VARDIS FISHER'S THEMATIC IDEAS: HOW THEY ARE DEVELOPED
IN THE "TESTAMENT OF MAN" SERIES

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STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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ABSTRACT

In his Testament of Man series, Vardis Fisher traces man's development from prehistoric times to the present in order to show the origins of various beliefs, attitudes, and superstitions, which, the author maintains, must be recognized for what they are before man can realize his highest potential.

Mr. Fisher's approach to literature in the twelve books of the series is largely that of a scholar-teacher. In gathering material for the novels, he read widely in a number of fields, appending lengthy notes to the later works in the series. In presenting his material, he employed didactic techniques--interpolating authorial asides, developing character types, and manipulating dialogue. There is some evidence of intuitive artistry in the early, "primitive" novels, but this approach is not sustained.

That the author has been preoccupied with certain thematic ideas is evident through examination of several of his works of non-fiction wherein his thematic ideas are directly stated. These ideas, then, appear in each of the Testament books.

Mr. Fisher has contended that the Testament series has suffered because of critics' prejudice against the
content of his themes. This study, however, notes that the chief weakness is the method by which themes are handled.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of his first novel, Toilers of the Hills, in 1928, Vardis Fisher has had twenty-seven novels published. In addition to these he has produced a volume of poetry, a collection of short stories, a book of essays, and six other works of non-fiction, which include three works on his native state of Idaho (done under the auspices of the Federal Writers' Project) and a book on the writing of fiction, God or Caesar?

Any classification of the novels into literary traditions presents problems. As Mr. Fisher himself has pointed out:

My first two novels led critics to think I might be an American Hardy, and hope was entertained that the Antelope Hills would be my Wessex. I then shifted and with great gallantry my critics shifted with me; they now thought that my literary affinities were Zola, Frank Norris and Dreiser, none of whom I had read. I then shifted to fantasy in one book, to the "psychological" novel in another, and next to the American historical novel; and weary with trying to classify me some of my critics abandoned me to what I have no doubt they regarded as perverse whims.¹

However, for purposes of discussion, it is convenient to classify the novels in three areas: regional, psychological, and historical. The Testament of Man series presents a special problem, which will be discussed below.

Among novels in the regional tradition are *Toilers of the Hills*, *Dark Bridwell*, and *April: A Fable of Love*. In these stories Idaho farmers are shown in their struggles against a dismal and uncompromising world of raw nature. The psychological novels include *Forgive Us Our Virtues* and the autobiographical tetralogy *In Tragic Life*, *Passions Spin the Plot*, *No Villain Need Be*, and *We Are Betrayed*. In the American historical tradition are *Children of God*, a story of the Mormon migration; *City of Illusion*, a novel of the Comstock Lode and the heyday of Virginia City; *The Mothers*, an account of the ill-fated Donner party; *Pemmican*, a novel of the Hudson Bay territory; *Tale of Valor*, a story of the Lewis and Clark expedition, *Suicide or Murder? The Strange Death of Governor Meriwether Lewis*, and *Mountain Man*, a portrayal of trappers in the Northwest territory.

The Testament of Man series does not fit neatly into any of the above categories. In the twelve novels of this series Mr. Fisher traces man's development from pre-historic times to the present, concentrating on periods of history that he has selected as crucial. In one sense, the series is historical in that the writer has carefully researched the various periods and has even appended
lengthy notes to the later novels of the series. On the other hand, the moral and psychological development of the human being is also emphasized: the last book of the series represents the autobiographical tetralogy brought up to date. In view of this emphasis, the series might also be considered "psychological." It may, perhaps, best be viewed as an experimental attempt to combine the two traditions.

The Testament of Man series has been chosen as the focus of this study because it represents Mr. Fisher's conscious attempt to fictionalize certain thematic ideas, some of which appeared in his collected essays *The Neurotic Nightingale* as early as 1935, and which were more fully and clearly set forth in *God or Caesar?* published in 1953. Two articles written for *The American Book Collector* in September 1963, three years after the publication of the last book in the Testament series, reiterate the author's constant awareness of, and desire to expound on, these theme ideas.

The Testament of Man grew out of the author's dissatisfaction with his attempt at the autobiographical novel in his tetralogy. He felt that he had not understood his protagonist, whose thinly disguised name was Vridar Hunter.

Before I had completed my four novels about Vridar I was pretty sick of the task. There had been gathering in me a doubt so strong that it dismayed my intuitions and almost paralyzed my will. I could not for a while imagine why this
was so; I could not believe that it was due to a failure of moral courage. I was forced at last to the conclusion that my doubts were based in a lack of knowledge. With this thought in mind I decided to give a few years to exploratory reading in a number of fields.

... The matter I had come to suspect was not the simple one of the adult's childhood; it was the complex matter of his entire history, which is the history not only of mankind but of the whole plant and animal world.2

Thus it was, as Mr. Fisher has "Vridar" explain to his wife in the last book of the Testament series, that he decided to go back in history, "to go back a half million years and open all my senses wide and get down on hands and knees and feel my way to my feet ... and come bent over and dragging a club down the centuries, to find out what makes Vridar run."3 His approach to the task—on the one hand scholarly and on the other intuitive—has led to that historical-psychological dichotomy which causes the Testament series to defy easy classification.

The scholar-teacher in Mr. Fisher insists on facts and ideas derived from painstaking research. For him, inspiration has little to do with the artist's sources. "Belief in inspiration, like that in possession, ghosts and psychic pain, goes back to the childhood of the race. If one believes in inspiration one must also believe in


guidance by a higher power that uses one as an instrument. That was all right in the time of Paul but it is no good today." Furthermore, style is relatively unimportant. He stated in God or Caesar? that style could be over-rated, causing ideas to suffer neglect, and that among novels "which are generally thought to have been the greatest yet written ... few of them are distinguished for their style." It is also as a scholar that he declares "... the search for truth behind the appearances is still, in my opinion, the function of art. The offering of appearances as essence is the function of popular fiction." His own search for truth behind the appearances led him to research in preparation for the Testament of Man series. He described the awesome task in The American Book Collector:

For years I read standard works in a number of fields; then studies of the primitive mind; and at last undertook a systematic course of intensive reading in comparative religions, archaeology, anthropology, not overlooking along the way such fields as music, medicine, geography, climate, customs--or even beverages and athletics .... He often has made a point of reminding his readers that his work is based on research. "In my next novel (about the

5. God or Caesar?, p. 127.
Maccabees)," he declared in *God or Caesar?* "the Notes will quote some forty or more of the greatest Jewish scholars, as well as many gentile. And so it will be in the volumes that follow that one." In fact, such notes are appended to five of the Testament novels. In this way the scholar-teacher approached his self-assigned task of finding what made Vridar--and hopefully all the rest of us, too--run.

The scholar-teacher was also responsible for the scope of the Testament series, which places its emphasis on prehistoric times in the first five novels and on ancient history in the next six, ending the first eleven novels with the Middle Ages. The last novel skips to modern times, thereby skirting more modern history which would have tended to show the impact of science, as well as the turbulent periods of political, social, and industrial revolution. In *The American Book Collector*, Mr. Fisher indicated that his selection of important periods for the novels was based on the reading he had done in preparation for the series.

On the wall facing me, when I sat at my desk, I put typed statements, so that I would see them in moments of contemplation. . . . Two from Bentwich were there--that the selection and separation of Israel was the constant theme of the Prophets, and that the war of the Maccabees against Jews who would Hellenize Israel and

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8. *God or Caesar?*, p. 258.
against Syria was the most fateful turning point in history for the Western world... However, his selection of research material itself, as noted above, emphasized prehistoric and ancient history and tends to show that he had already decided that modern history was not important to his purposes when he set out to do the Testament of Man. This interest in prehistoric and ancient history is undoubtedly a result of Mr. Fisher's idea that the problems of the modern world still hinge on ancient myths and ideas that have become so entrenched in our minds that we tend to accept them as facts without questioning their origins. In The American Book Collector article cited above he said of his early, prehistoric novels:

... All the while I made attempts, of course, to show different faces of the emerging Male and Female, Adam and Eve, Father and Mother, as well as to suggest if not the origin at least early phases in the development of various ideas and forces, myths and distortions, in our modern world.

There is, however, a less scholarly, more intuitive side of the author. It is this side that apparently took over in the early novels of the series--those dealing with primitive man, who was unable to leave a written record for scholars to explore with much certainty. In the last,


autobiographical book of the series, The Great Confession, he describes how he tried to intuit the limited mental and emotional horizons of the ape-man, seeking out caves and old mining tunnels where he would spend hours trying to think and feel with only such powers of observation as would have been available to a creature that had little or no ability to verbalize.

In every way he could think of, Vridar went back and down, far back and down deep; insinuating (no, it was blunter than that)--feeling (but it was more powerful than that)--pushing, thrusting his own sentient sensuous peeled-to-the-quick being back into what it had come out of; possessing it, filling it; encompassing its small taprooted breeding place--and at night before sleeping, thinking about it; in sleep dreaming about it, striving all the while to nose around its actual emotional boundaries and feel through the simple lines of its few primitive meanings--for these had been his, long ago, they were still his: he could feel them within him, deeper than most of the emotions he used because deeply taprooted--infinitely deeper in him than logic and faith and belief--ages and eons deeper than compassion and pity . . . .

Reviewers have commonly complained that the Testament series has been overburdened with research to which story as well as theme are too much subordinated. It is true that the stories of the novels, especially those in the latter half of the series, suffer from a lack of form in the sense of having a definite plot with rising and falling action.

However, the thematic ideas do not suffer subordination to factual material. Indeed, the writer seems to have kept his themes so constantly in mind that the novels tend to suffer more from their burden of thematic material than from their factual content. In any case, the series might have had more literary appeal had the scholar-teacher been checked a little more and the artist given a freer rein.

This study will examine some constant theme ideas as they have been set forth by Mr. Fisher, mainly in God or Caesar?, but also in his earlier collection of essays, The Neurotic Nightingale, and in the articles published in The American Book Collector in 1963. The two main theme ideas found in these works of non-fiction have been classified for purposes of discussion as follows: the myth and reality of human nature, and man's evasion of truth.

These thematic ideas will be discussed in terms of where and how they appear in the Testament of Man series. This method, it is thought, will demonstrate that serious purpose and certainty of thematic content have not been enough to secure for the Testament of Man a lasting or prominent position in the literature of our time.

Finally, it should be noted that God or Caesar? reflects Mr. Fisher's own ideas and that it is not simply a compendium of theories on writing fiction; of this he assures the reader in his introduction to the book:
There are no final answers here to any questions; there is only the substance and color of one author's prejudices and views. Many of those views are not, as the reader will soon discover, orthodox.

... In a book like this I think one should call without coyness or apology on one's own experiences, because we speak most authoritatively at those points where we have been severely tried. ... 12

CHAPTER II

THE MYTH AND REALITY OF HUMAN NATURE

The myth about human nature, Mr. Fisher has said, is the idea that man by nature is generous, kind, compassionate, and just. He maintains that most persons hold this "mistaken view" of man, that they refuse to see themselves and their fellows for what they are--greedy, calculating, and self-seeking. The author insists that he is not a misanthrope: he simply recognizes man's true animal nature, and this recognition is the first step toward improvement of the human situation.

Thus the masses in the Testament novels are described as being ignorant, greedy, and uncompassionate. On the other hand, there are a very few persons who set themselves above the masses by their recognition of what they are and from what they have come. The ego is seen to be the driving force for all human beings, but in the uncommon man the force of ego is balanced by a recognition of the realities. In all of humanity there is an instinct to preserve the race, but this instinct, which Mr. Fisher indicates might have been a force for good, is perverted by the development of the idea of separateness--the idea of a chosen people.
The Common Man

Vardis Fisher's view of the average or common man is as outspoken as it is pessimistic. The idea that all men are created equal is to him one of the myths of modern times. In one of the essays of The Neurotic Nightingale he defended professors whose scholarly abilities and approach, he indicated, were largely wasted on students of average mentality who had come to college to be entertained. Referring to the "notion that democracy is an actual and a workable thing," he added,

But some of us know that it is not. We know that it is making hypocrites of us. We know that flattering the vanity of the averagely intelligent is our greatest industry. . . . It will be so as long as we glorify the average and make demagogic speeches about the forgotten man and defer to the stupid belief that anyone is as good as anyone else . . . .

