

Literature, Culture and the Western Soul¹

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To come to Orthodoxy from the world of today is to come from emptiness to riches, from shallowness to depth, from shams to a reality so all-encompassing that it can, at times, leave one quite uncertain as to the possibility of existing both in the Church and in the "real" world.

Our distress at the seeming impossibility of reconciling the external aspects of modern life with the depth of Orthodox thought, which seems by contrast so utterly otherworldly, springs in large measure from the fact that we inevitably bring some modern emptiness, shallowness, deadness, falsity with us. Our shallowness begins to creep into our spiritual life, no matter how well-intentioned we may be, and we soon reach a point where we can no longer ignore the fact that something is wrong.

To preach that everything Western is taboo is misguided, and to live as if it were true is impossible. We are Westerners: our souls were formed by the Western mentality and psychology, and the often painful effort of understanding ourselves can succeed only by our coming to a knowledge of the forces that have shaped us.

Instead of running away from our culture, or trying to deny its power in us, we must face it squarely and understand its essence and origin. This is the first step in forming an Orthodox world view, and this is the first task facing us today. If we are able to do this, we will be able to discern what in our culture is worth utilizing, and what is harmful. Perhaps more importantly, we will gain a knowledge of ourselves, an increased depth of soul, that will permit us to understand how we may become fruitful Christians.

We have not inherited Western culture at all. That is precisely our trouble. We have simply grown up on the degenerate and decaying vestiges of that culture. We live, not in the West, but on the fading memory of the West. Our present "culture" is an absence of culture, a vacuum that has left our souls shrunken and our spirits stifled. Before trying to plunge his spirit into the depths of Orthodoxy, today's man must first feed his soul, for its malnutrition will not permit any profound growth of spirit. Modern Western man is like a plant with the shallowest possible roots, and he naturally cannot support any great growth. His spirit is no longer capable of soaring, because a lofty spirit must rise out of a deep soul which has the maturity, the sensitivity, to feel noble things and become ennobled by them.

The Fathers have always taught that the higher, spiritual part of man's nature is founded in the first level of the soul, that which is sensitive to and best developed by the study of virtuous, noble, and beautiful things. Our faculties and responses, distorted by the Fall, must be restored to normalcy, and after that we can begin to progress in spiritual things. The "higher perception" which St. John Climacus calls an "attribute" of the soul is "buffeted" by sin, and we must retrain ourselves. The

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redirection and elevation of his soul is an essential task for every Orthodox Christian.

By contemplating the noble and beautiful as portrayed in the arts, the Christian struggler can regain an awareness of that tenderness of heart, that community of sympathy, that faculty for nobility and purity given us by God and darkened by our long neglect. Spiritual growth follows most truly on this elevation and purification of the first stratum of the soul. Without this, it is difficult to attain sobriety, fruitfulness, authenticity, depth, in our spiritual lives. An uncultivated soul seldom has the discernment and balance to see clearly and honestly, nor the sensitivity to feel deeply, nor the intensity to strive wholeheartedly, nor the idealism to reach uncompromisingly for what is truest and best. Sensitivity and intensity are not in themselves spiritual. Rather, they serve as a prelude to spiritual things.

It is psychologically impossible for us to become suddenly "non-Westerners", even if such a thing were desirable. It is intellectually irresponsible to offhandedly reject the treasures of hundreds of years of Christian culture in hopes of escaping the taint of Westernism. If we refuse to nourish ourselves on what is edifying and elevating, we will inevitably be fed by what is not, as the popular culture of America, in all its shallowness and falseness, seeps into our unguarded hearts daily. If we do not counteract it, if we fail to set the loftiest things before us, we will inevitably let our souls remain choked with artificiality and cheapness. We will remain mired in the fatal shoddiness of our world and ourselves, and we shall not be able to touch the depths of our own hearts, nor answer the need of our neighbor's.

Note the example of the early Church. When the Church denounced pagan culture, She denounced only those aspects of it which were based on the demonism of pagan religion or the hedonism of pagan art. Those aspects of Hellenic culture which were useful and healthy, She not only refrained from denouncing, but even transmuted into a profoundly convincing missionary statement.

Then as now, many decried the use of secular art and learning as a means of cultivating and educating the soul, defending their position with the Apostle's warning to, "...beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of this world, and not after Christ." (Col. 2:8)

In answering them, the Fathers of the Church formulated the response which has remained the Orthodox position on the issue, a response expressed in the teachings of men such as St. Clement of Alexandria, St. Basil, and St. John Damascene.

In his *Stromateis*, St. Clement teaches that the Apostle's warning applies only to those who have turned back from spiritual things to the things of the world, from the ultimate truth of Christ to the partial truth of secular learning, "philosophy being most rudimentary compared with Christianity, and only a preparatory training for the truth." (*Strom VI. 7*).

