists launch an intensive investigation, leading to the placing of an elaborate space-station in orbit around the planet. The planet's surface is found to be covered by a mysterious "ocean" whose nature, organic or inorganic, baffles the scientists; the study of the properties of this ocean has blossomed into a whole new branch of science, "Solaristics." The discovery is made that the stability of Solaris' orbit is caused by "tidal" variations in the ocean's shape. But Solaris has no moons, so does the ocean change its shape deliberately? Is it sentient? Visits to the planet's surface reveal that the ocean is capable of manifesting a bewildering variety of different, often gigantic, formations; these have been classified as "tree-mountains," "extensors," "fungoids," "symmetriads," and "mimoids." The origin and the purpose of these formations remain unknown. A century after the discovery of Solaris, Kelvin, a physicist, arrives at the space station orbiting Solaris to replace one of its three-member crew who has recently died. He discovers that the crew members have been receiving mysterious "visitors" apparently conjured up from their subconscious minds, not as hallucinations, but as solid human beings. The female "visitor" of Kelvin's predecessor has apparently driven him to suicide. Soon after Kelvin's arrival, his own "visitor" materializes in the form of a former lover who has died some years before. Kelvin and his colleagues come to believe that it is the ocean which in some mysterious way is the source of the "visitors," since they first appeared immediately following an X-ray bombardment of the ocean. Finally the scientists succeed in constructing an apparatus for disintegrating the "visitors" and use it successfully; but, although they are now certain that the ocean is responsible for the

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

visitors' appearance, they still have no idea of how or why. The ocean remains an enigma.

The ocean of **Solaris** is one of science fiction's richest and most beautiful images, a vast natural phenomenon which, almost playfully, refuses to yield up its secrets to human science.

Lem's novel **The Invincible** (1967) provides another good illustration of his skill at mapping the limits of human technology, but in this case the opponent's nature is better understood. An advanced spacecraft, *The Invincible*, is sent on a mission to investigate the failure of a predecessor, *The Condor*, to return from a previously unexplored planet in the "Lyre Constellation." On the planet's barren surface, *Invincible's* crew find the unmarked corpses of their predecessors scattered around the apparently undamaged *Condor*. The mystery is finally, if only partially, resolved, when *Invincible* clashes with the agents responsible for the deaths of *Condor's* crew. On examination these turn out to be microscopic crystals, apparently evolved over eons of struggle, whose ancestors were probably robots abandoned on the planet by some former civilization (here one is reminded of Dick's **Second Variety**). One of the ship's scientists postulates "an evolution of non-living things, an evolution of machines," and speculates that a shortage of energy may have led to a struggle for survival:

*In this battle, the 'intellectually' superior mechanisms, which needed considerable amounts of energy (not least, because of their size) were no match for the less developed but more economical and more productive machines.*

The crystals possess a collective mentality and swarm in clouds, overcoming attackers by enveloping them in an electromagnetic

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

field of such power as to wipe the human brain clean of all memories and similarly disrupt all cybernetic systems. They dominate their planet's environment, and the ironically named *Invincible* proves no match for them. In the end the crew of the *Invincible* accept this triumph of the inorganic over the organic, and take off, leaving the planet undisturbed.

In **The Futurological Congress** (1971) Lem enters Philip K. Dick territory. In a century's time, living conditions on the earth, now supporting 100 billion people, become so intolerable that the authorities have taken to administering to the population continuous massive doses of hallucinogenic drugs known as "mascons" which mask the squalor and generate the illusion of decent living conditions. These mascons have the unfortunate side-effect of causing the hair to fall out, the ears to become horny, and, and worse, for tails to grow; to mask these it has become necessary to administer "supermascons." The people, needless to say, are blissfully unaware of this state of affairs. The principal character, Ijon Tichy, while dining in an elegant restaurant with someone high in authority, is told the dreadful secret, and given a phial of vigilanimide, an antihallucinogen which reverses the effect of the mascons and allows him to see the world as it really is:

*My hands were trembling as I pulled the cork and lifted the flask to my nostrils. A whiff of bitter almonds made my eyes well up with tears, and when I wiped them away, and could see again, I gasped. The magnificent hall, covered with carpets, filled with palms, the ornamented walls, the elegance of the sparkling tables, and the orchestra in the back that played exquisite chamber music as we dined, all this had vanished. We were sitting in a concrete bunker, at a rough wooden table, a straw mat*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*– badly frayed – beneath our feet. The music was still there, but I now saw that it came from a loudspeaker hung on a rusty wire. And the rainbow-crystal chandelier was now a dusty, naked light bulb. But the worst change had taken place before us on the table. The snow-white cloth had gone; the silver dish with the steaming pheasant had turned into a chipped earthenware plate containing the most unappetizing gray-brown gruel, which stuck in globs to my tin – no longer silver – fork.*

When the effect of the antihallucinogen wears off, Tichy's companion tells him that they are fortunate to be dining in an elegant restaurant, because less exalted establishments mask conditions that are far worse:

*"Here at least we have real tables, chairs, plates, knives and forks; there, people lie on planks – stacked in many tiers – and eat with their fingers from buckets moving by on conveyor belts. And what they eat in the guise of pheasant there is much less palatable...a powdered concentrate of grass and beets, soaked in chlorinated water and mixed with fish meal; usually they add gelatin and vitamins, plus synthetic emulsifiers and oils to keep the stuff from sticking in your throat."*

But eventually a second dose of the antihallucinogen reveals even this squalid subreality to be an illusion:

*I looked, petrified, at the transformation taking place, realizing in a sudden shudder of premonition that now reality was sloughing off yet another layer – clearly, its falsification had begun so very long ago that even the most powerful antidote could do no more than tear away successive veils, reaching the veils underneath but not the truth. It grew brighter – white.*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*Snow lay on the pavement, frozen solid, trampled down by hundreds of feet; the street presented a bleak and colourless scene; the shops, the signs, had vanished and instead of glass in the windows – rotting boards, crossed and nailed together...One ragamuffin sat atop a pile of snow, settling down for the night as if in a feather bed; I saw the contentment in his face; he felt right at home...*

The situation is finally explained to Tichy by another high official:

*“The year is 2098, with 69 billion inhabitants legally registered and approximately another 26 billion in hiding. The average annual temperature has fallen four degrees. In fifteen or twenty years there will be glaciers here. We have no way of averting or halting their advance—we can only keep them secret.”*

The book ends with its hero apparently returning to one of his initial illusory states.