Because after all is said and done the majority does rule and sets the blight of its superstition and ignorance upon everything that courage undertakes.¹

In God or Caesar? he cautioned prospective artists against mingling with an idolatrous public and getting entangled in the machinery of publicity. "Unless you wish to exploit the credulity, superstitions, ignorance and hero-worshiping tendencies in people, and at last get hung up in a web," he warned, "abjure the mythmakers. . . . for

they have no interest in the gods they create but only in the reflection of their image in their creations."²

Because seeing themselves for what they are has been the last thing in the world that all but a few people have wanted to do, we find human nature insulated with the self-protective assumptions. It is generally assumed, for instance, that people by nature are honest, kind, truthful, loyal, compassionate and merciful, but by nature they are none of these things.³

In the already-mentioned articles written for The American Book Collector, Mr. Fisher reiterated his view of the common man in terms of his appearance in popular fiction. "The people in such fiction have the simplest dimensions," he wrote, "their interests, tastes, and thoughts are those of the millions of simple people who like to read about them. They think with their emotions, in conformity with what is thought to be intelligent and proper by all the status-seekers."⁴

As a result of this view of the average man, characters in the books of the Testament of Man tend to come in two varieties—the vast majority, which is ruled by fear and superstition, and a select few who by virtue of their superior intelligence set themselves apart from the herd.

². God or Caesar?, p. 49.
³. God or Caesar?, p. 79.
Darkness and the Deep shows man at his most primitive level, just down from the trees, a creature born of an admixture of courage and fear yet not having enough of either quality to become either predator or prey. The enormous Ho-Wha, lord of the family group on which the story centers, is the prototype of the common man as he appears in later novels. Had the advance of civilization depended on such as him, Mr. Fisher suggests, there would have been no advance.

He was a lazy, a complacently indolent man who was content to feed and mate and sleep. If all people had been like him, there could have been no progress, but only the cycle, endlessly repeated, of birth and vigilant idleness and death. It was restless and frustrated men like Wuh and women like Who-ah who added a little, generation by generation, to the heritage of their race.5

The second novel in the series, The Golden Rooms, advances man to the Neanderthal level and ends with a literal, and perhaps also symbolic, slaying of this type by a more advanced contemporary—probably Cro-Magnon. The majority lives by instinct and habit; the averagely intelligent make no contributions to the advancement of their lives and even resist when their more intelligent brothers do show them how to improve their lot. Discoveries are made by two characters of exceptional intelligence on whom the action of the story is centered. When Harg, the

Neanderthal man, learns to make fire his demonstration is greeted only with fear and even anger by the men of his clan. The women are quick to accept its use because they find it adds to their comfort, but they are not at first aware that Harg has actually made the fire. Though the Cro-Magnon people are shown to be more advanced in some ways than their Neanderthal contemporaries, they have no sense of compassion or pity. They no longer attack and kill the weak and the sick among them but force them to go away when they become intolerable.

The ascendancy of women in the matriarchal society of Intimations of Eve has no effect on the human being's tendency to be naturally selfish, greedy, and cruel. The grandmother, head of the clan focused on in this book, tolerates the presence of a sick man and woman and a barren woman only because there are no young children in the clan whose welfare might be threatened by the diseased and barren. Nevertheless, she hates all three weaklings and treats them only with scorn. She does occasionally pour an evil-smelling concoction down one of their throats to rid them of the evil spirits with which she believes them infested, but this is done more for the welfare of the family group than from any desire to alleviate suffering. Indeed, her patients always suffer more after taking her medicine than they did before. On discovering that a neighboring family has domesticated some goats, the
grandmother decides that she will take one. "For so many years she had had her way that it did not seem to her that she was unreasonable and greedy. She had always taken what she wanted if she could get it. That was the way with all her people. Persons were born then, as they still are, with theft and covetousness in their hearts." 6

The character representative of the common man in Adam and the Serpent is called "Owl." His only distinguishing feature is his indolence: "Owl was like a drifting organism that attached itself to anything from which it could suck nourishing juices. In his world he was a physical parasite. He might have been a spiritual parasite in a later time." 7 He seeks to fulfill his needs and desires by wishful thinking and magic, and failing in this he turns to narcotics and the fermented juices of fruits.

The Divine Passion, which shows the primitive roots of Hebraic beliefs, further illustrates Mr. Fisher's idea that the human being is a self-seeking animal by nature. He neither condemns nor applauds this trait but observes that it is so. In order to enlighten those who might feel that such laws as the Ten Commandments have their origin either in divine revelation or in any altruistic desire of


man to protect his fellows, he interjects a paragraph of explanation:

Though for them number ten, because of their ten fingers and ten toes, was invested with sorcerous and magical meanings, they had no decalogue, but they did have a few tribal prohibitions besides the one, "You shall not covet." They observed the feast of fruits, giving the choice first fruits to the gods; they said, "You shall not kill your neighbor or lie about your neighbor or steal from your neighbor"—but neighbor meant fellow tribesman. It was moral, and indeed it was in the highest degree honorable, to lie about nontribesmen, or to steal from them, or to kill them. . . . They did not take one another's name in vain for the reason that they did not kill one another; they were afraid that the spirit of the libeled one or the slain one would seek vengeance. From their fear of vengeance and from nothing else had come their commandments against blasphemy, lying, stealing, and murder. 8

At this point in the portrayal of the common man, the author's scholarly and didactic approach to his work has completely arrested his more intuitive side as seen in the earlier novels of primitive life. The theme idea remains relatively constant, but is demonstrated increasingly through dialogue and authorial asides rather than through story development and genuine characterization. The characters in these later novels become types, which recur constantly and are frequently used as the instruments through which the author expounds his ideas directly. This is shown, for example, in The Valley of Vision in which Solomon and his Egyptian wife, Khate, share Mr. Fisher's

skeptical view of the average man. In appreciation of her husband's wisdom as a fair and merciful judge, as opposed to the "eye for an eye" precepts of ancient Hebraic law, Khate remarks, "My Lord, in your court today I was thinking that great men will never have more than a few people to understand and applaud them but the impostors will always have their multitude." Solomon then answers her "with one of those profound remarks that always startled her."

"The wise ruler," he says, "can feel no mercy because the people will always look upon mercy as weakness. It is not the mothers that men revere but the male lion, the tiger, the bull."  

Philemon, a Greek seeker of truth, becomes the exponent of Mr. Fisher's ideas in The Island of the Innocent, a story of the struggle between orthodox Jews and those who want to Hellenize the religion of Israel. In fact, in the latter seven novels of the Testament series, the main character is nearly always a seeker of truth who learns and then expounds those thematic ideas that Mr. Fisher seems to cherish. The stories of the novels largely revolve around the travels of these characters in the course of their search for truth and have very little plot structure. Philemon is a moderate in the struggle between those who want to cast out completely all orthodox Jewish

belief and those who refuse to accept anything of Greek philosophy. Nevertheless, he shares Mr. Fisher's view of the masses. Reuben, a Hellenized Jew, criticises his people for taking the myths of their religion literally and Philemon replies, "Why should you care if the common people take myths literally? They have to have things to believe, and these must be simple enough for them to grasp."

"We may all stand on a common floor of myth," Reuben observes, "but among any people there are always a few who stand above the myth."  

In Jesus Came Again, the common people who are searching in great numbers for a prophesied messiah, sink in mass hysteria to the level of beasts in the presence of Joshua, a man much like Jesus with his doctrine of love. In the end he is crucified as a result of one of these scenes because, as a man identified as The Cynic explained to one of Joshua's followers, "It's not evil that people really hate. It's persons who make them conscious of the evil in themselves."

Mass hysteria and animal-like behavior become part of the religious ritual among the first century Christians depicted in A Goat for Azazel. In this story, Damon, son of a Greek father and Christianized Roman mother, travels


through the ancient world devoting his life to learning what Christianity is, that his mother could die in peace at the stake for her beliefs. He comes to see Christianity as a compilation of myths, which for him are vehicles of truth. Though he does not believe the myths, he readily accepts what he feels are the truths within them and believes that the Christian teachings will lead to a more human and compassionate mankind. It is Damon's Jewish friend, Elisha, who becomes the voice of the teacher, as he says:

Christians have their scapegoat. They call him their Lord. To his head in death they transferred their sins. Can any religion based on the scapegoat idea serve an enlightened mankind? Must it not inevitably lead to prodigious excesses of indulgence and easier and easier ways of atonement? People seek a great deal for a little and at last are unwilling to pay even that.

... Damon, my friend, do not try to see what is not there, like an orphan searching the shadows for the face of his father. If religious appeal is to the less intelligent part of mankind, then uncommon people must eventually become its servants and be forced to prostitute their talents to the common level. Mind and courage in that case will abdicate.  

By the beginning of the fourth century mind and courage have abdicated, the author indicates, in Peace Like a River (first published as The Passion Within). Christians are at this time split into many different sects, each quarreling with the others over matters of

interpretation and dogma. The story centers on a group of desert-dwelling ascetics who spend their days trying to outdo one another in self torture and who have sunk to the level of animals in their habits of personal cleanliness.

By the Middle Ages, as shown in *My Holy Satan*, the human condition has not improved, and indeed has slipped far back from the golden ages of civilization in Greece and Rome. The lot of the serf is to work from sunup to sundown, returning to spend the night with his animals, his condition not much different from theirs except that he communicates with language. Though the nobles have more leisure, they, too, are plagued by vermin and disease. Religion has taught man nothing of compassion or pity. Rather than the disinterested indifference to suffering seen among the primitive peoples of the early novels, these people take an active delight in the suffering of others. When a man on a pilgrimage presents himself at the church for a scourging, the people gather anxiously to watch.

... Sometimes a man sentenced to a long pilgrimage was scourged so many times and so violently that at the end he was only a scarred and crippled creature, with bleak eyes and a dead soul. What horrified Richard most was the delight which many Christians took in these brutal floggings. The baron and his group were shouting and applauding, the women were squealing their approval; and even in the faces of serfs and peasants Richard saw an unholy joy. What, he wondered, was the difference
between this and the Roman arenas, which the early Christians had so bitterly condemned?\textsuperscript{13}

Mankind in the twentieth century is thought to be still wandering in a bog of ancient superstition and myth. Deceived by a Puritanical idealism learned at his mother's knee, Vridar Hunter becomes increasingly disillusioned throughout his young manhood, reacting to his disillusionment more bitterly than most persons who discover the world to be far different from their childhood picture of it. At last, in early middle age he decides that his conflicts may be resolved by his delving into the past to find out from whence they have arisen. The majority of the characters that people Orphans in Gethsemane (later published as two volumes--For Passion, For Heaven and The Great Confession) are ignorant, self-seeking, greedy, and cruel. Thus, at any rate, Vridar sees them. Returning to his home in Idaho after years of study, teaching, and traveling, Vridar visits a childhood sweetheart and some other former classmates. His response to them is typical of Mr. Fisher's response to the average man in all the Testament series:

\begin{quote}
\ldots He told himself it was not her illiterate speech; it was not her look of a little old witch out of a dry forest--it was his realization that she was stupid and had always been stupid, this girl whom he had idealized.

Vridar had seen a number of his childhood classmates. Most of them looked like morons and
\end{quote}

talked like morons: no wonder they had made life such a nightmare for him—for they were only animals, these louts that he had thought were human.14

The Uncommon Man

Though the common man may retard the progress of civilization, there exist uncommon men in each generation who by virtue of their ability to see beyond the myths of their time may some day have the cumulative effect of setting mankind on the road to maturity, freedom from fear, and freedom from delusions. The artist and the scholar, Mr. Fisher indicates, can and should lead the way.

