

THE LITERARY HERITAGE OF A (STILL)

YOUNG WRITER

by Maxwell Reif

New Humanity Publications



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To The Writers Of The New Humanity

1890

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(STILL) YOUNG WRITER

by Maxwell S. Reif

a journey of renewal, from the
confines of Western literature,
to the universe of time and
space, and back again

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When I speak of my literary heritage, I speak in terms of literature as real influences, meaning infusions of energy. At thirty-six, I feel that in some ways, looking back over it, my heritage is very poor, in other ways extremely abundant. I have gotten what I needed, in literature and life, that I can say. I do not see how a man in this world can claim to be both frank and well-read at the same time, considering how much there is to read, and I do not feel I am well-read. But I read steadily, for what it is worth, what I find useful to me.

I was born into a world of the 1950's and early '60's in which forms of thought were very calcified and solidified in the strata of American society in which I grew up. There were writers, somewhere out on the fringes of things, pouring their energy back into society, but by the time this energy reached me in the place in upper middle-class suburbia where I was ensconced, defenses, my own and society's, had robbed it of most of its subversive fire.

The reigning Tiumverate in American letters at that time was, of course, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald, with Steinbeck behind them and writers like Dos Passos, Thomas Wolfe, and others, there in the wings. J.D. Salinger was a little different; his Catcher in the Rye was so articulate in its expression of discontent that it practically reached me and made me question things for a few days.

Hemingway, I liked, not so much for his themes, which were practically incomprehensible to me, but for the activities his characters engaged in, trout fishing, deep-sea fishing, and bullfighting. I had the illusion that because his style was "simple," I could understand him. He was, of course, almost universally imitated by self-styled writers. Faulkner and Fitzgerald were much more difficult on the surface and I suffered no illusions that I understood them.

In poetry I was acquainted with ee Cummings and his curious experiments in punctuation, shocking enough to pierce my veil a little, and homespun Robert Frost, whose apparent simplicity of a situation would take you, like Hemingway, to your own depth of understanding.

Most of the writers of the time had a tragic view of life, but their themes scarcely reached me where I was ensconced in the cocoon of my upbringing. The sense of the themes of literary tales being connected with one's own life, and of one's own life being the stuff of myth and change and oneself a center of experience as valid as any character in any tale, was remote.

Then there were the Classics, spun about us like warm threads of the cocoon. The unquestioned Shakespeare was far beyond my intimate interest, both because of the difficulty of the Elizabethan language, and because I had not experienced enough of life to know what any of these writers, ancient or modern, were talking about, or why they chose to say it.

Moby Dick (I keep wanting to say "of course," because many people living today grew up in this same literary landscape) was to American classical letters what Shakespeare was to world literature. Plowing through Moby Dick, I scarcely

understood a word.

Cervantes, of whom a bit of humor came through, and the incomprehensible Chaucer, filled in my world. Dostoevski's Crime and Punishment in its shiny paperback edition was prominent in every literarily inclined bookstore, but it appeared too long and complicated. Tolstoi was out there somewhere, with the monstrous War and Peace and some short stories we had to read. The only book I can remember reading with any enjoyment was Huckleberry Finn.

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In college there were new names. Jean-Paul Sartre was suddenly regarded as something of a god in many circles. I was exposed, at Northwestern University, where I attended my first two years, to T.S. Eliot and "The Waste Land," in which I believe I counted six different languages; Pound, Yeats, James Joyce, and so on. All this talk about the Holy Grail and Tarot cards, which I had never heard of, was as much like Greek to me, in "The Waste Land," as Eliot's inscriptions in some of his poems. All I got out of the whole thing were names to drag around that made more impression on "educated" people. (I had made a fool out of myself, or at least it seemed that way, mentioning Robert Frost to an upper-class fraternity brother English major at Northwestern.) I remained completely baffled, except for a mild sense of enjoyment, to see James Joyce's regressive use of language in the first few pages of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, experimental use of language with the shock value of Cummings had had.

Nietsche was in the air in my philosophy courses -- I wondered why he had gone mad if he was such a great writer and philosopher -- but the feeling I got was something like "Everybody talks about Nietsche, but nobody does anything

about him."

In the spring of my first year at Northwestern I heard Allen Ginsberg read and went home to my dorm room, inspired through my cocoon for practically the first time in my life, to write a poem, full of feeble classical allusions, about how I didn't fit in, either with the hippies who'd sat on the stage with Ginsberg and chanted "Hare krisna ...," or with the clean-shaven academics who were devoid of any means of inspiring me. At least here, in the hairy Ginsberg, I felt, was something called poetry that was immediate and had to do with the celebration of life, our life, not the cataloguing of musty literary and mythological references.