The world presented in **The Futurological Congress** is a comic inferno, the scenario of Dick's **We Can Remember It for You Wholesale** writ large. With its society's mass (if involuntary) use of psychotropic drugs, it is a worthy descendant of Huxley's **Brave New World**.

\*

J. G. Ballard (1930–2009) has always been an outspoken champion of science fiction as he sees it—the literature not of outer, but of inner space, the literature of unfettered imagination. As he has said:



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*Living is one of the most boring things one can do. The really exciting things, the most interesting experiences, go on inside one's head, within those areas covered by the intelligence and the imagination.*

*I think the imagination is capable of devising almost anything – I don't see any restraints in it. I think it's capable of living – it does live – in an unlimited universe. One's merely got to channel it in the right direction.*

Ballard uses images and symbols to convey his ideas in a very striking manner. The critic David Pringle has provided a thoughtful analysis of Ballard's use of symbols in his early novels *The Drowned World* (1962), *The Drought* (1964) and *The Crystal World* (1966). In the first of these global warming causes the earth's ecology to revert to its prehistoric state, and the human race to cease reproducing – which leads to a second Eden, but one in which human beings have a place solely as organisms, not as human beings. The symbol here is *water*, the theme the unconscious desire of human beings to return to the *past*, to the womb. In *The Drought* (and in the short story collection *Vermilion Sands* (1971)) Pringle suggests that Ballard employs *sand* to symbolize the *future*, a future in which human beings become increasingly intellectualized as they move further and further away from their biological origins. They become lethargic and affectless – an emotional state aptly symbolized by a sandy desert. In *The Drought* industrial waste has caused a tough polymeric film to form on the surface of the oceans, so preventing the evaporation of water to form clouds, and transforming the entire land surface into a parched desert. In the aridity and formlessness of sand Ballard sees an appropriate symbol of the future. It is a

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

symbol of entropy, of the dissolution of form within both the individual and social spheres. In *The Crystal World*, the entire globe is slowly transformed into a crystalline mass. Here Ballard uses the image of a crystal to present an image of *eternity*, or *timelessness*, of a world transmuted from a Heraclitean plurality into a unity, a static unchanging Parmenidean One.

In one of Ballard's most haunting stories, **The Garden of Time** (1962), crystals are used in an explicit way to engender timelessness. With its protagonist Count Axel, this story is a compressed reworking of Villiers de l'Isle Adam's symbolist "novel" *Axel* (1890). In Villiers' novel, Count Axel has withdrawn, as is customary with symbolist heroes, into an ancient and isolated castle—in this case, deep in the Black Forest—where he devotes himself to the study of the hermetic philosophy of the medieval alchemists. But, finally, confronted with the vulgarity of the material world—his disdain for which is expressed in the deathless line

*As for living, our servants shall do that for us –*

Axel chooses to commit suicide. In *The Garden of Time*, Ballard has replaced Villiers' somewhat overblown romanticism with precise visual imagery. Threatened by a vast ragged horde—the encroachment of the external world—Count Axel and his wife live on in their retreat. They are saved by the "time flowers" which grow in their garden:

*The flowers grew to a height of about six feet, their slender stems, like rods of glass, bearing a dozen leaves, the once transparent fronds frosted by the fossilized veins. At the peak of each stem was the time flower, the size of a goblet, the opaque*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*outer petals enclosing the crystal heart. Their diamond brilliance contained a thousand faces, the crystal seeming to drain the sun of its light and motion.*

Whenever Axel plucks one of the crystalline flowers, time is reversed and the barbarian army is flung back from the garden walls. But each day the horde draws a little nearer and the supply of flower-jewels runs lower. Eventually Axel plucks the last flower; when its effects are exhausted the army bursts in upon them. But while their garden and castle are destroyed, in the manner of a fairy tale Axel and his wife are magically preserved as crystalline statues concealed behind an impenetrable thorn bush. The jeweled flowers are frozen moments—actual embodiments of memory—while the statues similarly represent a pair of lives protected from the ravages of time by a literal crystallization.

Ballard has written several stories which reveal his interest in the nature of consciousness and in which it would not be fanciful to discern the influence of Sartre's **Nausea**. In **The Overloaded Man**, for example, the main character has developed the knack of erasing the details of objects so as to escape "the nausea of the external world":

*He had discovered this talent only about three weeks ago. Balefully eyeing the silent TV set in the lounge one Sunday morning he had suddenly realized that he had so completely accepted and assimilated the physical form of the plastic cabinet that he could no longer remember its function. It had required a considerable mental effort to recover himself and reidentify it. Out of interest he had tried out the new talent on other objects, finding it particularly successful with over-associated ones such as washing machines, cars and other consumer goods. Stripped of*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*their accretions of sales' slogans and status imperatives, their real claim to reality was so tenuous that it needed little effort to obliterate them altogether ...*