The young writer who wishes to be a serious artist, who has his eye on the next centuries as well as his own, must strive to see human beings for what they are, without their halo of myth. For we can be reasonably sure of this, that somewhere in the future, after the research is completed and the evidence is in, human nature will be clearly seen for what it is. The artist tries to anticipate the future. For all his trying he may not be able to see people as clearly as they will some day be seen but he can hope to see them much more truly than most of his fellows see them.15

Such uncommon seers of truth will reach only a small audience, "which delights in intellectual discovery and in the illicit begetting of luminous values upon the old."16


15. God or Caesar?, p. 79.

egoism, and a desirable asexual quality which makes him "a kind of hybrid, half-man and half-woman, half-woman and half-man."\textsuperscript{17} He is also a heretic because his ego wants to immortalize him and establish him as his own supreme being. Referring to the artist in \textit{God or Caesar?}, Mr. Fisher wrote: "In no other field are persons so convinced that they are the servants of heaven. In no other field are they so likely to be. Overdeveloped egoism and feelings of guilt produce both the prophet and the poet."\textsuperscript{18}

The difference between prophet and poet is that the poet (or artist) can strive to understand the origins of his guilt feelings and achieve a balance between these and his egoism, letting neither dominate the other. If he cannot do this, he will have an intolerant quality, as do the prophets of the Testament novels.

The primitive main characters of the early books in the Testament series are always described as being more intelligent than their contemporaries. For example, Wuh, in \textit{Darkness and the Deep}, discovers that a club can be used as an extension of himself and regards it as a thing with a life of its own. "It was his kind," the author observes, "in the eras ahead of him who would invent gods and people the invisible with the shadows of their fears and desires

\textsuperscript{17} \cite{god_or_caesar,p. 20.}
\textsuperscript{18} \cite{god_or_caesar?, p. 17.}
... and whose egoistic longings would induce the hypnotic trance of the visionary and insulated soul."\textsuperscript{19}

The Cro-Magnon man of superior intelligence, Gode, begins the process of peopling the invisible with shadows of his fears in \textit{The Golden Rooms}. He leads an attack on a group of Neanderthals because his vanity is outraged at the sight of the stoop-legged creatures, but he does not at the time think of them as his own kind. Yet their humanity haunts him, and leaves him with vague feelings of guilt for having killed them. He decides that there is a part of these creatures that has not died with their bodies, and returns to the site of the slaughter to bury their remains, feeling that this will keep them from wandering abroad.

By the time of the matriarchal society of \textit{Intimations of Eve}, the visible world has become subservient to the invisible. Whatever troubles plague the people are thought to be the result of malicious spirits, both human and animal. It is the young man Raven, the only one of his family group with an alert and curious mind, who comes to the conclusion that those tormented by spirits are somehow guilty. Because the women of the group are in control of such magic as is used and because one of the women houses evil spirits, which cause her constant pain, he concludes that guilt resides in women. His conclusion seems to be a

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Darkness and the Deep}, p. 192.
result of his own ego frustration and ensuing sense of guilt in a society where a man's worth is judged by his ability as a fearless hunter: Raven's talents are of a more philosophical nature.

Dove, forerunner of the prophet, in *Adam and the Serpent*, has all the qualities of Mr. Fisher's uncommon man, but having a still primitive mind lacks the ability to achieve that balance between ego needs and guilt feelings that would have made him a poet. He is slightly feminine in appearance, having a pallid complexion, over-sensual mouth, sparse beard, and large dark eyes that sometimes look soft and gentle. "He was an inoffensive man who loved peace, and so thought of himself as related to all the gentler manifestations of which the dove was to become a symbol."20 Like Raven he is a philosophical type living in a woman-dominated society where a man is valued only for his ability in the hunt. Through self-induced visions he comes to a belief in a sun-father, a male principle having been absent in the newly forming religious beliefs of his people. Also, like Raven, he believes that women are the source of evil. The women hate him for his heretical beliefs and in the end destroy him.

Once man has ascended over woman in the forerunners of the Hebrews shown in *The Divine Passion*, the uncommon

man is dealt with as two distinct types. One of these, called Rabi, has the physical characteristics ascribed to the artist by Mr. Fisher. "He was a tall thin man, with the fullness of a woman in his hips and the narrowness of a woman in his shoulders. . . . His large brown eyes were kind and whimsical." Rabi is the priest of his people and accepts his position as a semi-deity and infallible oracle; he has no intellectual equal among his people. Yet he has self doubts, too. "As a matter of fact, this priest-god, who had a searching mind, and might better have been a scientist, wondered now and then if he were a fraud." He achieves a balance that the prophet does not achieve by relying on what he realizes can be known. "He had more respect for his own mind, about which he could hope to know much, than for the minds of the gods, of which he suspected he knew nothing at all."21 The other uncommon man in this story is called Yescha. In appearance he is small, dirty, and emaciated. Scorned by the women of his clan as impotent, he strives to preserve his sense of worth by believing that all other people, and especially women, are sinful. His egoism overcomes any self doubts and makes him intolerant. This, as Mr. Fisher explains it, is his sin.

His notion of sin had been born of a feeling of separateness, of being apart from his group, of being exiled to the terrors and loneliness of the

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indrawn and self-devouring life. He had committed that sin. He had become so conscious of self that he was now banished to the small world of self. The sense of his own individuality and meaning had become a monstrous growth that filled and suffocated his mind and tortured while it could not sustain him.22

Again in the novel of King Solomon's time, The Valley of Vision, the uncommon man appears in two varieties, the one balanced and tolerant, the other imbalanced and intolerant. Solomon seeks to establish his worth by making of Israel a kingdom comparable in wealth and luxury to neighboring Egypt. Whatever doubts he has of his worthiness lead him to view his own and his people's beliefs with a critical eye and to listen with an open and eager mind as his Egyptian wife introduces him to new ideas about what God is. He does, in fact, accept her idea of God as a principle of love as opposed to his people's view of the jealous and avenging "Yah." The prophet, Ahijah, on the other hand, has no doubts either about his powers or those of his God. "Tangled and uncombed and filled with flying seeds and dust, his mane hung down his shoulders. What a striking figure he made, this prophet of Yah, his body baked a golden brown by the desert sun, his eyes, overhung by heavy brows, flashing with the holy fires in his being!"23 He sees himself as a person apart and his people

23. The Valley of Vision, p. 118.
as a people apart, and thus he resists with all his powers any of Solomon's efforts to assimilate in his kingdom any ideas or knowledge from foreign cultures.

In the turbulent times of the impact of Greek culture on the Hebrews, Philemon, a Greek physician in *The Island of the Innocent*, is the man of balance among the fanatics. On one side is Reuben, urbane and intelligent, yet so zealous in his desire to Hellenize Israel that he advocates the slaughter of those Jews who resist. On the other side is Hosah, one of the pious, whose every waking moment is governed by religious precept and ritual; to preserve these and keep them pure he is willing to give his life. When the fight comes, Philemon is forced to choose sides and so dies fighting on the side of the pious Jews—not because he accepts their beliefs but because he cannot stand the intolerance that persecutes them. Philemon has achieved that balance between his own egoism and self doubt that makes of him a rational and tolerant human being, content to see the world as he does and to allow others to believe what they must or will.

The balanced character of *Jesus Came Again* is a woman, an educated Greek and a Roman citizen. Journeying to Jerusalem to explore the rumors of a coming messiah, she meets two men whose divergent ideas lead her at last to see the truth in myths, an ability which only the uncommon persons of Mr. Fisher's novels possess. One of the men is
called Joshua. A man much like Jesus, he has also come in search of the foretold messiah and is himself taken to be the savior by people who are drawn to him through his doctrines of mercy, forgiveness, and love. The other is a philosopher, called The Cynic. It is he who says:

A messiah, you tell me. Generations will wait and die, wait and die and he will never come. . . . Grow up, be adult, learn to get along without your father and your mother. . . . Some strive for fame, some for riches; but you seek eternal life for this wretched arrangement of flesh and bones that I see before me. Have you never sensed how colossal your vanity is, how childlike your hope?  

In the end Joshua has been crucified for preaching his belief that a savior-king will come to overthrow the emperor worship of Rome, and many of his followers are saying that he has returned from the grave. But the woman Sirena sees beyond the total doubt of The Cynic and beyond the belief in a miraculous resurrection. For her Joshua is an outgrowth of humanity's need to elevate itself above its present misery, and this she does not condemn, for she shares it. When one of the women who has been following Joshua asks if the messiah will come, she replies:

No, Zillah, not that. Don't you see that he has come?--again? Can't you understand it now? He has come in the only way he will ever come--as he came a hundred or a thousand years ago; as he will come again next year, or a hundred years from now, or a thousand years hence. Don't you see? He has come, he will come again, he will

24. Jesus Came Again, pp. 78, 79.
keep coming until in this world there are no more Lucias hunting for their lost children, no more soldiers with lances by dead men in the night...25

As has been stated in the discussion of the common man, the seeker of truth in A Goat for Azazel is called Damon. He devote his life to study, traveling from place to place in the ancient world trying to fathom what it is in Christianity that can have caused his martyred mother to die in such peace. "Damon read chiefly the philosophers, including all the Greeks he could find; he took many notes, he strove with almost frantic zeal to understand the sources of myth, legend, and delusion; he related a number of things to Christian beliefs."26 (It may well be noted here that the author is clearly describing himself. In the last, autobiographical book of the Testament series he describes himself as being just such a zealous student in his pursuit of the truth behind myths and legends.)

Like the other seekers after truth, Damon is surrounded on one side by cynics and on the other by religious fanatics. Like the other uncommon men, Damon achieves a balance between doubt and belief by seeing the truths housed in myths. "There probably never was a Matthew," he says. "It doesn't matter. There probably never was a Jesus hanged on Passover eve. I see now that

25. Jesus Came Again, p. 248.

it doesn't matter. ... It's the myth that counts. The things called facts are the fences we build. Truth, what is it but our meanings housed in myths?" 27

A direct descendant of Sirena in *Jesus Came Again* is the character Helene in *Peace Like a River*. Living among desert-dwelling ascetics for two years, she decides that their belief in the wileness of the flesh is a perversion of the teachings of Jesus, and that men are responsible for it, seeking to degrade women and thereby elevate themselves above all creatures of the earth. In the end she journeys to Nicea with her friend Mark, a jolly and tolerant man. There she finds powerful bishops debating angrily over matters of doctrine and dogma and is so sickened by the sight that she leaves. Everyone is so concerned with proving this or that idea to be a fact that no one can see beyond the trivia to the truth. "Jesus taught love and forgiveness," she says to Mark.

Are these men Christians who hate and curse one another and want to kill one another? ... Either Christians love all men, including Jews, or they should forget about Jesus. You men take homoousios [sic] and bishops in their scarlet and jewels. We women will take the one in Galilee who forgave the harlot. 28

The description of Richard, with his pale, thin sensitive face, soft brown eyes, and sparse beard would be

enough to indicate that he is to be the uncommon seeker of truth in *My Holy Satan*. However, Mr. Fisher adds to the description: "There he stood, deeply afraid of the world and its people, yet fired with a will to raise himself above the level of his origins, to enrich his mind with learning, to open his soul to the light." In the end he is imprisoned and tortured by inquisitors as a heretic, a martyr dying for truth's sake.

Vridar Hunter is the last such uncommon man in the Testament series. He is also all of these uncommon men in the sense that Vridar is the author himself, who has apparently designed his uncommon men in his own image. The physical description of Vridar, for example, has much in common with those of Dove, Rabi, and Richard. He is tall and thin, with a pallid complexion, haunted large brown eyes, and small, almost delicate hands. His life, too, is dedicated to a search, as he writes to his second love in *The Great Confession*:

> I think the most important thing to come out of my tortured thinking this past year is a belief that the intellectual quest can be more exciting, for any person with the mental equipment for it, than a quest that primarily engages the emotions. If right in this, and if I can find a quest to challenge all my faculties, I shall have won a singleness of purpose to which I can cling.\(^\text{30}\)

\(^{29}\) *My Holy Satan*, p. 79.

\(^{30}\) *The Great Confession*, p. 68.
The quest becomes for Vridar a series of novels the intention of which he describes to his third wife in one of those Platonic-type dialogues with which the Testament series is rife:

I see my project, Angele dear, as an adventure in self-discovery which the intelligence of man owes to his spirit. It is my thesis that man must free himself of a vast burden of superstitions, attitudes, and cults inherited from his dark primitive past, before he can proceed to the next stage of civilization. I think that freedom from fear can never be achieved with social and economic securities and guarantees, but only by liberating the spirit of man from its ancient bondage. On that frontier of the mind I intend to be one of the first novelists--to be, if only I have the talent for it, its Meriwether Lewis. There are lights to kindle, and hills to set them on . . . .