For the most part, I had to go through the destruction of a great deal of my personality facade, which entailed enduring years of protracted and intense pain, before I really became open to literature as a living influence and -- what we sometimes forget it is meant to be -- a healing force. But my life picked up somewhat in intensity my second year of college, 1967-68, when I became involved in the anti-war movement and the "counterculture." I saw, perhaps, through slightly less thick blinders.

I developed a deep, though as yet, semi-conscious, longing for a Primitive corrective to my over-refined, dead sensibility. D.H. Lawrence came the closest to personifying this longing in his writings, and reinforced my inarticulate sense of need, which I acted out, a little, through use of marijuana. I also read St. Exupery's The Little Prince at this time; it, too, pushed me onward in my sense that a quest for meaning in the modern world might somewhere be possible. I even tried to imitate, with no success at all, St. Exupery's simple, childlike style. Sigmund Freud, too, became an

influence at this time, not directly, but through conversations which my roommate and my mad poet friend, Dave Katz, would have late at night, that I overheard.

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As my life continued slowly to intensify -- a rollercoaster that I could not know was headed for tragedy -- I was expelled from New College, the experimental school in Florida that I transferred to after my debilitating second year at Northwestern, and went to live in a house with hippies in upstate New York.

Here, people were reading the Chinese I Ching and the Tarot cards not in some watered-down Eliot allusion, but in the original. The youth of America had materialized the Counterculture, a true, though perhaps more modest than we thought at the time, Hegelian antithesis to the one-sidedness of the mainstream American culture. Here it was possible to begin to get in touch with the deep instinctual side of our natures which had been suppressed in our upbringings.

I suffered, however, from horrible "monsters" which had come to the surface of my personality during LSD trips, and was totally miserable and completely lost the whole time on the farm. At one point, wandering in search of help, I went to visit Allen Ginsberg at his apartment in New York's Lower East Side, but, although he tried to be kind and helpful, I was not yet ripe to confront directly the personal nightmares of sexual guilt and shame that had driven me mad on LSD and had left me suicidally depressed when the drug had worn off.

In 1971, after spending a year in a second childhood at my parents' house back in St. Louis, I was "artificially resuscitated" for a time by a psychiatrists' antidepressant pills. On a visit

to an old Northwestern political friend in Chicago shortly thereafter, I had a bona fide mystical experience, which began the process of my being led out of my personal wilderness. After that, through the writings of Meher Baba, the Indian master whom the experience had involved, I was able to contact more deeply ancient and still-living sources of real wisdom. (Meher Baba wrote extensively and meaningfully about love, a subject I had gone to the library to investigate in the card catalogue once, finding only one book listed. This had been in 1968.) I also began meeting more and more people who were living this wisdom each in his or her own unique version, and this enabled me to cease to feel that I lived myth, meaning, and the quest for transcendence were things that had passed out of the world and only lived on in obscure poetic allusions and their footnotes.

I also learned at this time that literature does not exist for itself, as some kind of body of remote, sterile aesthetic objects, but for man. It should tell his story in a fresh and rejuvenating way. If it does not, it has degenerated into the veneration of idols like a religious orthodoxy that has lost its living spark and become merely a chorus of dreamers answering the minister in their sleep. Our feeling-deadened age, which had been brought by materialistic science to an almost exclusively outward-looking view of things, drastically needed an onrush of subjective meaning to balance all that objectivity. I believe that it is scarcely possible for any man to see art whole, but that each age takes what it needs from the past and creates new forms according to its need, as well. One of its functions, I believe, is to correct the excesses of the previous age in any direction; perhaps a perennial, great artist

writes with such universality that there are sides of him that appeal to any age.

Through Meher Baba, whose Discourses gives me priceless pearls of insight into the deeper aspects of practical and philosophical psychic life, I contacted traditions of world literature that had been inaccessible to me before. I read the Sufi mystical poets of medieval Persia and other mystics from the Middle East and India: Hafiz, Jal-al-ud-din Rumi, Omar Khayyam (whose symbolism of "Wine," etc., used the image of wine to connote divine love); Kabir, the fifteenth-century Indian poet and weaver whom Robert Bly has retranslated; and others. Kahlil Gibran, whose writings I had thought of as pap, suddenly appeared to me as a container of this great wisdom, and his drawings were vehicles of sublimity, too.