*Steadily, object by object, he began to switch off the world around him. The houses opposite went first. The white masses of the roofs and balconies he resolved quickly into flat rectangles, the lines of windows into small squares of colour like the grids of a Mondrian abstract. The sky was a blank field of blue. In the distance an aircraft moved across it, engines hammering. Carefully [he] repressed the identity of the image, then watched the slim silver dart move away like a vanishing fragment from a cartoon dream.*

Finally, seeking

*pure ideation, the undisturbed sensation of psychic being untransmuted by any physical medium,*

he drowns himself in a pond:

*Slowly he felt the putty-like mass of his body dissolving, its temperature grow cooler, and less oppressive. Looking out to the surface of the water six inches above his face, he watched the blue disk of the sky, cloudless and undisturbed, expanding to fill his consciousness. At last he had found the perfect background, the only possible field of ideation, an absolute continuum of existence uncontaminated by material excrescences. Steadily watching it, he waited for the world to dissolve and set him free.*

In *The Assassination Weapon* (1966), one of the best of the pieces collected in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, the protagonist Traven's mental problems are described as follows:

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*What the patient is reacting against is, simply, the phenomenology of the universe, the specific and independent existence of separate objects and events, however trivial and inoffensive these may seem.*

*"... It looks as if something is missing ... perhaps his soul, the capacity to achieve a state of grace ... the ability to accept, the phenomenology of the universe, or the fact of your own consciousness. That is Traven's hell.*

There is a pronounced visual element in much of Ballard's work, and indeed he has acknowledged the strong influence of modern painting, especially the Surrealists, whose image he has described as "the iconography of inner space".

Ballard is a clever writer who has exploited a variety of narrative devices. One of his most ingenious stories, **The Index** (1977) is just that, a five page index to

*the unpublished and perhaps suppressed autobiography of a man who may well have been one of the most remarkable figures of the twentieth century.*

In this Borgesian conceit, Ballard speculates that

*perhaps the entire compilation is nothing more than a figment of the overwrought imagination of some deranged lexicographer. Alternatively, the index may be wholly genuine, and the only glimpse we have into a world hidden from us by a genuine conspiracy of which [the subject of the putative autobiography] is the greatest victim.*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

Ballard has also written a number of urban disaster novels, of which **High-Rise** (1975) is the most rigorously constructed. Here Ballard envisages the affluent tenants of an elegant forty storey tower block slipping into a collective savagery: cocktail parties degenerate into marauding attacks on “enemy” floors and the trappings of technological civilization are turned into primitive weapons. As Golding did in *Lord of the Flies*, Ballard warns us that civilization is a very thin veneer indeed.

Ballard moved away from urban infernos in one of his most beautiful novels **The Unlimited Dream Company** (1979). In this novel the appearance of a messianic figure, Blake (a name surely chosen with the visionary poet in mind), signals the transmutation of a humdrum town in the south of England into an exotic paradise of liberation. In his final ecstatic vision, Blake sees humanity merging

*with the trees and the flowers, with the dust and the stones, with the whole of the mineral world, happily dissolving ourselves in the sea of light that formed the universe, itself reborn from the souls of the living who have happily returned themselves to its heart. Already I saw us rising in the air, fathers, mothers and their children, our ascending flights swaying across the surface of the earth, benign tornadoes hanging from the canopy of the universe, celebrating the last marriage of the animate and inanimate, of the living and the dead.*

In his penultimate novel **Millenium People** (2003) Ballard returns to High-Rise territory, postulating a violent rebellion by London’s middle classes against their own institutions. The explosion of a bomb at Heathrow leads psychologist David Markham, whose wife is among the victims, to investigate

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

London's fringe protest movements. He falls with a shadowy group based in the comfortable Thameside estate of Chelsea Marina. Led by a charismatic doctor, the group aims to rouse the docile middle classes to anger and violence, to free them from both the self-imposed burdens of civic responsibility and the trappings of consumer society – private schools, foreign nannies, health insurance and overpriced housing. Markham, seeking the truth behind his wife's death, is swept up in a campaign that spirals rapidly out of control. The "revolution" finally fizzles out, and Markham reflects:

*Did they realize from the start that the Chelsea Marina protest was doomed to failure, and that its pointlessness was its greatest justification? They knew that the revolt in many ways was a meaningless terrorist act...only by cutting short their exile and returning to the estate could they make it clear that their revolution was meaningless, that the sacrifices were absurd and the gains negligible. A heroic failure redefined itself as a success. Chelsea Marina was the blueprint for the social protests of the future, for pointless armed uprisings and doomed revolutions. Violence...should always be gratuitous, and no serious revolution should ever achieve its aim.*

Nevertheless, at the novel's end Markham is still attracted to the anarchist vision of the revolt, thinking

*of another time, a brief period when Chelsea Marina was a place of real promise, when a young pediatrician persuaded the residents to create a unique republic, a city without street signs, laws without penalties, events without significance, a sun without shadows.*

\*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*Arthur C. Clarke's* (1917- ) **Childhood's End** (1953) is a moving account of the humanity's future evolution. Omnipotent beings suddenly appear from outer space, hovering over Earth's major cities in vast spacecraft, and proceed to impose, gently but firmly, an interdict on all war and conflict. The invaders seem benevolent, but do not at first reveal themselves. The reason eventually becomes clear—they have the appearance of devils, leathery wings, barbed tails and all. The true purpose for their arrival is to prepare the human race for its ultimate transformation into a single, disembodied intelligence. In a Stapledonian finale, *homo sapiens* ascends the final rung in the ladder of evolution.