There is no doubt that Vridar sees himself as one of those uncommon men who can lead others to see the light:

. . . all over the world were the self-idealizing--no, the timid and fearful people who refused to face the realities and look to the sources of their woes. "A few of us," Vridar said, "have to look for them and report what we see, even though they may never themselves have the courage to look; even though they may try to destroy us for looking." 32

Self-Love as Man's Driving Force

The basic force of human nature, as Mr. Fisher sees it, is self-love or "egoism." It is the driving force for all human beings, but is strongest in the uncommon man. In men it is expressed as a lust for power or as an impetus

31. The Great Confession, p. 325.
32. The Great Confession, p. 555.
toward art and philosophy, and in women "in some relationship with erotic passion." It can be a constructive force, if recognized for what it is but can also be a destructive force if extreme and allowed to dominate the personality.

In 1935 when many intellectuals both in the United States and abroad were embracing various communistic and socialistic ideologies, Mr. Fisher attacked their positions in an essay on radicalism:

They inveigh against individualism and they talk endlessly of collective welfare; but they show in nearly everything they do that they are emotionally opposed to what they intellectually preach. They are opposed because they are themselves the most egregiously individualistic of all persons on earth. They are among the most egocentric, the most in danger of excesses in paranoia; and they are all this because radicals are born of overweening self-love, of mighty ambitions denied. Nor is all this anything to be ashamed of: their individualism is the source of their ardor and their power and it must always be so. But when, failing to understand what they are and out of what they have come, they establish themselves as the prophets and priests of social betterment and preach a doctrine of collective salvation they are self-deceived and they are unwittingly dishonest.

Though a complete collectivism in society is made impossible by the individual ego's need to fulfill itself, the other extreme of the individual completely apart from society is equally disastrous to the human personality.

33. God or Caesar?, p. 194.

Extreme self-consciousness, Mr. Fisher believes, must have led to a concept of sin and a doctrine of atonement:

It was the individual, separated, and made conscious of his separateness, who strove to return to the group and the blessed nirvana of self-forgetfulness. The Prophets needed it but being unable to find it stood apart, aloof and solitary, thundering at the people about sin, depravity, and that at-one-ment which they themselves had no power to find.  

Those who avoid exploiting the weak and helpless in society do not do so because they are unselfish and have humanity's interest at heart, he stated in his essay on radicalism. It is rather that their self-love has developed in such a way that it would be affronted were such people to exploit those weaker than themselves.

The ego needs of the primitive creatures of Darkness and the Deep are relatively simple and direct. The one whose ego needs are perhaps greatest because most often thwarted is the character Wuh, a lonely bachelor whose presence is tolerated on the circumference of a family group. In one amusing scene Wuh's tremendous desire to be noticed and admired gives birth to an artist of sorts. With nothing much to do one day he begins to experiment with his mouth to see what variety of sounds he can produce. When the family group gathers around to watch and even to imitate him, he becomes ecstatic at all the attention and produces a veritable symphony of cacophonous

35. *God or Caesar?*, p. 58.
noise. Lest the point be missed, however, the author adds expository information:

He wanted to be the center of the stage, day and night, with all other persons deferring to his wishes and making room for his will. If he had known that he was squatting on an enormous world, he would have desired to boss it from pole to pole. If he had realized that there was a stupendous universe around him, he might have wished, after conquering the earth, to rule that, too. For such was the egoistic craving of him and his kind.36

Though desirous of power over their fellows and attention for themselves, however, these people did live in groups and unite for the preservation of the group when danger threatened.

Self-love is the first and only kind of love for the people of The Golden Rooms. The men love only themselves and their weapons, which they regard as extensions of themselves, and the women love only the small children who are dependent on them. When the Neanderthal people fail to realize that Harg has made fire, he sulks in self-pity, but when they do realize that he is the fire maker, he uses his discovery as a means of seizing power over the group. He becomes a tyrant, driving the other men to the perimeter of the fire and forcing them to hunt for him. Among the more advanced Cro-Magnon people self-love leads man to art and woman to meticulous care of children and home site.

Again the author is careful to explain his point as well as to illustrate it.

In men, much more than in women, there was a deep and inherited urge to alter their environment and make it conform more nearly to their sense of their own meaning. There was also a constant wish to find extensions of themselves and their power. These two urges impelled them to the lowly beginnings of art.

... The women had little interest in his art. Their way of life was more egoistically ingrown because they delivered a part of themselves into children. They found their extension in their own flesh and blood. ... . A man, freed from such duties, and lacking the deep egoistic joy of giving birth, turned to the world around him and sought there the larger meaning with which the woman was already endowed.37

Because, the author believes, there was no concept of paternity among the most primitive people, he draws as the earliest form of society a matriarchy. It is here that the male ego suffers the deprivation that leads man to a concept of sin. The main male character of *Intimations of Eve*, the young man called Raven, is chased away from the ritual preparations for a birth in his family group. Feeling himself alone and apart from the group he ponders on the mystery of the birth preparations and wonders why there is one woman among them who has never had a child. He concludes that she is in some way guilty of something, but the idea does not formulate clearly in his mind. Again the author explains his character's motives.

In the wonder of birth there was no place for a man. In the miracle of creation he was a useless spectator, an outcast, a starved and frustrated creature who was driven by his own restless hunger to try to build a creative life. He could carve images on staghorn handles or draw them on tablets of stone. He could turn in loneliness to ideas, to reverie, to philosophy, and in a later time he would turn to tyranny and enslavement and murder. He would turn to organized war and strive to make himself supreme within his artificial kingdoms.38

It is egoism that leads Rainmaker, the matriarch of her clan in *Adam and the Serpent*, to cherish "the belief that has been common to most people that her people were the chosen ones and enjoyed the special interest of the Mother."39 Though she had no concept of the universe, the author observes, she would, on being told of its size, have assumed that her people occupied the center of it. Dove, a man of extreme egoism and the central male character of this novel, like Raven in the novel before, hates the tyranny of women. Having suffered the humiliation of being publicly cursed by his wife, he comes to the conclusion that women are creatures of evil and that all evil spirits are those of women. The author again sets forth man's ego hunger and its search for satisfaction in terms that become increasingly repetitive.

... A woman gave birth. Out of her blood came one like her that belonged to her, the miracle

of her union with spirit; but a man gave no birth from his blood. He had no essential role. And so it was that he turned out of desperate need to reflection and reverie, striving to find for himself a meaning in life no less indispensable than that of women. So it was that he turned to religion and philosophy and art.

Early in man's ascension as spiritual and temporal leader of his people, as depicted in The Divine Passion, religion existed as a means of preserving the welfare of the social organism. "Of intolerance these people had no conception; nobody was driven by persecution to accept a belief for the salvation of his soul," the author observes. "Nobody was urged to accept any belief of any kind." It is the prophet Yescha (discussed previously as one of Mr. Fisher's uncommon men) with his tremendous self-consciousness who comes to a clearly defined concept of sin and of the necessity for atonement. To be sure, these people think of themselves as superior to their neighbors; war against those who worship alien gods is a sacred undertaking, and they believe that their god rides with them into battle. Women's ego-needs and their various means of satisfaction are illustrated through three principal women characters: Beth, the kind and gentle mother who finds meaning in giving of herself to others; Talitha, who finds a sense of self-importance through devotion to religious

40. Adam and the Serpent, p. 172.
41. The Divine Passion, p. 8.
ritual, and Narda, who uses her physical charm to enhance her feelings of importance. These will be discussed at greater length in Chapter III.

The balance of Solomon's personality in The Valley of Vision is a result of the fact that he recognizes his ego needs, accepts them, and makes them serve him. When his scribe compliments him on his wisdom and says that this quality will survive the ages, Solomon replies, "No, Ahiah, don't flatter me. I begin to see clearly what I am. Let's admit what we see, and then do what we can about it." In his efforts to raise Israel among the great nations by assimilating ideas and knowledge from other cultures, Solomon is constantly thwarted by the prophets of Israel with their doctrine of apartness for the chosen people. Solomon and his Egyptian wife, Khate, do not believe this doctrine and see it to be a result of vanity. "I see now what a horribly smug and conceited person you are," Khate tells a young prophet, "--and yet, it is not quite that; I suppose. You're self-deceived, deluded, bewitched by your own fantastic bigotry." It is egoism that makes the Hellenists of The Island of the Innocent want to destroy all those who will not accept Greek philosophy and culture. On the other hand, it

42. The Valley of Vision, p. 97.
43. The Valley of Vision, p. 253.
is also egoism—the sense of apartness advocated by the prophets in *The Valley of Vision*—that makes the pious Jews cling literally to the teachings of their Torah, willing to give their lives rather than allow any foreign influence. Philemon, the man of balance, recognizes that the radicalism of the Hellenists is a result of men's ego need to have others accept their beliefs, and though he does not accept the Jewish religion, he sees virtue in the Jew's devotion—a willingness of the ego to submerge itself in something greater than self. Explaining the good he sees in the devotion of the Jews, Philemon tells his Hellenist friends:

> Enriching these instructions, dramatizing them, giving them wonder and meaning are various rituals. Now all this is called religion. From another point of view it is merely a philosophy of life that protects its disciples from their natural tendencies to emotional excesses and usurpations.

> There's no God—we all agree on that; but in every man there is a god. If the man wants to think that his god is a being or power somewhere out in space I can see no harm in it—or if he wants to think it is his own conscience or his own self-consciousness. As long as he has an idea that controls the caprices and tyrannies and impulses that would make him their slave.44

> Humanity's tremendous self-consciousness leads it to a wild and hysterical pursuit of a messiah in *Jesus Came Again*. And because Joshua is a man with a god in him—a belief in the power of love—he is pursued by the people who want to believe that he is their savior. Though Joshua

44. *The Island of the Innocent*, pp. 211, 212.
has nowhere pretended to be the messiah, or to have healing powers, the people in their hysteria attribute miracles to him. His crucifixion was foreseen by The Cynic, who had observed that people destroy their gods in an effort to absorb the ideals they have created. It is all a result of vanity, The Cynic observes:

You Jews seem to have only one kind of love, love of God, which means love of self, since you have created him in your image. Love your neighbor as yourself, yes, but first convert him to your prejudices. I love you, a man says to a woman, because you understand me. I love God, says Joshua, because he is a father who watches over me. But don't you people ever love anything that doesn't promote your love of self?

It is the ego's refusal to accept death that leads the early Christians of A Goat for Azazel to die willingly as martyrs believing that their glory will be greater in the life hereafter. Damon, the scholar who has sought for an answer to the riddle of the Christian's devotion throughout his life, himself dies a Christian at last realizing the ego's need to submerge itself in something greater than self. In the book on the religion of the Christians that he has spent his life writing, he says of the Christian gospels:

Do we not have here, essentially, the old, old cry, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? The lonely lament of unhappy and fearful people who cry daily to the heavens for some proof that this wretched life with its

45. Jesus Came Again, p. 112.
injustice, its inequities, its terrors is not all that the babe is born to, who did not ask for this life or come into it by his own will. I can understand the cry with its burden of sadness and loneliness, for I am nearing my end; and although I do not believe these things, yet with what reluctance, almost with what bitter outcry, I shall go down to my grave!46

The difference between fulfillment of man's and woman's ego-needs is again emphasized. There is on the one hand Damon's wife Ayla, who wants to settle, to build a nest, to rear her children in peace, and on the other hand there is Damon, restlessly traveling through the world in search of something greater than himself.

The difference in ego fulfillment for man and for woman becomes the focal point of the story in *Peace Like a River*. In his feverish attempt to become something greater than he was, the author indicates, man went to extremes in denial of his physical self in the form of the Christian ascetic. In doing so he not only perverted his own nature, but also attempted to pervert the better nature of woman—that quality that makes of her a creator and preserver of life. Woman, the ascetics say, is the gateway to Hell, a deceiver and betrayer of man who was created pure in the image of God. Helene, the central character of the story, refuses to accept this view and in her bitter denunciation of it symbolizes the result of what centuries of patriarchy

have done to women. Why, she asks, do these ascetics practice self-torture and condemn women as wicked? One of them tells her that they seek godliness.