Through all these poets I contacted a fountain of living wisdom that was powerful enough to knock one off one's feet. The Western mystics, too, made sense to me now, and I enjoyed gems by and about St. Francis of Assisi, Meister Eckhart, Blake, Thomas a Kempis, the stories of the Baal Shem Tov and the other Chasidic rabbis. They all seemd to express the same wisdom, much as Meher Baba had said that they do, through somewhat different symbols in some cases. Thus, I was initiated to the perennial mystic belief that all spiritual traditions esoterically express the same truths and differ only in their outer trappings.

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My view of literature was thus universalized. Instead of the narrow Western tradition, I had something now much wider and, it felt, more whole. I even heard Shakespeare had secretly been an English Sufi.

In 1974, through a course I took when I

re-entered college for my last two years at the University of Cincinnati, entitled "Eastern Thought and American Literature," I was able to find in some American writers the same transcendental wisdom and energy that I had found in the Persians and Indians. Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau had it, T.S. Eliot had some of it in Four Quartets, and again I found it in Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and other modern avant-garde writers. In my English Literature course I found some of the exuberance in all of the Romantics, and a boundless voicing of it in Blake, and recognized that Dylan Thomas was saying intensely in his line "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower drives my green age," exactly what I had read in Meher Baba's prose and Kabir's poetry. Yeats had an expression of it; so did most other poets, to some extent, that I came across.

But for a long time I all but rejected the Western tradition of most prose fiction as hopelessly cut off from the mystic sources of inspiration, and saw the tragic early deaths and the insanity of so many modern writers as having been due to the fact that both they and their audience suffered this isolation from unitary wisdom. Nietzsche and others had tried to bear the weight to buoy up the sagging edifices of scholarship, that could only really be borne by avatars and prophets, and had broken under the burden.

It was not so much the men, perhaps, as the times, but men and times mutually condition one another, so it was really both. Since I seriously believed in reincarnation, I felt it was not all quite as hopeless as it seemed, since they would be back, and do better. Meanwhile, I was learning that practically any writer who was successful in maintaining his strength against the chaos of the 20th century was somehow connected to a mystical

or occult esoteric tradition: Yeats' Golden Dawn and "Vision," Blake with his study of Boehme and the Cabbala, Hermann Hesse -- as faithful a writer to the soul, I believe, as there has ever been, to several eastern and western hermetic traditions; Kazantzakis, the great Tolkien, Allen Ginsberg, Eliot and his Christian-mystic and Buddhist sources -- the list went on and on.

By '74 I had assimilated the fact that I lived in a meaningful universe: the "Waste Land" phenomenon was a subjective perception, not an ontological one. My personal fortunes still rose and fell as I worked my way through deep personal psychic blocks and guilts, but enough people had shown, and I had seen myself, that in my periods of depression and unhappiness I was only encountering the veils over my own eyes that prevented me temporarily from penetrating ever deeper into the nature of things, the World-Mandala. The guardians at the gates of new realities were my own fears, and when these were reversed, I would enter. There was a lore of stories to illustrate such points; St. Francis had met a leper and kissed him, and the leper had become Christ; the Knight at the Chapel Perilous on his quest for the Holy Grail encountered a final Test where everything, including his entire Quest, appeared meaningless, just before reaching the Grail; and so on. It was not some deficiency of life itself, but a temporary and psychological barrier.

At one point my personal despair was so great that I thought I had brain damage, but a meeting with Richard Alpert ("Baba Ram Dass"), whose book, Be Here Now had influenced most of the people I knew, allowed me to feel that this was not so, and to experiencing a breakthrough by sharing verbally a number of sexual fantasies I had felt extremely guilty about since childhood. The telling of these secrets to a truly loving and listening individual

brought me back to a direct perception of life's energy and the awareness that, as Hafiz, the Persian poet, had said, "You yourself are the veil over Self." With the Ram Dass experience, which he called "Guts" (meaning "we sit in a room and you tell me anything you can't tell me"), I was able to confirm the model I had received from both direct experience and literature, which was that burning the "demons" of one's unconscious in the fire or consciousness was the way to widen the area of consciousness and grow. In this way, one ascended the 7 "chakras" of awareness, according to the Eastern conception, or the "Tree of Life," the Western Hermetic concept, until one became an embodiment of pure love and infinite consciousness. This model seemed an accurate one in explaining what those of us who were not interested in more sleepwalking were doing here on earth, and my experience continues to confirm this (Meher Baba, whom I read steadily for twelve years, never even uses the word "chakra," but I believe this is to divert people away from flashy trappings of occult symbolism so that it does not become "spiritual materialism," and toward the real essence.)