*Robert Silverberg* (1935- ) is one of the most prolific SF writers. **The Masks of Time** (1968) centres on Vornan-19, an enigmatic character who suddenly materializes in the world of 1999 claiming to have come from 1000 years in the future. The evidence for this, however, is not entirely convincing, and some believe him to be nothing more than an ingenious fraud. Nevertheless, he becomes a cult figure and the World Government of the day starts to figure that it could make use of him to counter the threat posed by the Apocalyptists, a group whose preaching the imminent end of the world has caused chaos. If Vornan-19 were to prove genuine, then he would furnish living proof that the world would endure into the next millennium. But Vornan disappears when attacked by a mob and the question of his authenticity—and of the world's survival—is left open at the novel's close. In **The World Inside** (1971), a variant of Huxley's **Brave New World**, Silverberg tackles the problem of overpopulation through the modest proposal that the population should simply be allowed to explode. In Silverberg's vision of the year 2380, the human race has expanded into the universe at large and now live in thousand



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

storey superstructures each housing in excess of a million people. After two centuries of ruthless selective breeding, the human imperative is now: be fruitful and multiply without constraint, afford one's neighbours any type of sexual fulfillment, and above all, avoid the evil of frustration. But within this seemingly blissful vertical Utopia there still lurk individuals who feel such perverse and atavistic desires as a longing for privacy, a wish to descend from the heights, to walk on earth and bask in the sunshine. These rebel throwbacks to an earlier Earth are dangerous, disruptive elements...

*Gregory Benford's* (1941- ) **Timescape** (1980) is one of the memorable SF novels of the last 25 years. In Benford's vision, the world of 1998 is a growing nightmare of desperation, of uncontrollable pollution and increasing social unrest. Two scientists in Cambridge experiment with tachyons—subatomic particles that travel faster than light and therefore, according to the Theory of Relativity, can move backwards in time. The scientists plan to employ them to signal a warning to the previous generation. In 1962, a young California scientist finds his experiments are being spoiled by unknown interference. As he begins to suspect something near the truth, it becomes a race against the clock—the world is collapsing and will only be saved if he can decipher the messages in time. But (in accordance with the “Many-Worlds” interpretation of quantum theory) acting on the messages received in 1962 has the effect of splitting the universe into two alternative realities—one in which the ecocatastrophe is avoided (and in which President Kennedy is shot, but not killed), and the “original” one from which the messages were initially sent.

*Norman Spinrad* (1940- ) is one of SF's most controversial writers. In 1972 he published **The Iron Dream**, a parodic vision of

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

what science fiction would be like if it had been written by Adolf Hitler. In his **Riding the Torch** (1974), the earth has been sterilized and the remnants of humanity, confined to a fleet of starships, are engaged in an interminable and fruitless quest for other life in the universe. Ultimately grasping that life on Earth was a unique accident, they respond with a rhapsodic celebration of their uniqueness. **The Mind Game** (1980) is a harrowing account of how a sinister cult, based on the actual cult of Scientology, begins to take over the American middle class.

\*

SF short stories and novellas abound in memorable ideas. I conclude these notes with some of my personal favourites.

In *Arthur C. Clarke's* (1917- ) **The Nine Billion Names of God** (1953), the priests of a Tibetan lamasery arrange for the installation of a computer which is programmed to list all of God's possible names in their hieratic alphabet: what would have taken fifteen thousand years can now be carried out in a hundred days. Once this is done, they believe, God's purpose will have been achieved, and the world will end. The technicians engaged to install the computer worry that, once all the names are listed, the monks will blame their machine for the continued existence of the world. But *this* worry turns out to be misplaced, for when, after a hundred days, the computer completes its run, the technicians observe that

*overhead, without any fuss, the stars were going out.*

The background to *Alfred Bester's* (1913- ) **Disappearing Act** (1953) is the future War for the American Dream, a total war

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

into which the whole adult U.S. population has been drafted, each person now "a specific tool for a specific job." When a number of patients in a hospital ward for battle-fatigued soldiers vanish without trace, the General in command of the war effort demands to know what is going on. He is present in the ward when three of the patients reappear out of thin air, causing him to believe that in some miraculous way they have acquired the power of teleportation. Thinking that this capacity has great potential as a weapon, he summons psychiatric experts to pry the secret from the patients. The experts are astounded to learn that—so far as they can tell—each of the three is travelling into the past, to early twentieth century New York, to first century Rome, and to nineteenth century England. Now bent on learning the secret of time travel, the general summons a number of new experts, including a historian who has to be sprung from the penitentiary in which he has been serving a long sentence for expressing his opinion of the War for the American Dream. The historian discovers that the inmates are not in fact travelling into the historical past, but into pasts created by their own imaginations. He tells the General that the only "expert" capable of penetrating their secret is a poet. But poets no longer exist. In **Star Light, Star Bright** (1953) a school principal, Warbeck, attempts to track down a boy, Stuart, whose vacation essay describes, in a matter-of-fact way, the exploits of his friends, which appear to be little short of miraculous: one has constructed an attachment which, fitted to the end of a telescope, enables him to see through the clouds, another has invented a machine for converting food she dislikes into food she likes, still another hates to walk and so "thinks" herself everywhere. Warbeck is convinced that the children described in the essay must be geniuses and that this must also be true of its author; but the exact nature of his genius is unclear. The

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

boy Stuart proves to be astonishingly elusive; all records of him and his family have disappeared. After considerable effort, Warbeck succeeds in determining the family's whereabouts, but as he approaches their apartment building, he suddenly finds himself thrust into limbo, an automaton, unable to speak or to stop, plodding along a road stretching into the infinite distance. In his simple desire to be left alone, the boy, without being aware of it, has sent Warbeck there: the boy's talent is for *wishing*. In **The Men who Murdered Mahommed** (1958) Henry Hassel, Professor of Applied Compulsion at Unknown University, returns home one afternoon to find his wife in the embrace of one of his colleagues. Furious, he throws together a time machine, travels into the past, and shoots his wife's grandfather. He returns to the present confidently expecting that his wife will no longer exist, but instead finds her in exactly the position in which he left her. Quickly inferring that faithlessness must run in his wife's family, he again jumps into his time machine, returns to the past and kills his wife's maternal grandmother. But he returns to the present a second time to find his wife in the same position. Astounded, he makes increasingly desperate efforts to affect the present by going into the past and slaughtering Columbus, Napoleon, and half a dozen other celebrities, all with no effect whatsoever. After a while he finds that nobody at all can see or hear him; he has in effect become a ghost. Later he meets another spectral time traveller who explains what has happened:

*"Time is entirely subjective, a private matter. Time travellers travel into their own past, and into no other person's. There is no universal time. There are only billions of individuals, each with his own continuum; and one continuum cannot affect another. We're like million of strands of spaghetti in the same*

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*pot. No time traveller can ever meet another time traveller in the past or future. Each of us must travel up and down his own strand alone. The fact that we're meeting each other now is explained by the fact that we're no longer time travellers – we've become part of the spaghetti sauce. You and I can visit any strand we like, because we've destroyed ourselves. When a man changes the past he affects only his own past -- no one else's. The past is like memory. When you erase a man's memory, you wipe him out, but you don't wipe out anyone else. You and I have erased our past. The individual worlds of the others go on, but we have ceased to exist. With each act of destruction we dissolved a little. We've committed chronicide."*

William Tenn's (1920– ) **The Discovery of Morniel Mathaway** (1955) is an ingenious variation on the time travel theme. A professor of art history from the far future travels by time machine some centuries into the past in search of an artist whose works are celebrated in the professor's time. On meeting the artist in the flesh, the professor is surprised to find the artist's current paintings talentlessly amateurish. The professor happens to have brought with him from the future a catalogue containing reproductions of the paintings later attributed to the artist, which the professor has come to see are far too accomplished to be the artist's work. When he shows this catalogue to the artist, the latter quickly grasps the situation, and, by means of a ruse, succeeds in using the time machine to travel into the future (taking the catalogue with him), where he realizes he will be welcomed as a celebrity, so stranding the professor in the "present". To avoid entanglements with authority the critic assumes the artist's identity and later achieves fame for producing what he believes are just copies of the paintings he recalls from the catalogue. This

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

means that *he*, and not the artist, created the paintings in the catalogue. But he could not have done so without having seen the catalogue in the first place, and so we are faced with a causal loop.

Tenn's **The Servant Problem** involves another sort of loop. In a totalitarian society of the future, the autocrat Garomma, Servant of All, has achieved what he believes is complete social control by having the masses conditioned to worship him. But Garomma does not realize that he himself has been conditioned to obey the orders of Moddo, his Servant of Education. In his turn Moddo is controlled, unawares, by the psychologist Loob, Assistant to the Third Assistant Servant of Education. And Loob is under the dominance of the laboratory assistant Sidothi, Psychological Technician Fifth Class. But Sidothi, as a lowly member of the masses, has been conditioned to worship Garomma, thereby closing the circle of control.

In *Fritz Leiber's* (1910- ) **Rump-Titty-Titty-Tum-Tah-Tee** (1958) a group of New York artists and musicians produce a pattern of ink blots together with the drummed rhythmic phrase of the title. The combination proves so compulsive that, like a catchy tune, it spreads all over the world and threatens to dominate people's thoughts completely. Eventually an antidote is discovered, a pattern that negates all symbols, accompanied by a rhythmic phrase "Tah-titty-titty-tee-toe" which completes and negates the first one. In **You're All Alone** (1950) Leiber depicts a Mettriean<sup>13</sup> world in which only the principal characters are

---

<sup>13</sup> *Julien Offray de la Mettrie* (1709–51) was a French physician and philosopher who, on the basis of personal observation, claimed that psychical activity is purely the result of the organic construction of the brain and nervous system. He developed this theory in *Histoire Naturelle de L'âme* (1745). The protest against his atheistic materialism was so strong that La Mettrie had to leave the country. He further alienated the public with *L'Homme Machine* (1748), the final development of his mechanical explanation of human beings and the world. He lived in Berlin under the protection of his patron Frederick the Great. His ethics, purely hedonistic, are set forth in *L'Art de Jouir* (1751).

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

actually alive and conscious, the rest of the world's inhabitants being nothing more than mindless mechanisms.

In *Daniel F. Galouye's* (1920-76) **Counterfeit World** (1964) the characters gradually become aware that the world they inhabit is virtual, a programmed construct inside a computer. The question is left open as to whether that computer is itself part of a larger program in some further computer...

*Robert Heinlein's* (1907-88) **By His Bootstraps** (1945) is a memorably convoluted time-travel story in which a man from 30000 years hence returns from the future to meet himself, and then proceeds to fight himself, while he himself stands by and watches. The future man has been dispatched to obtain certain items for a resident of the still farther future who also turns out to be himself... **All You Zombies** (1959) boasts a protagonist entangled in a temporal loop enabling him, through a sex-change operation, to become both of his parents. Heinlein's **The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag** (1942) is a chilling fantasy in which the world is presented as a botched job by a cosmic artist who decides to destroy his work and start all over again.

*A. J. Deutsch's* (?-?) **A Subway Named Möbius** (1950) postulates the construction of a subway system topologically so complex that its connectivity becomes infinite. This leads to the emergence of a nonspatial network into which trains and their passengers disappear; on re-emerging they are entirely unaware of that time has passed...

*T. L. Sherred's* (1915-85) **E for Effort** (1947) explores the effect of the invention of a machine enabling any past event to be witnessed at the time it actually happened. In the effort to suppress the invention, society is put in turmoil...