She snorted at him. She hissed and sneered at him. She wanted to pick up a handful of sand and throw it in his face. "All right, Agios out there on one leg is the image of God. I'll take the rose and the lily, the figtree in fruit, the rainbow in the mist, a mother nursing her child."47

Later she says:

I still believe in Jesus, the gentle Jesus who understood women; but I don't believe a lot of stuff these Christians believe. Neither did Jesus. He never believed that the love that produces a child is from Satan. He never believed that a woman should be filled with shame at the thought that she's a woman.

... How wonderful that we can have a child in our own body! Maybe that's what's wrong with men. They're envious. All they can do is to go ranting around, trying to create out of their mouths.48

In spite of their attempts to deny the flesh, the ascetics of this story do not rid themselves of ego needs. In fact their trials in self-denial take on a kind of contest aspect in which each tries to outdo the other. When one of the monks purposely places himself in the way of temptation and transgresses, another not only rejoices in his fellow's weakness but also refuses to try to help him overcome the terrible guilt that ensues.

47. Peace Like a River, p. 97.

48. Peace Like a River, pp. 197, 198.
By the time of the early thirteenth century in My Holy Satan, the ego of man has completely enmeshed in doctrine and dogma the teachings of Jesus, leading to the atrocities of the Inquisition. Hillel, an enlightened Jew, voices the author's view when he comments that arrogance is the greatest of all sins because it is a sin of the mind rather than of the passions. The spirit of inquiry, he observes, breeds humility, whereas dogmas breed arrogance. Of life he says:

Yes, there's some sweetness, there's a little light. But under these is the immense struggle between human wills and passions, the engulfing powers of rapacity and greed and sloth and vanity—a struggle that goes on all over the earth. There'll never be many men perhaps who will dare hell and tyranny to try to light a torch.49

To this point in the Testament novels, the author has indicated that extreme self-consciousness and a sense of separateness led to the concepts of sin and atonement. However, in the final novel, The Great Confession, Mr. Fisher now suggests that the different ego manifestations of the two sexes—each incomplete in itself—may have led to these concepts. The occasion for comment arises when Vridar Hunter's book about Jesus is turned down by a New York publisher. Vridar types the following on a note card:

It may possibly be that it is not separation, as Carpenter so eloquently argues, that has produced the concept of sin and all its expiation rites; nor so much self-consciousness that has

produced the need of at-one-ment, as the sense of incompleteness in each sex, because it is only a part of the whole. . . . Is it not significant that the Jews of all people have been most separate, who have been most deeply troubled by a sense of sin? Is their Motherless condition not part of it? 50

Vridar then concludes that the trouble with society is that people are fixed in childhood by their fear and hate of the Father symbol imposed on them by a tyrannical patriarchy; and that thus women have had little to do with the development of art, philosophy, and religious systems. This great problem for the Western world, then, is seen to revolve around the different and opposite ego manifestations in male and female. Had Mr. Fisher's Solomon won out, the world would be an entirely different kind of place:

"If Solomon--the Solomon of my story--had won," Vridar said one day to Angele, "we'd not now have so stifling a triumph of patriarchy, a wifeless and sonless Father; nor the shameful down-the-centuries degradation of women, under both Judaism and Christianity; nor the kind of world we have now . . . ." 51

The Drive for Race Preservation

Although the picture of humanity painted in these twelve books of the Testament of Man series is generally a gloomy one, the author insists that he has been neither a cynic nor a misanthrope. In one of the American Book Collector articles he wrote:

50. The Great Confession, p. 483.

Certain people, clinging in fear to old forms, obsolete ideas, and closed systems, have called me a misanthrope. Others have called me a cynic and atheist. They should have gone back with me. I have spent many years back there, and all along the way found evidence not only of man's grievous errors and infinite capacity to make a fool or brute of himself, but also of his potential for growth and greatness.52

The inquiring mind of his Solomon and the love and compassion of his Jesus figure, Joshua, he points out, are examples of this potential for growth and greatness. There are other examples, which revolve around what might be called a drive for race preservation.

There is a feeling of fellowship in the presence of danger and death which motivates Wuh in *Darkness and the Deep* to defend an old man who is being attacked by flesh-eating birds. The instinct for race preservation also leads the males of the family group to guard the women and children against danger.

The Cro-Magnon man's recognition of the Neanderthal as something somehow human in *The Golden Rooms* haunts his dreams after he has killed them. It was not man's instinct to kill his own kind, the author observes, but to hunt for food or to fight for survival.

An old man strangles on a fish bone, and this obviously brazen attack by an evil spirit terrifies the primitive people of *Intimations of Eve*, causing them to

52. "Vardis Fisher Comments on His Testament of Man Series," p. 36.
band spiritually and physically closer together. In such times when the lonely and terrified individual submerged himself in the greater security of the group, the author notes, persons looked at one another with warmth and something akin to affection in their eyes.

The drive for race preservation is also represented in the sex drive. In one of the many authorial asides of Adam and the Serpent the author writes:

... In a long-ago time the cell had divided and had become the two sexes; in all the ages since then the divided cell has subconsciously striven to unite, to be whole again, to be one. In the sexual act it strains toward this completeness, and the half of the cell that is male or female sometimes feels that it has achieved oneness and is then deeply happy, for it is no longer lost, no longer oppressed by its burden of loneliness, by its incompleteness in a world where all things are divided yet hunger to be absorbed and made one.  

Mass dancing, too, is a manifestation of the drive for unity and preservation, and there are many incidents throughout the Testament books wherein people begin to dance in times of great emotional stress. Again by exposition, the author explains this phenomenon in The Divine Passion: "They were trying to assimilate themselves into the larger truth of which they felt themselves to be the lonely and scattered parts. Taking off their garments was a symbolic act, indicating the suspension of the individual during his absorption by the group."

53. Adam and the Serpent, p. 171.
54. The Divine Passion, p. 38.
As religion turns more toward the salvation of the individual in the remaining books of the series, the drive to preserve group welfare and solidarity gives way to the sense of separateness which the author links with the concept of a chosen people, solitary and apart. When the enlightened world citizen, who was the author's Solomon, was defeated by provincialism, in the person of the prophet, the religion that would largely shape the Western world began to lead its followers into a series of evasions from which, the author maintains, we have yet to escape.

55. See the discussion of Self-Love as Man's Driving Force, p. 34.
CHAPTER III

MAN'S EVASION OF TRUTH

With his division of humanity into those who seek truth and those who evade truth, Vardis Fisher sets out to show that religion—especially the Judaic-Christian tradition—is the chief instrument by which man seeks to evade truth. Thus, he says, the Judaic-Christian tradition has set up a Father and a Son symbol, to which mankind has subjugated itself in a state of perpetual childhood, abdicating all sense of its own moral responsibility. Women, having had little to do with the development of the system, have been placed in an inferior position in society—a position from which they are just beginning to emerge.

Religion as an Escape from Reality

Mr. Fisher has long insisted that religion, Christianity in particular, has outlived its usefulness for modern society. His non-fictional attack on religion is most concentrated in the collected essays, The Neurotic Nightingale, published in 1935. A concept of sin, he suggests in the title essay, is an incentive to fornication and guilt, making the forbidden fruit the most desirable. By contriving a concept of sin, he adds in "How's Your
Sense of Humor?," man sought to repress his animal nature—a repression which has led to more brutality than man's true nature would ever have developed. "We are taught," he wrote, "that humanity is, for the most part, sympathetic and unselfish and charitable, and that it prefers truth to superstition, generosity to greed. We are taught that it is not brutal, and that rape and robbery and murder are no more natural to it than fungus is to a marble wall."¹ This view of humanity is, in his opinion, quite unrealistic.

Man, Mr. Fisher asserts is the most greedy, brutal, and selfish animal on earth. He then points out that man has so little respect and love for peace that he still devotes his most ingenious efforts, manhood, and wealth to slaughter.

Such modern problems as persecution of Jews in Germany and of Negroes in the United States and elsewhere, Mr. Fisher declares, are the results of man's efforts to repress the animal side of his nature. "They are all violent revulsions against puritanism and what puritanism has done to us," he wrote in "Some Implications of Radicalism."

And this periodic need to express ourselves in vigorous action, and to fulfill our racial memory and our heritage, is in my opinion the chief reason why we plot wars while preaching peace.

¹ The Neurotic Nightingale, p. 24.
It would seem that our repressions could be directed to more constructive ends and in many persons of intelligence and sensitivity they are. When a group or a nation is concerned, however, we have the sort of orgy, the sort of wholesale catharsis, that we have recently witnessed in Germany.  

The development of a sense of irony has been for some persons a defense mechanism seeking balance between what man is and what he is wishfully thought to be. However, this sense of irony is not a solution, the author concludes in "How's Your Sense of Humor?" In a long-ago time before superstition and fear gave birth to religion man struggled in a real and natural world; he did not call on gods to protect or avenge him. "We had no need of irony because we demanded no privileges and pretended to no virtues which we did not have. But as we have become self-conscious we have also become self-pitying, and in support of our vanity we have gathered a vast amount of nonsense."  

The attitude that religion is an "opiate for the masses" is frequently stated in God or Caesar? "The world over," Mr. Fisher wrote, "the common people seem to need dogmas which stand superior to and are indifferent to the realities." Those who intended to write popular fiction, he said, would do well to keep in mind that "as long as the bitter struggle endures between the moribund churches and a

2. The Neurotic Nightingale, pp. 43, 44.

resuscitated emperor-worship that passes under the name of Communism it seems likely that books will be popular that promote faith in old dogmas and hope for another and better life." 4

The real Garden of Eden exists in the Testament of Man series in the most primitive times when man lived in and dealt with only the natural world that his senses could see and touch. To be sure it was a difficult life with man at the mercy of the elements, predatory animals, and disease, but his mind was free at least to cope with his problems without any paralyzing fear of the supernatural.

Like the Biblical Garden of Eden, the jungle of Darkness and the Deep also has its snake. In the early part of the story an old woman is fallen upon and devoured by a huge python. Not as yet having weapons, her family group can do nothing but shout and try to frighten the reptile away. They fear the snake, but their fear is of a natural enemy— they do not regard it as anything with supernatural powers. Later having discovered the use of a club, the young man of the family comes upon a second python devouring a deer, and he attacks and kills it, thereafter feeling a great source of strength and pride in the fact that he has conquered what was once a mortal enemy. However, when these people are faced with tragedy

that they can neither understand nor control, they are led by their fear to a kind of prayer. Finding the charred remains of their own kind in the aftermath of a forest fire, they begin a lamentation that approaches supplication. The author observes:

They were uttering more than sounds of woe. Their mournful lament was also a kind of entreaty, a supplication, a prayer to all the unpitying forces in the world that attacked and destroyed. They felt chastened and humbled and defenseless. If they had been a little more imaginative, they might have striven in a spirit of sacrificial giving to placate and appease those terrible enemies, thunder and flame; but they could only cry out of grief and abasement and the superstitious loneliness of their heritage.5

That killing of their own kind was not the way of such primitive people, except in self-defense or mating rivalry, is shown in the haunting sense of guilt felt by the Cro-Magnon man who had led the slaughter of the Neanderthals in The Golden Rooms. So haunted is Code by the memory of his deed that he is led to an unconscious act of atonement. Again the snake is an instrument of death but is still a natural enemy. Hearing the cries of some birds that have been captured by snakes, Code is reminded of the cries of the Neanderthal people during the slaughter. He kills the snakes and frees the birds, but his dreams are still haunted by a vision of the Neanderthal women struggling in vain to protect their babies. The fear

that his recurring dream instills in Gode leads him to a kind of prayer and starts mankind on the pathway toward a belief in the supernatural that will come to dominate his life. Thus the story ends:

... The visible world has been all that a man could face; the invisible world was more than he could bear.