Other deep influences who came to me in the mid-1970's were St. John of the Cross, whose poems are ecstatic mystical celebrations, but whose "Dark Night of the Soul" remained for me only a significant phrase and the title of a poem, the saint's prose explication of which mostly bypassed me; Carl Jung, who has given an inestimable treasure to our times by translating the spiritual teaching of the middle ages and much world mysticism into an almost inexhaustible fund of writings about every aspect of the modern psychological-spiritual journey (giving proper importance to the role of art); Ramakrishna, whose

Gospel, recorded by one of his disciples, is one of the greatest books I have ever read; and Robert Bly, the poet who suddely appeared like a Pheonix flashing across the literary skies of America. I heard Bly read on several occasions in 1974 and the experience revolutionized my conception of what a poet is, branding several things unforgettably into my consciousness: 1) Here was a man who listened to the audience reaction when he recited a poem, and if necessary, repeated the whole thing for their sake, 2) Here was someone whose recitations of Sufi poetry left me feeling and even seeing the light he released, a hundred yars away as I was leaving the auditorium, and 3) Here was a poet who said "Don't listen to me. Work on yourself." When he said this, I left the reading and went home to write poetry, causing a minor commotion, and the next night when I came in a little late, Bly paused in his reading to say, "I love that man." In several short sessions he became an important literary father for me.

Another, little-known major influence whose brand of fire burned me for twelve years was Francis Brabazon, a crusty Australian poet who became a Sufi and then later a disciple of Meher Baba's. He wrote with the advantage of having had ten years under Meher Baba's direct and powerful influence in India, but his epic poem, Stay With God, ruthlessly and accurately dissected Western civilization as a whole, and all the arts separately. It is a great and major work, and the only thing, I believe, that prevents it from being better known is that much of it is devoted to a retelling of the life of Meher Baba and a celebration of the Master-Disciple relationship as it has been known timelessly in the East, in the tradition of Rumi; but if Meher Baba is indeed the Avatar of our age, as he says he is, then

Brabazon will someday get his audience. (Another disciple wrote a very fine book which someone casually said "will be very popular in three hundred years.") His ghazals, a Persian form of mystical love poetry which he brought into English, are sublime, though I still prefer for rejuvenation of the form-breaking Fire of Stay With God.

In 1981-82 I had the good fortune to be the literary secretary for a man named Lyn Ott, a painter who had gone blind and become a novelist and writer about art and metaphysics. His book, The Quest For the Face of God, is an extremely enriching tale of his own life and influences, and influenced me no end. While paying proper homage to the great painters of the past and the 20th century in the West, Lyn tells how he, too, had made the jump to mysticism and for the last twelve years of his career, painted 500 blazing colorful works with Meher Baba as the central figure of each one, and nothing else. His book, published by Sheriar Press, has some resemblance in certain ways to another account of an artist working through the Western tradition while going to the East for renewal, The Transformative Vision, by Jose Arguelles.

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I am writing this in May of 1984. At this point, the period of my life that illustrated Ramakrishna's parable about the necessary isolation of spiritual aspirants during early phases of their growth -- "When a tree is young, you have to put a fence around it because someone or something might trample it, but when it grows strong, you can take the fence away because even an elephant can't knock it down" -- appears to be over and I am able to look at my own Western