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

In *Henry Kuttner's* (1914–68) **Mimsy Were the Borogoves** (1943), two young children come across an educational toy from the far future from which they learn how to enter higher-dimensional space, into which they vanish, never to return.

*Damon Knight's* (1922–2002) **The Country of the Kind** (1956) depicts a docile future society containing one violent, atavistic misfit. Humanely excommunicated by his fellow-citizens, whom he refers to as “Dulls”, he is free to roam the world. To render him harmless, however, his body chemistry has been altered to make his presence intolerably offensive to others, and psychic conditioning employed to induce an epileptic fit at the first sign of violence on his part. This violent man is the sole artist in a world from which art has vanished. In his wanderings about the world he leaves carvings to which is attached the message:

*To you who can see: I offer you a world. You can share this world with me. They can't stop you. Strike now – pick up a sharp thing and stab, or a heavy thing and crush. That's all. That will make you see. Anyone can do it.*

But nobody takes any notice.

I conclude with *Frederik Pohl's* (1919– ) **The Tunnel Under the World** (1954). After dreaming of his death in an explosion, Guy Burckhardt wakes up on June 15<sup>th</sup>, makes his routine trip to his office in the town of Tylerton and, aside from noticing that the advertisements are somewhat more aggressive than usual, has an ordinary day. That evening, a fuse blows in his house. He goes down to the basement to fix it, and notices that the basement floor and walls have, inexplicably, acquired metal facings. Puzzling over this, he is overcome by a sudden weariness and falls asleep on the floor. The following morning he is surprised to find, that



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

the date on the newspaper is June 15<sup>th</sup>, rather than the 16<sup>th</sup> as he expected. He is still in a state of bewilderment when later, at his office, he receives a phone call from a man named Swenson whom he recalls having approached him the previous day. Swenson expresses great relief that Burckhardt remembers him and tells Burckhardt that he can shed some light on the recent mysterious events. The two arrange to meet and Swenson takes Burckhardt to a movie theatre where, passing through the manager's unoccupied office, they enter first a metal-walled tunnel and then a room off it containing a number of television screens. Swenson tells Burckhardt that he believes malign forces – aliens possibly – have taken over the town and have for some unknown reason programmed its population to wake up every morning believing the date to be June 15<sup>th</sup>. Determined to find out the truth, Burckhardt marches off down the tunnel. At its end is a door leading to another room containing a desk in which he finds a gun. After a short wait, a man and a woman show up. A struggle ensues, in the course of which Burckhardt shoots the woman and the man runs off. Burckhardt is astonished to find that the woman is actually a humanoid robot; when she informs him that he, too, is one, he is devastated. In fact, she explains, the entire populace of Tylerton are robots, simulacra of the twenty thousand people – including Burckhardt himself – killed in a chemical plant explosion which destroyed the town on the night of June 14<sup>th</sup> some years before. The town has been reconstructed and the brain patterns of the original inhabitants transferred to the simulacra – who still think themselves human beings – so as to create a microcosm of American society, one capable of serving a variety of purposes, for instance, gauging the effectiveness of advertising slogans or political campaigns. Because the last living memories of Tylerton's inhabitants were of the night of June 14<sup>th</sup>, the

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

simulacra are reprogrammed each midnight to believe that the following day is June 15<sup>th</sup>, a day they are thus constrained to live through repeatedly without knowing it. Burckhardt and Swenson's sense that something was amiss had been the result of inadvertently missing their nightly programming. Outraged by these revelations, Burckhardt storms out of the room, resolving to put an end to the tyranny somehow – even though he now knows himself to be no more than an automaton. But he finally enters the outside world to find that his whole town occupies the space of a tabletop and that he is himself only one inch tall. The following morning he awakes – his memory of all these events obliterated – to find once again that the date is June 15<sup>th</sup>.

SSSSSSSSSS

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

### Recommended Reading

*Amis*: Lucky Jim.

*Andreyev*: The Seven That Were Hanged.

*Andrzejewsky*: Ashes and Diamonds

*Appelfeld*: Badenheim 1939, The Retreat, The Iron Tracks.

*Artsybashev*: Breaking-Point.

*Atwood*: The Handmaid's Tale.

*Austen*: Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility.

*Auster*: The New York Trilogy, Leviathan, The Book of Illusions.

*Babel*: Red Cavalry.

*Baker*: The Mezzanine.

*Ballard*: High-Rise, Empire of the Sun, War Fever, Running Wild, The Unlimited Dream Company, Vermilion Sands, The Atrocity Exhibition, The Crystal World, The Drowned World, The Drought, The Overloaded Man, The Four-Dimensional Nightmare, The Terminal Beach., Cocaine Nights.

*Balzac*: Pere Goriot, The Quest of the Absolute, Eugenie Grandet, La Peau de Chagrin.

*Barbusse*: Hell

*Bassani*: The Garden of the Finzi-Continis.

*Bellow*: Mr. Sammler's Planet, Dangling Man, The Dean's December.

*Bely*: St. Petersburg.

*Bernlef*: Out of Mind.

*Bester*: Tiger, Tiger, The Demolished Man, Starburst.

*Bierce*: Can Such Things Be?, Fantastic Fables, The Devil's Dictionary.

*Böll*: Billiards at Half-Past Nine.

*Borges*: Fictions, Labyrinths.