He knelt, shuddering, with his head bow’d; and he began to sob... Gode was weeping, and it was the first time a woman had ever heard her man weep. He was not weeping with tears; he had no such blessed relief as tears can give. He was making the dry terrible sound of a man choked by terrors, of a man driven by unutterable dread to abase himself in the strangled and heartbroken humility of what in its own way was the first human prayer.6

Thus far in the series, the author has let the story illuminate his theme that religion offers man an escape from reality, a way of relinquishing his own responsibility in the face of disaster. However, with Intimations of Eve, Mr. Fisher's enthusiasm to impart ideas clearly, again leads him to exposition either through his own words directly or through the dialogues of his characters. The story opens with a man wandering lost in a dream. He is terrified, not by fear of natural enemies so much as by spirits. The sounds he hears are not the sounds of beetle wings but the ghosts of dead forest creatures which could attack in multitudes. "For him and for his people all the ills of life, all its sorrows and

sickness and famine and blight, and all the terrifying manifestations of lightning and flood and storm," the author writes, "was [sic] the vengeful work of ghosts or the anger of the Moon Woman." He goes on to explain that any accident or misfortune that befell these people was thought to be the work of evil spirits, that they never blamed themselves even when misfortune was a result of carelessness on their part.

The point has been made, but the author summarizes it again instead of allowing his story to carry it along:

Long ago, before deciding that living things had a soul and that the soul survived physical death, human beings had lived in a happier and more carefree time. The only world they knew then was the visible world. Then they had been afraid only of things they could see. In that faraway time they had used their minds as well as they were able, and sought the truth, and striven to determine the logical relationships of cause and effect. The explanation of all baffling things they had looked for in natural phenomena. There was no superstition in them, no dependence on magic, no notions of good and evil as absolute values, and no fixed and harrowing anxiety in regard to the present or the future. In their own simple way they had all been scientists in a world where all things could be explained by one with enough knowledge. In that time, and only in that time, have human beings been free.

After they came by the notion of the soul and of the ghost that survived the dead body, they entered the long terrifying night of spiritual bondage, the end of which is not yet . . . 8

The snake in this slowly evolving Garden of Eden takes on a supernatural quality in *Adam and the Serpent*. It has become a phallic symbol—a form taken by spirits in order to mate with mortal women. It is this idea, the author takes care to point out, that led to the tempting of Eve in the Biblical myth. "... the snake alone of all creatures in the world was immortal. Periodically it sloughed its aging self, but it never died. The Great Mother, who in a later time was to be known by some people as Eve, was also immortal, and between her and the serpent, as Dove perceived for a long while, there was a strange and mysterious relationship."\(^9\)

Though religion in this matriarchy was like all religion an attempt to escape reality, "to lighten and relieve the intolerable care of human life," it was practiced on a very practical level. This, in Mr. Fisher's opinion, was caused by a basic difference of attitude toward religion in men and women. "Women have been and still are more devout and constant at a practical level—at the level of birth and pain and death; whereas men, even from ancient times, have been metaphysicians."\(^{10}\) The idea of sacrificing one's god in order to partake of his qualities occurs in this story when one of the young men of the tribe kills and

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eats a hawk, which is for him a symbol of daring and power. The author comments that people have always believed they could eat their gods if they did so piously. Sacrifice for the purpose of appeasing a god's anger occurs quite by accident one dreadful night when the skies are lighted by an unusual number of falling stars. The would-be prophet of the story assumes that the father spirit he has conceived of is throwing the Great Mother out of the sky. Overjoyed, he dances and sings, so angering the tribal matriarch that she kills him with a club. The stars mysteriously stop falling and the matriarch concludes that the death of the heretic must somehow have appeased the anger of the Great Mother. Religion has already become an evasion of reality; it is now beginning to foster brutality beyond the natural inclination of the amoral, primitive man seen thus far.

The Divine Passion begins with a human sacrifice—that of a first-born son. Worshipping the sun and fearing that he should die during his long winter battle with the forces of the underworld, the people offer him all their first fruits to sustain him in his struggle. Their fear that their god might not survive, the author points out in an aside, had developed in them malicious, vengeful and cruel traits, which would in time become sanctified as the conscience strove to justify them.
Their concept of deity had reacted upon their natural goodness; for their gods, like themselves were envious, vindictive, often petty, often malicious, always jealous—and it was logic, not cruelty, that impelled them to offer sacrifices; it was an unhappy understanding of themselves that prompted them to come bearing gifts, to praise and to flatter; and it was the terror and desolation of their lot that dropped them to their knees in prayer.11

When these people at last go to war against a neighboring tribe, they do so in the name of their god. All wars were holy wars, the author remarks; they were wars in which a chosen people by virtue of their superiority took what was rightfully theirs.

Holy wars and their brutality are commonplace in the time of Solomon. In The Valley of Vision Mr. Fisher describes how the Assyrians marched into battle carrying their god and goddess Asshur and Ishtar before them, and how they proudly carved in stone records of the tortures they inflicted upon their prisoners. Even Solomon has no pity on the weary and starving Canaanite slaves who walk beside his beast to shelter him from the sun on his journey to Egypt. He regards them as an accursed and inferior people fit only to serve and die. The influence of the Egyptian princess softens him somewhat so that later after conquering the people of Gezer he takes them as slaves instead of killing them. It is Yah's prophet, Ahijah, who

11. The Divine Passion, p. 36.
tells the king that he must offer the men prisoners on altars to Yah and destroy all the remaining women and children.

It is against intolerance and brutality in the name of an ideal that Philemon and his female counterpart, Judith, fight in The Island of the Innocent. Mr. Fisher's theme of what evasion has done to humanity is expressed through several of the many dialogues in the book. Philemon sees no difference between the Hellenist's devotion to his philosophy and the Jew's devotion to his religion when both result in a wish to destroy all those whose beliefs differ from their own. "Most Greeks were as much the slave of the city-state as Jews are of their deity," he tells a Hellenist friend. "Which is worse, to be enslaved by government or religion?" 12

In one of those Platonic-type dialogues mentioned before, Judith begins to see the light as Philemon answers her questions:

"Why do people want to kill people?"
"The philosophers have never answered that."
"Why do they want to torture them?"
"That's a worse riddle still."
"Are people as bad as they seem to be?"
"Maybe not. Maybe it's their beliefs that make them bad."
"But if the right to believe is good, but the belief is bad?"
"That's another riddle."
"It's not that people really believe," said Judith looking at him. "It's just that they have

12. The Island of the Innocent, p. 68.
emptiness and loneliness to fill up. Isn't it so?"
"Darling, don't ask me these things. I'm not a wise man."
"The wise men know nothing. They're just a little more clever in filling up the emptiness."
Philemon smiled. "I'll agree to that."
"People want other people to believe as they believe. Why?"
"Oh, maybe so they'll feel a little less lonely in their emptiness."
"When I first knew you I hated you. I know now why. I hated you because I thought you had contempt for my beliefs and my people. But if our beliefs are illusions, yet we love people who believe as we do, that doesn't make a very nice thing of love, does it? Why do you smile?"
"Darling, because you're so very serious."
"That's another funny thing," said Judith, looking at his eyes. "The fewer illusions people have the more they smile at seriousness. So the very wise person, who had no illusions, would be serious about nothing." 13

(This last statement brings to mind the author's view that many people develop a sense of irony in an effort to achieve a balance between what man is and what he is thought to be.)

In the cruel and brutal world of Jesus Came Again Joshua tries to teach people to seek their own better nature, to love their neighbor, to lay up the treasure of good deeds on earth, to judge their fellow man as they would be judged. But the masses do not want lessons in moral responsibility; they want a savior who will deliver them from their wretched condition, and they demand

miracles and signs. Wherever Joshua speaks, the throngs that gather to hear him break into riots. In the end he pays with his life for having tried to give his people a nobler idea of themselves and their god.

The concept of repentance as the qualification for forgiveness of sin is seen as a purely Christian phenomenon by Mr. Fisher—a concept that leads to more evasion and abdication of moral responsibility. An old philosopher first voices this opinion to Damon, the protagonist of A Goat for Azazel. Christians, he says, have only to cry repentance and to believe in order to enter Heaven; good deeds have little to do with it. Later Damon reacts violently to Luke's story of the prodigal son in language that sounds much more like twentieth century Vardis Fisher than first century Damon:

... Being a lost sheep is a pretty attractive proposition: you can eat your cake and then get another for having eaten it. You can indulge in every lust in the human frame—and heaven will sing for you. You say this wickedness became good? How do you know? Maybe he was only rolling his old man for another stake. Wouldn't it be a good thing to hold back on the feast and the singing until we're sure this punk really means it?

... This fascinated obsession with wickedness will lead you into bigger and bigger wars. How can it help it? I can hear the loud hosannas when the last libertine, pooped out and sick with his own gluttonies, goes back to papa. What reason is there to be good?—if you can have a life of pleasure and in an hour of penitence not only save your soul but get the feast and
the singing? What would the philosophers say to that?\textsuperscript{14}

The fourth century ascetics of \textit{Peace Like a River} have made a cult of repentance and in so doing have provided that incentive to fornication and guilt of which the author wrote in \textit{The Neurotic Nightingale}. There is one among the monks, for example, who believes that he can sanctify women by seducing them and does seduce several nuns including his own daughter. There is another among these ascetics who sees that their withdrawal from life is a perversion of nature. Thus the author speaks through the character Helene, a woman who loves the beautiful things of the world and who longs for a husband and children of her own. God is in the things of this world, in a mother with her child, she says, as over and over again she voices her wrath and indignation against men and their concept of an aloof and forbidding God who would demand a sterile existence of his children.

\ldots The power of God is something women know but that men like you will never know. It's not rituals or sacraments or a dismal self-righteous face; and it's not the arrogance of bishops and church fathers, nor the childishness of men who call themselves saints. It's not in Agios out there, thinking with outlandish antics to win God's approval. \ldots There's some of it in Mark, but I see none of it in Ida and her wretched nuns who have denied their holiest calling. God is out here in the desert, not in me, oh no, not in me; but he's in your daughter

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{A Goat for Azazel}, pp. 139, 140.
The Christian denial of the importance of temporal life and the emphasis on salvation of the immortal soul leads at last to the horrors of the Inquisition in My Holy Satan, the last of the Testament books to deal with historical times. It is a time, as the author describes it, when reason has so abdicated its position to belief and superstition that anyone who dares use his mental faculties for questioning is accused of heresy. The heresies for which Richard is to be tried are his beliefs that when a scientific opinion and a Church belief conflict, it should be determined by man which is the truth; that Christians had taken teachings from the holy books of the Jews; and that women were of the same order of creation as men.

Through the character of the student Richard the author states his familiar theme that man's religious delusions lead to brutalities beyond anything that true human nature could conceive.

He understood now in his woe that the inquisitor was not really an evil man. That was what made it so terrible. He saw himself as a very good and holy man, a man who wanted to save other souls as well as his own; a kind of angry and impatient and frustrated father, wearied by the stupid stubbornness of heretics who would blindly damn themselves to eternal torments rather than confess their errors and come to God. It was his duty and his unpleasant task to save them. . . . That was the

15. Peace Like a River, p. 234.
only way he could look at it once he accepted all the Church's dogmas as infallible and changeless truth. The matter for him was very simple: man had fallen, God had revealed all truth to the Christians, it was there, it was to be accepted without doubts or questions. If you did not accept all of it you were headed for hell and your more determined brothers were determined to save you, as a great kindness. How could they force you except with torture? If persuasion and pleading failed what could they do but burn your flesh off and break your bones?16

The last of the Testament novels, dealing with modern times, is Orphans in Gethsemane. In its most recent edition it has been published in two volumes—For Passion for Heaven and The Great Confession. The former may be considered a presentation of the conflicts that generations of illusions have implanted in the protagonist, Vridar Hunter. The latter is the story of his continuing struggle to realize and overcome these conflicts. As mentioned previously, the work is autobiographical.

The Vridar Hunter shown in For Passion for Heaven is the product of a rigidly puritanical upbringing. He is taught that good people are generous, kind, and unselfish and that all women are chaste and refined and must always be treated with great respect. Yet his earliest remembrances of the rough pioneer farm life into which he has been born are of greedy people who take rather than give and of brutality in human beings toward animals and toward

one another. His adolescent preoccupation with sex fills him with such guilt feelings that he can scarcely communicate with women. His attempt to make of his first wife the pure, ethereal creature he has been taught to believe women are leads at last to her suicide. The conflict between what he has been taught and what he sees the world to be leaves him an intensely self-conscious, self-concerned individual.