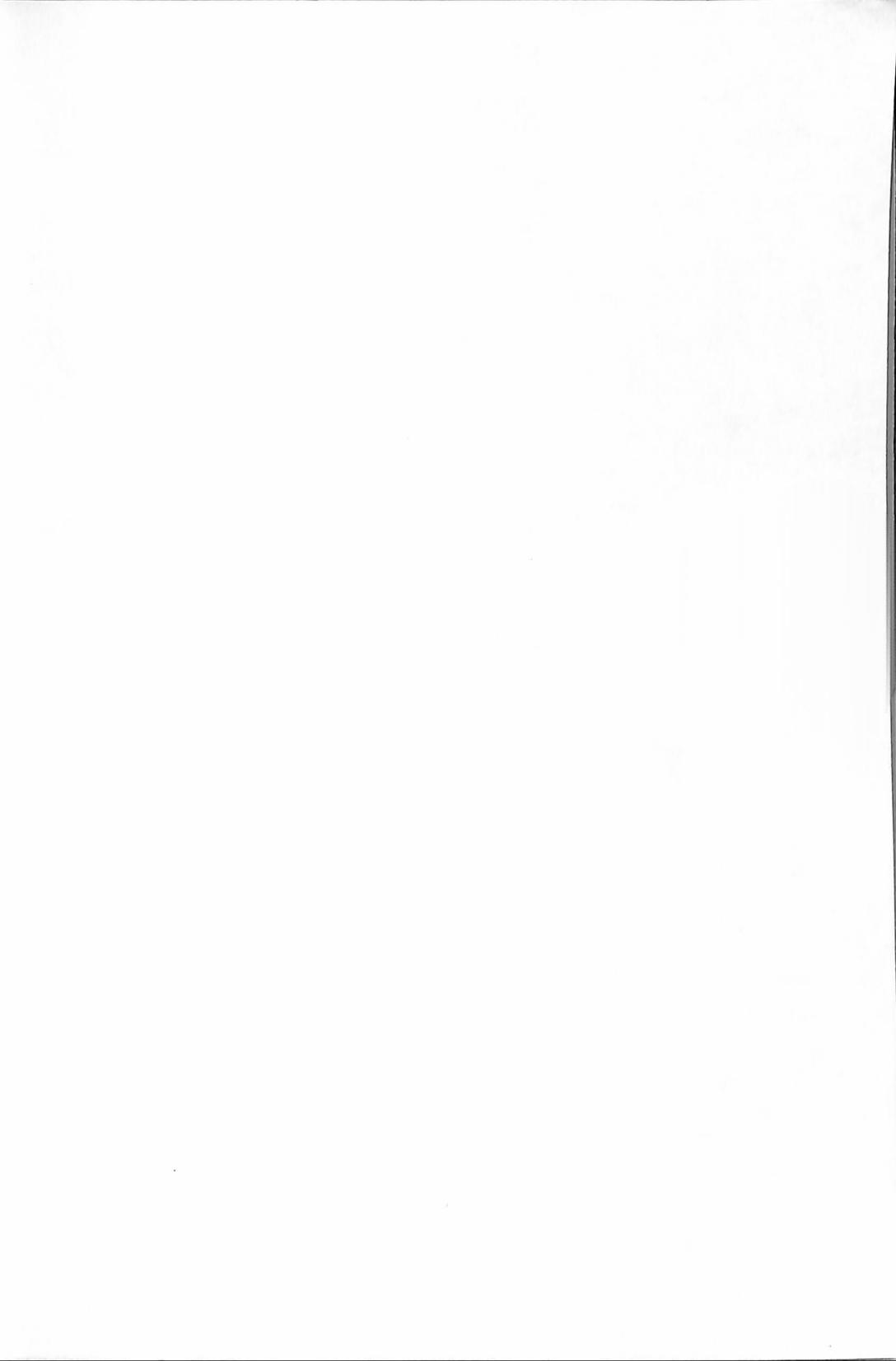
forbears with new eyes. I have an enormous respect for the terse style and tragic vision, at this point, of Hemigway, whose "A Clean, Well-lighted Place" comes to mind immediately as a masterpiece of the poetic short story; for F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose Tender is the Night is a vivid and serious, albeit depressing account of his times; for Faulkner, whom I have begun to read a little and enjoy; for Jack Kerouac, whose exhuberant prose led to an early death after years of depression and drinking.

I have a new respect for these writings and for the somberness of many of them. They no longer appear to me merely as unworthy, incomplete visions, but as honest tellings of great courage, as far as they go, penetrating as deeply as it was given to these authors to go. That is, was not given to many of them to live in a complete spiritual regeneration, but rather to die in the Wasteland, does not really lessen them in my eyes. They were knights who died on the quest. Success and failure both appear transpersonal now in my eyes. I am personally secure, now, in my belief in the poetic ("karmic") justice of everything that happens in this world, from an intuitional and not merely theoretical standpoint. ("Belief in injustice is a measure of one's ignorance," Richard Bach.) I am secure in my personal belief that all these writers will indeed be back to do greater work. I can now, for the first time, see, I believe, death and life, tragedy and ecstasy, as points of view of which both poles have their relative validity. Oedipus the King, who puts his eyes out in the first play of the cycle, comes back in the third as a Sage: that is the way of things in my own life, and in existence, so far as I can see.

I can survey the 20th century, its charred and battered landscape, the very "Wasteland" itself, with love; my own writing is entering new

areas with new force, hopefully to do its part at some time in the renewal of our civilization; I am curious to see where life and literature will take us now.

Maxwell Stanton Reif
St. Louis, Missouri
May 28, 1984.



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