*Borowski*: This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

- Bradbury*: The Illustrated Man, Fahrenheit 451.
- Braine*: Room at the Top.
- Briussov*: The Fiery Angel.
- Broch*: The Sleepwalkers, The Death of Virgil, The Unknown Quantity, The Spell.
- Bronte* (Charlotte): Jane Eyre.
- Bronte* (Emily): Wuthering Heights.
- Bulgakov*: The Master and Margarita, Black Snow.
- Butler*: The Way of All Flesh, Erewhon
- Cahan*: The Rise of David Levinsky.
- Calvino*: Our Ancestors, Mr Palomar.
- Camus*: The Outsider, The Plague, The Fall,
- Canetti*: Auto-da-Fé (also his nonfiction work "Crowds and Power").
- Čapek*: War with the Newts, Hordubal, Meteor, An Ordinary Life, The Absolute at Large, Tales from Two Pockets, Apochryphal Stories.
- Cather*: The Professor's House.
- Celine*: Journey to the End of the Night, Death on the Installment Plan
- Chamisso*: Peter Schlemiehl.
- Chandler*: The Big Sleep, Farewell My Lovely, The High Window, The Lady in the Lake, The Little Sister, The Long Goodbye, Playback.
- Cheever*: Short Stories
- Chekhov*: Ward 6 and Other Stories, Plays.
- Chesterton*: The Man who was Thursday.
- Chopin* (Kate): The Awakening.
- Clarke*: Childhood's End.
- Cosse*: A Corner of the Veil.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*Crane*: The Red Badge of Courage.

*Davies*: Fifth Business, The Manticore, World of Wonders.

*De Beauvoir*: The Mandarins.

*De L'Isle Adam*: Cruel Tales, Axel's Castle.

*Del Rivo*: The Furnished Room.

*Dick*: The Penultimate Truth, Ubik, The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, The Man in the High Castle, A Scanner Darkly, Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said, Martian Time-Slip, Time Out of Joint, Counter-Clock World, Now Wait for Last Year, Collected Stories.

*Dickens*: David Copperfield, Great Expectations, The Pickwick Papers.

*Dickey*: Deliverance.

*Döblin*: Berlin Alexanderplatz.

*Dostoevsky*: Notes from Underground, Crime and Punishment, The Possessed, The Idiot, The Brothers Karamazov, A Raw Youth.

*Duerrenmatt*: The Judge and his Hangman, The Assignment, The Quarry.

*Duhamel*: Cry from the Depths.

*Dumas*: The Count of Monte Cristo, The Black Tulip.

*Duras*: The Square.

*Ellis*: The Rack.

*Ellison*: Invisible Man.

*Emants*: A Posthumous Confession.

*Fallada*: Little Man, What Now? The Drunkard, Every Man Dies Alone.

*Feuchtwanger*: Double, Double.

*Fitzgerald*: The Great Gatsby, The Last Tycoon, Tender is the Night.

*Flaubert*: Madame Bovary, Sentimental Education, Salammbô, Bouvard and Pecuchet.

*France*: The Gods will have Blood, Penguin Island.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*Frayn*: The Tin Men.

*Garshin*: Stories.

*Gide*: The Immoralist, The Vatican Cellars, The Coiners.

*Goethe*: Faust, Elective Affinities.

*Gogol*: Dead Souls.

*Golding*: Lord of the Flies, The Double Tongue.

*Goncharov*: Oblomov.

*Grass*: The Tin Drum.

*Green*: The Dark Journey.

*Greene*: The Quiet American, A Burnt-Out Case, The Ministry of Fear, Brighton Rock.

*Grubb*: Night of the Hunter.

*Hammett*: The Maltese Falcon, The Glass Key, Red Harvest, The Dain Curse, The Thin Man.

*Hamsun*: Hunger, Mysteries.

*Hardy*: The Return of the Native, Jude the Obscure.

*Harrison*: Make Room!, Make Room!

*Hašek*: The Good Soldier Schweik.

*Heinlein*: The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag.

*Heller*: Catch-22, Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man.

*Hellman*: An Unfinished Woman, Pentimento, Scoundrel Time, Plays.

*Hemingway*: For Whom the Bell Tolls, A Farewell to Arms, To Have and Have Not.

*Herlihy*: Midnight Cowboy, The Sleep of Baby Filbertson, All Fall Down.

*Hesse*: Demian, Siddhartha, Steppenwolf, Narziss and Goldmund, The Glass Bead Game.

*Highsmith*: Strangers on a Train, Deep Water, People who Knock on the Door, The Talented Mr. Ripley, Ripley Underground, A Suspension of Mercy, The Cry of the Owl, The Blunderer, This

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

Sweet Sickness, The Two Faces of January, Carol, The Tremor of Forgery.

*Hoffmann*: Tales.

*Houellebecq*: The Elementary Particles (Atomised)

*Hughes*: The Fox in the Attic.

*Hugo*: Les Miserables.

*Huxley*: Point Counter Point, Brave New World, Eyeless in Gaza, After Many a Summer.

*Huysmans*: Against Nature, Down There, The Cathedral, The Oblate, En Route.

*Ilf and Petrov*: The Twelve Chairs, The Golden Calf.

*Isherwood*: Mr Norris Changes Trains, Goodbye to Berlin.

*James*: Washington Square, The Turn of the Screw, The Aspern Papers, The Ambassadors.

*Joyce*: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Ulysses.

*Kafka*: The Castle, The Trial, Amerika, Stories.

*Kazantzakis*: Zorba the Greek.

*Kersh*: Night and the City.

*Kertesz*: Fatelessness.

*Kharms*: Incidences, Today I wrote Nothing.

*Kleist*: The Marquise of O.

*Knox*: Kockroach

*Koestler*: Darkness at Noon, The Age of Longing, Arrival and Departure.

*Kosinski*: Blind Date, Pinball, The Painted Bird.

*Lampedusa*: The Leopard.

*Larkin*: Jill.

*Lawrence*: Women in Love, Sons and Lovers.

*Le Carre*: The Spy Who Came in from the Cold.

*Leiber*: You're all Alone, Conjure Wife, The Wanderer, Stories.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*Lem:* Solaris, The Invincible, The Futurological Congress, The Chain of Chance.