As he seeks to understand himself in The Great Confession, he comes to his belief that all of his problems, indeed the problems of the whole Western world, are rooted in the Judaic-Christian tradition from which Western society has sprung. Early in this volume he says to his second wife:

... What a thing I am, overborne and nearly choked by this heavy Hebrew and Christian heritage of evasion. What a fraud! I'm pretty thoroughly damned sick of him. The poor, stupid thing, ashamed to be decent. The gargantuan imbecile, emotionally. An emotional halfwit, that's what. An emotional illiterate.

... That's it—an emotional illiterate; and I suspect now that emotional illiteracy is the trouble with the whole damned Christian world. Oh, I have an intimation of it now!17

As Vridar immerses himself in the writing of a series of historical novels, in which he intends to probe the psychological origin and development of man, he decides that the trouble with the human race is that it is fixed

17. The Great Confession, p. 34.
in, as he terms it, "childness." For centuries, as he sees it, humanity has been clinging to a God-father image, in which a mother symbol has had very little influence. The twentieth century for him is a transitional period in which humanity, devastated by two World Wars and impending annihilation, has lost faith in its ancient symbols and is scurrying about in search of a substitute for its dying religion. Lost without his illusions and his father symbol, man turns to such religion substitutes as Communism, or flees back to the shelter of "moribund churches," or turns to alcoholism and insanity.

By now Vridar has married for the third time--having been unable to live with his second wife's mysticism, her devotion to the teachings of the gospels. The third wife proves an eager student--as were Khate to Solomon, Judith to Philemon, Sirena to Joshua, Ayla to Damon, and Elienor to Richard in so many of the preceding novels of the Testament series. Again the author's thematic material is set forth through a series of Platonic-type dialogues with very little action or plot interfering, except that the characters occasionally pour a drink or light a cigarette.

He went over to kiss her and then resumed his talking. Mankind's job, as he now saw it, was to grow up and stand on its feet, without wailing to Papa. "That means without Aquinas or Joseph Smith, Stalin, Hitler, or Roosevelt, Isaiah or Paul or the Pope. Religion is a
private and sensitive matter, for anyone sensitive enough to be religious. The rest of it is theology and the orphanage.

"Lorelei, as children we stagger through life, carrying the dreadful burden of misinformation and superstition from our parents--their prejudices, phobias, compulsions, illusions, and all their myths and legends; and we never get out of it. Scores of writers have called this nation adolescent. I'll find a better word for it. I haven't been able to see much adulthood in the Judean-Christian world."18

Religion and the Degradation of Women

Man's frantic escape from reality in the form of religious systems he has devised has resulted, according to the author, in one major casualty--woman. Her position in life, through religious attitudes developed by men, has been that of an inferior being--a position from which she is just now beginning to emerge. "The way men degraded women in ancient times," Mr. Fisher wrote in 1953, "and later under the Christians constitutes the most revolting chapter in human history. You must understand it if you would understand women today and their rebelliousness."19

The bitch-heroine of modern fiction, he related, is an outgrowth of a hundred centuries of degradation of woman by man. She is frigid, a vampire, and a hellcat, seeking to destroy the one who has debased her yet unaware of the source of her motivation. On the other hand, he observed,

19. God or Caesar?, p. 188.
marriage is still her fortress economically and is biologically the nest. It is "a refuge, such as it is, from the contempt of the patriarchal age, persisting through the Semites down through Paul and the Fathers to the private opinion today of many orthodox male Christians."  

In *The American Book Collector* Mr. Fisher asserted that the male's emergence to a position of power in the social scheme brought with it the pre-eminence of the Son-symbol and the concept of war as a divine instrument while the daughter sank below the consciousness "of even the major poets." The lack of a mother symbol in ancient Hebraic religious thought, he indicates, has been a great detriment to the development of the race.

Judaism and Christianity, for all their professed rapport with the supernatural, are largely an idealization of the family relationship, with nearly all the emphasis on the male side (where is the daughter?).... The refusal of the prophets to accept a divine mother (I still don't know and no man seems to know why) has produced a schizoid Western world.... How depressing to contemplate a patriarchy so inflexible and tyrannical, under the Hebrews and for centuries under the Christians, that women were denied their rightful place!  

The development of this theme of woman's degradation in the Testament series closely parallels that of the

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20. *God or Caesar?*, p. 199.

uncommon man in that women characters in the novels tend to be stereotypes who reflect the author's view. In addition to this method, Mr. Fisher again uses the familiar authorial asides and some rather transparent dialogue. An examination of the degradation theme in each of the novels will show how it enters again and again, stated and re-stated.

The women of the first three novels are represented as in their natural sphere--different from but not thought inferior to their male counterparts. Eve is in her garden here, unfettered by taboos and impositions of guilt. Her driving force, her whole being is turned outward toward the care of her children. Indeed, a woman's love for her dependent children is the only kind of love that exists. It is an extension of this instinctive mother love that leads the barren and socially ostracized Ghoo of Darkness and the Deep to adopt and care for a retarded dwarf. She goes without food so that he may eat and finally loses her life trying to protect him.

The self-sacrificing mother is to become a symbol of woman's most ennobling quality throughout the Testament series. In addition to the example of Ghoo, the author frequently remarks on the extent of woman's instinctive motherliness. One such observation occurs after these primitives find the remains of their own kind in the aftermath of a forest fire:
Ka-ka reached the mountain and led the way up until they were again safe but she did not go at once in search of food. She still suffered from grief and shock. Sitting on a stone shelf, with Who-ah and the children around her, she stared out across the burned waste, remembering the dead ones she had seen there. Mother love was a deep and anxious emotion. It was almost the only meaning a woman had. No matter what she did, whether it was sexual embrace, the gathering of food, the making of a bed, or only the calm watching of children at play, her concern and her labor were for her offspring and her life was given to them. In thinking now of the destroying power of flame, she had only the children in mind.22

This all-embracing motherliness gives woman a more utilitarian approach to life. She keeps those things for which she sees a practical use and discards everything else. This is why she tends to remain aloof from man's interest in art, philosophy, and religion. Thus when Wuh, the uncommon man of Darkness and the Deep, discovers the use of a club his intelligent helpmate, Murah, learns immediately to use it, too. She remembers its use when Wuh, attracted by other interests, seems likely to forget it. The club adds to Wuh's sense of power, making him more aggressive, but to Murah it means security and peace--qualities, the author observes, that were important to a mother. The intelligent helpmate--different from but not inferior to her mate--becomes another familiar character in the Testament series. Always feminine, never aggressive, she becomes in later novels a convenient sounding board for

her uncommon man's ideas. She may not, because of her utilitarian point of view, always understand him, but she is there with womanly insights and a sympathetic ear.

The roots of compassion are shown in the embracing motherliness of the Cro-Magnon women of *The Golden Rooms*. Perhaps remembering how a wolf puppy followed him home after he had killed its mother, Code takes back to his cave a Neanderthal baby orphaned in the slaughter of its people. He does not think of it as his own kind though he sees a resemblance. The women, however, immediately adopt the child, cooing over it and nursing it without even noticing that it is different from their own children.

Women's practicality is again noted by the author when one of the Neanderthal men demonstrates his knowledge of firemaking to his people. The men of the group withdraw in terror, but the women immediately sense that this phenomenon can be put to good use. The author observes:

> The women paid no heed to them or to Harg; they acted as if they had used fire all their lives. For the world around them as all the strange things in it they did not feel the bewilderment or awe or terror which men felt— or in any case they felt it less oppressively and constantly. For them things were to be used in devotion to their children, and they divided the world into what could be used and what could not be used, feeling friendly toward the one and indifferent toward the other. Fire warmed them; they liked it, and intended to keep it. They did not think of it, at least not chiefly, as a mysterious and a dreadful thing.23

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This intense practicality of woman, this devotion to children, home, and stability is so opposed to the exploring, aggressive nature of man that the two natures begin to conflict openly in *Intimations of Eve*. Dissatisfied with his solitary position as hunter and food gatherer, the young man Raven tries time and time again to enter into the ritualistic practices of the women in order to achieve a more important position in his family. One day he offers the blood of a falcon to a pregnant girl, believing that it will make the baby strong and courageous. He seems to forget that the flesh and blood of predatory animals is abhorred by the women, especially by those who are carrying babies. The old matriarch's angry reaction to his gift alienates him ever further from his group and leads him to increasing contempt for women and their ways. Thus the author has prepared for the fall of Eve; in an authorial aside he comments:

So it was then and so it has always been: some of the deepest interests and emotional hungers of men and of women have been in ceaseless conflict. Women have sought the ways of peace and gentleness, and to nourish and protect their children they have turned to such symbols as the dove; but men have been lured to the adventurous paths, to the hazards, to the frontiers—and to such symbols as the eagle, the falcon, and the wolf.24

In addition to a basic conflict of natures between men and women, Mr. Fisher indicates that primitive ignorance

of the function of the female cycle has also contributed to the degradation of woman, to the attachment to her of guilt. In *Intimations of Eve* people regarded blood as the essence of life and thought that a woman in her menses was for some inexplicable reason squandering life's essence. There was no guilt attached to women, however. As Adam begins his ascendance in *Adam and the Serpent* the author indicates that the mystery has taken the form of a taboo. "the words 'pure' and 'impure' referred solely to the condition of a woman out of or in her menses; and when impure, no woman was allowed to touch food or clothes or children, or even to approach close to these things. She was as ostracized as one driven forth under a terrible curse."25

The prophet, Dove, is another like Raven who seeks to elevate himself to a position of importance in a matriarchal society. In so striving, he comes to the idea that the Sun is a great father chased constantly across the sky by the vengeful moon mother, who is the source of all evil spirits. Women, he concludes, are her agents on earth and are also a source of evil and misfortune. Not content, however, with showing the possible origins of such an idea and allowing the next novel to show its consequences, the author explains in an aside:

Wholly unknown to him was the fact that his new truths would lead to a major revolution in human affairs, build great religions, strengthen the accursed ambivalence of the divided cell, and place women in that bondage to male sublimations from which they have not yet escaped anywhere in the world. Adam was entering his kingdom, bewildered by his metaphysics and terrified by his gods. 26

With Adam in control of government and religion in *The Divine Passion*, the women of the Testament series begin to fit certain stereotyped patterns as they react to their abasement and inferior position. One such character, as has been mentioned above, is the eternal mother, in this novel called Beth. With Adam's ascendance she has become a spiritless and servile creature who accepts her lot, asking only that she might devote herself to her home and children. Accepting her inferior position she agrees that women must be of a lower order than men and finds her own ego fulfillment in the care of others. The priestess, Talitha, is another type—the woman who sublimes instincts more natural to her by withdrawing into religious functions in imitation of men. She accepts the tribal prophet's condemnation of women as sources of evil because she regards herself as above the ordinary women of her tribe and at the same time she envies them their homes and families. A third type frequently appearing after Eve's fall is the rebellious woman, who refuses to accept her lot and in so

doing denies the more tender motherly qualities that by nature are hers. Such a one is Narda, a wife of the tribal chieftain, in *The Divine Passion*. She uses her beauty and through coquetry seeks to maintain her position as her husband's favorite wife. By the use of primitive contraceptives, she avoids having children because she fears that child-bearing will make her less attractive. She is a woman forced to take what she can of life by stealth in a man's world. To the prophet's accusations against women she responds with vehemence:

Yescha had been saying that evil had been brought into the world by women. This judgment Beth accepted, for she was a meek person, and she knew that women were in many ways contaminated. If this were not so, they would not have to live under taboos which did not apply to men. But Narda said that Yescha was a lunatic. If the original evil had not been in women, then in whom, the people asked her, had it been? Narda did not know. She had no explanation of such things, but she was not going to accept this fresh burden on women. "You," she said scornfully to Beth, "are a woman for men to kick like a dog, and like a dog you crawl and whine!" 27

The gentle, motherly woman in *The Valley of Vision* is Zeruah. Like Beth she is submissive, accepting her lot as an inferior. What ambition she has is turned outward to the welfare of her son; for his sake she tries to win Solomon's favor so that her son might be the one chosen to succeed as king. Another of Solomon's wives, Naamah, also

has ambitions for her son to gain the throne, but her ambitions are centered as much on herself as on her offspring—she wants more than anything to be the queen mother. An Ammonite, she believes that the gods determine the destinies of all men and devotes herself to sacrifices and rituals that she feels will place her in esteem with her gods. Like Talitha, she sublimates her womanly qualities in pursuit of higher glories. A direct descendant of Narda is Khate, the Egyptian princess. A woman of superior intelligence, she does not seek fulfillment through having children and indeed practices the science of her native land to avoid becoming a mother. It is as Solomon's intellectual equal and helpmate that she finds a sense of her own worth. Like Narda, she rebels against woman's position in society. "If women ruled instead of men," she tells Solomon, "God would be a woman." Together she and Solomon decide that the trouble with the religion of Israel is that it has no mother principle to give it warmth, joy, and love.