It is quite true that the study of poetry, history, art, fiction, is indeed a "most rudimentary" one. It is indeed not a spiritual study. But we, in our modern condition, are in dire need of the rudiments, not only of spiritual life, but simple humanity. The Apostle warns us not to mistake the lower life of the soul for the higher life of the spirit, and warns us not to turn back from the fullness of Christ to

the emptiness of the world, but he does not tell us to ignore the development of the soul altogether.

St. Clement was not alone in his perception of the need for, and his willingness to make use of, such seemingly "worldly" things as poetry. St. Basil, in his "Address to Young Men on the Right Use of Greek Literature," demonstrates clearly the relevance of secular learning for spiritual life.

We place our hopes upon the things which are beyond; and in preparation for the life eternal do all things that we do. Into the life eternal the Holy Scriptures lead us, which teach us through divine words. But so long as our immaturity forbids our understanding their deep thought, we exercise our spiritual perceptions upon secular writings which are not altogether different, and in which we perceive the truth as it were in shadows and mirrors... Consequently we must be conversant with poets, with historians, with orators, indeed with all men who may further our soul's salvation... (we must) husband resources, leaving no stone unturned...whence we might derive any aid...Virtue is the only possession that is sure, and that remains with us whether living or dead, (and) since we must needs attain to the life to come through virtue, our attention is to be chiefly fastened on those many passages from the poets, from historians and especially from the philosophers in which virtue itself is praised, (for) one who has been instructed in the pagan examples will no longer hold the Christian precepts impracticable... So, we, if wise, shall take from heathen books whatever befits us and is allied to the truth, and shall pass over the rest.

Likewise, St. John Damascene, in his Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, tells the Orthodox Christian "eager for knowledge" to "revel" in the Scriptures, for

They contain the grace which cannot be exhausted. Should we, however, be able to get some profit from other sources, this is not forbidden. Let us be proved bankers and amass the genuine and pure gold, while we reject the spurious. Let us accept the best sayings, but let us throw to the dogs the ridiculous gods and unhealthy fables, for from the former we should be able to draw very great strength against the latter. (Iv. 17)

By following this course, the Church baptized pagan culture; the dross was scoured away and what remained was elevated. That baptized culture was Western culture. Wherever the Church went in Europe, She followed the same course. Whether in Ireland or in Gaul, in Britain or in Spain, She preserved all that was good and true in a people's art and literature, nature and society. The pagan culture of pre-Christian Europe thus found in Christ the fulfillment of its highest longings, and Europe flowered.

For generations thence men and women poured out their deepest aspirations in building, singing, making, and living. They rejoiced in God, in the wonder of His works and world, and the legacy they left us sings of their joy. They built an age whose wonder and beauty we have nearly forgotten, where poetry ran quick in the blood and chastity was not shamefaced, but valiant, where mockery and baseness were not a sign of strength and tears were not a sign of weakness, a world of gentleness and courtesy, of honor and acuity, of nobility and integrity.

It was once our world too. We did not always wander dejectedly in the wasteland of neon and soap operas. We once knew their exultation, their nobility, their joy. If we fail to see this, we lose all hope of ever seeing ourselves. If we look at the jewel-like clarity of the medieval mind, with its profoundly beautiful and humbling vision of the cosmos as a great court dance, and see only Anselm's proofs and papal aggrandizement, we make the saddest possible comment on the numbness of our own hearts. The medieval man looked at the night sky and wept, feeling himself enclosed in the double darkness of his physical and moral separation from God. But he also believed that the stars were holes in the floor of heaven: that light was streaming in from that world of endless day where all things danced in the delight of creatureliness, were radiant in the changeless light of God.

He treasured hierarchy because it was for him a reminder of God. His whole world was an endlessly unfolding, interlocking allegory of the majesty and love of God. He rejoiced in the delight of obedience and walked fearfully in the humility of command, because both were images of profound spiritual realities. He reveled in the color and beauty of the physical world, because they were foreshadowings of the even greater splendors of the Kingdom of God.

He could spend his entire adult life building a cathedral, and never forget the transience of the temporal world. His literature, didactic and moralistic, reminded him of the beauty of virtue and nobility, and the brevity of life. His poetry sang of his delight in the created world and his awe of God. His society taught him to feel the reality and proximity of the spiritual realm almost more intensely than the physical. His churches, resplendent, delicate, glowing, lifted his soul on traceries of stone, and set his spirit on the heights.