*Lermontov:* A Hero of Our Time.

*Levi:* If This is a Man, The Periodic Table, Moments of Reprieve, The Drowned and the Saved.

*Lewis (C. S.):* The Screwtape Letters.

*Lewis (Sinclair):* Babbit

*Lewis (Wyndham):* Self-Condemned.

*Lind:* Soul of Wood, Counting my Steps, Numbers.

*London:* The Iron Heel, Martin Eden, The Star-Rover.

*Malamud:* A New Life, God's Grace.

*Malraux:* Man's Estate, Days of Wrath.

*Mann (Heinrich):* Man of Straw, The Blue Angel.

*Mann (Klaus):* Mephisto.

*Mann (Thomas):* The Magic Mountain, Dr Faustus, Buddenbrooks, The Holy Sinner.

*Marquez:* A Hundred Years of Solitude.

*Masson:* The Caltraps of Time.

*Mauriac:* The Unknown Sea.

*McCarthy:* The Group.

*McCullers:* Reflections in a Golden Eye, Clock without Hands, The Member of the Wedding, The Ballad of the Sad Café, Short Stories.

*McEwan:* The Child in Time, The Cement Garden, The Innocent, Black Dogs, The Comfort of Strangers, Amsterdam.

*Miller:* Focus, Plays.

*Milosz:* The Seizure of Power.

*Montherlant:* The Bachelors, Chaos and Night.

*Moravia:* The Conformist.

*Mulisch:* The Assault, The Discovery of Heaven.

*Musil:* Young Törless, The Man Without Qualities.



## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*Nabokov*: Pnin, Invitation to a Beheading, Laughter in the Dark, Lolita, Ada, Speak Memory,  
*Narokov*: The Chains of Fear.  
*Notteboom*: Rituals, A Song of Truth and Semblance.  
*Orwell*: 1984, Animal Farm, Coming Up for Air, Keep the Aspидistra Flying, A Clergyman's Daughter, Burmese Days.  
*Perec*: Life: A User's Manual.  
*Perelman*: The Most of S. J. Perelman.  
*Pessoa*: The Book of Disquiet.  
*Plath*: The Bell Jar.  
*Poe*: Tales of Mystery and Imagination.  
*Proust*: Remembrance of Things Past.  
*Robbe-Grillet*: The Erasers.  
*Roth (Henry)*: Call it Sleep.  
*Roth (Joseph)*: The Radetzky March, Job.  
*Russell*: Nightmares of Eminent Persons, Satan in the Suburbs.  
*Salinger*: The Catcher in the Rye.  
*Saltykov-Schedrin*: The Golovyovs.  
*Santayana*: The Last Puritan.  
*Saramago*: Blindness, The Stone Raft.  
*Sarraute*: Portrait of a Man Unknown, Tropisms.  
*Sartre*: Nausea, Roads to Freedom, The Wall, Huis-Clos.  
*Schnitzler*: The Road into the Open.  
*Schulberg*: What Makes Sammy Run?, The Disenchanted.  
*Seghers*: The Seventh Cross.  
*Serge*: The Case of Comrade Tulayev, Birth of Our Power, The Long Dusk, Men in Prison, Conquered City, Midnight in the Century, The Unforgiving Years, Memoirs of a Revolutionary.  
*Sillitoe*: Saturday Night and Sunday Morning.  
*Silone*: Bread and Wine.  
*Sinclair*: The Jungle.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*Skinner*: Walden 2.

*Sologub*: The Little Demon.

*Solzhenitsyn*: The First Circle, Cancer Ward.

*Soseki*: The Three-Cornered World.

*Spark*: The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie.

*Stapledon*: Last and First Men, Star Maker.

*Steinbeck*: The Grapes of Wrath, East of Eden, Of Mice and Men, Tortilla Flat.

*Stendhal*: The Red and the Black, The Charterhouse of Parma.

*Stevenson*: Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.

*Svevo*: Confessions of Zeno.

*Tenn*: Of Men and Monsters, Collected Stories.

*Tolstoy*: War and Peace, Anna Karenina, Resurrection, A Confession, 23 Tales.

*Tournier*: The Erl-King.

*Traven*: The Treasure of the Sierra Madre.

*Trilling*: The Middle of the Journey.

*Turgenev*: Fathers and Sons, Rudin.

*Unamuno*: Abel Sanchez.

*Updike*: Rabbit Run, Roger's Version.

*Upward*: The Spiral Ascent, Journey to the Border.

*Voltaire*: Candide.

*Wain*: Hurry on Down.

*Waterhouse*: Billy Liar.

*Waugh*: Brideshead Revisited, The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold, Officers and Gentlemen, Decline and Fall, The Loved One.

*Weil*: Mendelssohn is on the Roof, To Wear a Star.

*Wells*: The Time Machine, The War of the Worlds, Stories.

*West*: The Day of the Locust, Miss Lonelyhearts.

*Wiesel*: Night Trilogy.

*Wilde*: The Picture of Dorian Gray, De Profundis.

## PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE

---

*Wilson* (Colin): *Ritual in the Dark*, *The World of Violence*, *Necessary Doubt*, *The Glass Cage*, *The Outsider*, *The Strength to Dream*.

*Woolf*: *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, *Mrs. Dalloway*.

*Wright*: *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, *The Outsider*.

*Wu Cheng-En*: *Monkey*.

*Yurick*: *Fertig*.

*Zamyatin*: *We*, *The Islanders*, *Fishers of Men*, *The Dragon*.

*Zola*: *Germinal*, *The Human Beast*.

*Zweig* (Arnold): *The Case of Sergeant Grischa*.

*Zweig* (Stefan): *Beware of Pity*, *Kaleidoscope*, *The Post-Office Girl*.