The Apostolic impetus carried that world for almost a thousand years. The nourishment provided by a thousand years of Orthodoxy was the spiritual ground in which grew all the best in Western thought and art. That impetus remained largely intact until the Enlightenment, was eroded greatly during the Romantic Age, and finally crumbled entirely in our own time. The best that was done, was done in this spirit: springs from this world. The community of feeling and intent which marks the best of our writers, artists, musicians, springs from this source. Regardless of social, political, religious changes, Shakespeare and Dickens, Bach and Mozart, Donne and Hugo share the same world, and it is to this world the Orthodox Christian of today must look for the formation of his soul. There are lessons we must learn from our on past before we can possibly hope to go on.

The Fathers recommended the study of pagan art and letters as a means of training the soul. We, who have available to us the products of a Western culture founded on Christianity, not only need not fear the use of those products, but have little excuse for neglecting them. To regard everything Western as immediately suspect argues a profound insecurity, a legalism more rigid than any sect, a scholasticism more arid than any summa.

We must recover the feelings and sensitivities which were once the common property of all civilized people. Those works of art, of literature, of music, which are pre-modern are of essential value for us. They can teach us, as will nothing we ourselves now produce, what nobility is, what virtue is, what honor and purity are, what sacrifice and loyalty are, what is worthy and what is not. Poetry, music, art,

fiction, are not spiritual food, but are rather the milk and bread we need to strengthen ourselves to live on the meat of the spirit.

We have almost forgotten the sight and sound and feel of the sublime. To regain it we must return to a time when the gray, gritty moral fog had not yet settled over the world: a time when men's sight was still clear and their souls still keen. If we cannot manage the uplands of the soul we shall hardly be able to touch the peaks of the spirit. Hardened by the din and moral cacophony of our world, our hearts are cold and our consciences numb. We are little moved by pity, honor, nobility, purity, because we seldom or never see them. We are even little moved by beauty, because we hardly know what it is. Like most value-terms, "beauty" has become almost contentless, a word empty of any absolute meaning. Beauty is now whatever we like, or whatever someone tells us is beautiful. Art is whatever someone chooses to call art. There are, ostensibly, no longer any valid reasons for refusing to admit that a pile of rusty hubcaps and bent pipe is "art" in the same way that Rembrandt is "art."

Artistic taste has only very recently become entirely personal. Beauty, like all other aspects of art, was once an aspect of the absolute Truth, which was God. Therefore, a thing was beautiful in proportion to its faithfulness in reflecting some part of the image and truth of God. Now, having lost the concept of Truth, we no longer have a true concept of Beauty, and feed on mediocrity, on ugliness, on anti-beauty, anti-heroes, anti-art, the mockery of God and man.

We must learn again what beauty is. We must learn what it is to be carried on the thunder of a fugue, to be engulfed in the madness of Lear, to be consumed with the sanity of Quixote. We need to be refreshed by the health and charity of Dickens, illumined by the clarity and perception of Hugo, ballasted by the sober gravity and sidelong wit of Johnson, touched by the fire of Donne, soothed by Chaucer's flowering springtime.

We must feel again that pang of homesickness, that bittersweet joy at almost touching, yet never grasping, almost hearing, yet never catching, Him Whose Beauty makes art beautiful. In its truest, deepest sense, that is what art does: that it cannot quench is why we need it. It continually whets a thirst, it continually reminds us of a hunger it cannot satisfy. It leads us up to the very highest reaches of human experience, and then leaves us still homesick, still longing for we know not what, and at that point the spirit is enabled to go on, to find its true home in God. A soul that is unformed, uncultivated, will neither feel the true depth and pain of its homesickness, nor know how to remedy it. In order to be thirsty enough, hungry enough to seek God diligently and uncompromisingly, we must form our souls carefully and continuously.

And we must form the souls of our children. A child born and growing up today is even more disadvantaged than were his parents. Without careful effort and concern, his parents cannot prevent him from being crippled in soul and stunted in spirit. It is important for adults to strive for the elevation and purity of their souls; it is even more urgent to see that the idealism, the spiritual quickness, the simplicity and the single-heartedness of a child's soul is offered the very best sustenance possible. Children who are sustained on the best in music, reading, and art will develop a genuineness of instinct, a surety of spiritual ear, which will be invaluable throughout their lives. They learn not to be fooled by cheapness, and they will never

forget the images of purity, chivalry, integrity and beauty they gained from reading and listening to the very best of what the human heart and mind have to offer. When their souls are well formed, they will be able to withstand many of the delusions and shallow mockeries which will await them in the world.

If we wish to serve God with all our heart and mind and soul, we must be sure that our souls are true and straight, well able to at least recognize nobility and integrity, whether or not our fleshly frailty can always manage to practice them. It is the Orthodox understanding of the needs of the soul, therefore, that demonstrates the spiritual uses of literary cultivation.