The lack of a mother principle in the religion of Israel is voiced by one of the Hellenists in The Island of the Innocent. "What other people in the world has no Mother?" he asks. "Not one. The Jews—to use the name which our enemies apply to us—have never had one. We're orphans. The chant—One—One—One—what can it mean
except some awful cry out of loneliness?"28 The fanatic woman in this book is called Angela. It is to Greek philosophy and not to religion that she is devoted. She advocates the slaughter of the pious Jews and devotes herself to fighting with the Hellenists to achieve this end. In choosing such a goal, the author suggests, she has denied her true nature and in the end commits suicide, choosing to die for truth, she says. But her death wish seems more a result of lack of fulfillment, of perversion of her feminine qualities. "When we're not conscious we feel pain no more," she says. "Is that something to be afraid of? Rather we should be afraid to live, for life is a hundredfold more dreadful than death. What do we do in living but cause pain and misery to other people?"29

An intelligent woman forced to make her way in a male-dominated society is Melanie, who uses her beauty and intelligence as a courtesan to gain what position she can in life. The helpmate of the story's uncommon man is Judith, a Jewish girl who is at first devoted to the religion of her people in all its ritualistic detail. Through her contact with Philemon, however, she begins to see beyond the ritual and to value the truths housed in the myths of her religion. The relationship of the helpmate to

28. The Island of the Innocent, p. 207.
her lover here is one of student to teacher--she has much to learn and he has much to teach. It is this relationship that is used as a vehicle for expounding many of the Fisherian themes in the latter half of the Testament series. Together Judith and Philemon, crusaders for the same cause, die fighting against intolerance. Judith is the most fulfilled woman in the novel. She is treated as an equal by her man and in turn tempers his devotion to cold reason with her womanly insights on justice and mercy.

The men of above-average intelligence in these novels always treat women with regard and as equals. For example, The Cynic of Jesus Came Again, a learned philosopher, says:

If women are now wasps and shrews or hellcats smelling of sulphur have we men anything but our vanity to blame? ... If you would teach Joshua something, teach him this, not to say the Father of men but the Mother of men, for it is women who have love. If we men are not destroying with war or staring fascinated at philosophic conceits that seem to make us triumphant in a universe that can't distinguish between us and ants, then we are trying to crawl back in and hack at the Mother's liver.30

Joshua, the Jesus figure, prays that his people will some day soften their contempt for women, and treat them as mothers and sisters--not as sinful daughters of Eve.

It is because of his lack of contempt for women that Joshua draws women to him. Those who follow him in

30. Jesus Came Again, p. 112.
his wanderings are familiar types. One of them, a woman called Lucia, is gentle and submissive. She adopts and cares for an orphaned baby, spending on the child what little money she has. She seems never to think of herself at all, but devotes herself to the care of the child and of the others in her group. Another, called Sibyl, has been a prostitute and as a result of her degradation so withdraws from reality that she lives entirely in a world of mystic visions. Two other women with the group rebel against their inferior position. One of these, Zillah, has become one of those hellcats smelling of sulphur to which The Cynic referred, a mocking, aggressive, treacherous type who has tried to sublimate any tenderness in her nature. The other rebellious woman, Sirena, has a superior education to other women of her time and verbalizes more effectively than the others her anger and bitterness at her place in the world. The Garden of Eden story, she says at one point, is a man's story--a stupid and contemptible story.

What would the story be if a woman had written it? I'll tell you. Woman would have been happy, devoted to her children and their welfare. But man made a whore of her. . . . Man took her as his woman, concubine, slave, property, chattel; mated with her when he pleased; cast her off when he pleased. . . . And you have the incredible gall to say that we brought sin into the world!--we, the mothers, nurses, slaves!31

31. Jesus Came Again, p. 91.
Murdia, the Christian courtesan of *A Goat for Azazel*, is a rebellious type at first, a man hater who denounces the idea of a virgin birth. "No wonder men say the son of God must be born of a virgin," she says. "What else could a man say? You're all virgin-worshipers because you're mother-worshipers and father-haters... You can't make your mother a virgin but bless your dull souls, you can say that the woman who bears your god had no man in her bed." Murdia later attempts to purify herself according to the demands of her religion, at last settling in Antioch, where, dressed in rags, she meekly attends the diseased and dying among the city's poor Christians. The uncommon man of the story, Damon, is horrified by the change in her and wonders how the beautiful and dazzling woman he once knew can have come to this sorry state. Another of Damon's loves, Levilla, becomes a religious mystic, barely eating enough to keep herself alive, wearing only rags, and devoting herself to the care of the poor. At one time Damon wants to marry her, but she replies that what he calls love is offensive to her, that carnal love is wicked. He does at last find a wife and helpmate in Ayla, a gay and extroverted woman who lives life fully and happily—as a woman. She is always interested in hearing

32. *A Goat for Azazel*, p. 89.
Damon discuss his ideas, but she never loses sight of the womanly virtues:

You men, you know, have created God in your image, and it is you men who have war and torture and slaves and the smell of blood in all the arenas from Rome to Babylon. . . . You get lost in ideas . . . I know that I love you and that means something. I know that I want a child. Those things to a woman mean more than a thousand Platos. 33

Man's degradation of woman becomes the main theme of Peace Like a River. "Vridar" discusses his intentions for this book on Christian asceticism in The Great Confession:

Far deeper and more shocking in its consequences had been the childish fable of Adam and Eve in the garden: the Judean-Christian systems had so humiliated and outraged and degraded women that in desperation they had striven, with appalling success, to conform their natures to the values and habits of men. All this had produced what one editor had called the bitch-heroine; what another had called the mom-viper; and what still others in contempt called Mom . . . .

It was incredible, at least for Vridar, that such writers as Schopenhauer, Balzac, Moliere, Strindberg, and a thousand more had held women in biting, bitter contempt. . . . "I'll let a woman tell these horrors what stinkers they are, these mewling momboys vomiting their fear into their generations of vipers! I'll tell these obscene hypocrites, these ruttish goatish incestuous libidinous makers of whores and whorehouses." 34

Thus the main character of Peace Like a River, Helene, escapes to the desert to live among the ascetics


34. The Great Confession, pp. 547, 548.
after having been prostituted by the wickedness of men. In her heart she longs to fulfill her biological role in life, to have a home with husband and children, and she does, at last, leave the desert in the company of a jolly ex-merchant who has never been able to devote himself seriously to becoming a "saint." Throughout the story Helene moves through one situation after another, spitting out her venom at those who have debased her, becoming more and more bitter and shrewish:

Our holy books say that God created this earth. It is men who have spoilt it... You men have corrupted it, and now, to save your stinking little souls, you try to put off on women the shame and the wickedness. Cowards, you don't dare face the truth. No, never. It was a woman who brought sin into the world? What a monstrous lie! It was a woman who corrupted you holy things in God's image? Liars, all of you! It is you men who multiply evil and will go on multiplying it with more war, more torture, yes, and more degradation of women; and all the while you will lie and dodge as you have lied and dodged from the beginning, trying to crawl out of your own shame, trying to put the guilt on us--on us who would never have had war and slavery and torture and whorehouses if we had been ruling this earth that God made.35

There are two other familiar women character types who are what men have made of them. One of these, Takuda, has been denied by her husband, who lives among the ascetics, striving to become a saint. She is completely mindless and spiritless and asks of life only that she be

35. Peace Like a River, pp. 234, 235.
allowed to attend to her husband's comfort. She accepts
the assumption of woman's guilt and answers all of Helene's
questions by saying that God did not give wisdom to women.
The other degraded woman is Thais, a reformed prostitute,
who comes to the desert to purge herself of her sin by
sealing herself in a cell to live in supplication, subsisting on bread and water for the rest of her life.
Helene is the only one among them who escapes finally to
fulfill her own true nature as a woman.

Though the degradation of women is not the main
theme of My Holy Satan, the main women characters are again
the familiar types that have appeared in nearly every novel
of the Testament series beginning with The Divine Passion.
One of these, Madelon, is a pathetic, emaciated mystic who
retreats from the memory of her seduction by the parish
priest by living entirely in a world of religious visions.
Another, called Elise, flies into frequent tantrums in her
bitter hatred of men. A medieval example of momism, she
keeps one of her sons in a mindless childhood, entirely
dependent on her. "She did not think of him as a man. She
thought of him as an infant, a helpless babe. Her aggres-
sive unbridled nature had made him what he was. She had
shared her bed with him until he was almost grown."36 The
third woman character is the Baroness Elienor. Above

average in intelligence, she is the helpmate figure to the story's uncommon man, Richard. Wearied by the shallowness of courtly love, she takes Richard as her lover and together they while away hours in conversations, which reveal that she is as much a heretic as is Richard. She shares his love of learning and encourages him to pursue knowledge. Truly a woman, she longs to fulfill her biological role in life, to have a happy home, husband, and children though the traditions of courtly love have made her desire not only unfashionable but also impossible.

Just as the uncommon men of these novels bear a striking similarity to Vridar Hunter in the last, autobiographical work of the series, the women of the novels strongly resemble the women in Vridar's life. Vridar's mother, for example, is described as being a religious fundamentalist, made cold and aloof by her belief that sensual love is wicked. His first wife, Neloa, longs to fulfill herself as a woman--wife and mother, but Vridar constantly tries to remake her into his ideal of what a woman should be. In addition to trying to enshrine her as some kind of virgin goddess, he tries to interest her in the life of the intellect, but Neloa is simply too female to fit his picture of what she should be. When Vridar finds in another woman the attributes he is looking for, Neloa commits suicide in her anguish over having lost him. The other woman, who becomes his second wife, is
intelligent and well-educated, but unfortunately tends toward religious mysticism. When Vridar realizes that his attraction to her has been because of her resemblance to his mother he leaves her—with an infant. It is in his third wife that he finds the helpmate that has appeared in so many of the other novels. She, too, would like to have a child, but because of Vridar's aversion to babies she sublimates her mother instinct in caring for animals. Like the other helpmates, she is always there with an eager ear to listen to her man's restless philosophizing, adding her feminine insights when she can.

In addition to these women characters, Vridar directly reiterates the author's thesis on the degradation of women as his research for his series of novels unfolds:

That only a small minority of the world's people ever developed, emotionally, beyond early childhood, was, Vridar thought, one of the most obvious facts of life. But why? . . . Was it—was it because of the emotional sicknesses inherent in a too-close family relationship? "God in heaven!" he cried and came up out of his chair. Had he at last found what he sought?—the key to the riddle! Had all this developed because of a patriarchy so rigid and tyrannical that the female—well, it had to come out, for those with the gumption to see it, in a book called The Second Sex—a book so penetrating that it brought from Margaret Mead, an anthropologist, a statement that exactly summed up one of Vridar's beliefs—that the virtues found in greater strength in women than in men had not been employed in the development of the Western world's institutions and values. How could they have been—for the Christians had
taken over the holy books of a people who did not even have a Mother!\textsuperscript{37}
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

A large portion of the last novel of the Testament of Man series, The Great Confession, is devoted to recounting the trials faced by the author in securing publishers for the books. The publishing history of the Testament works, shown in the Selected Bibliography (p. 97), reflects publishers' diminishing interest in the series. Beginning with the eighth novel, Jesus Came Again, the number of editions as well as the number of reprints declines markedly.

These publishing difficulties and the series' lack of critical success Mr. Fisher attributes to publishers' and critics' disapproval of his theme ideas, especially his attack on man's evasion of truth. For example, he writes that one Jewish publisher regarded the novel on Solomon as "a diatribe against his people." He suggests that the publisher's literal belief in the Solomon story of the Bible was the man's main reason for rejecting the book, wherein Mr. Fisher departs from the traditional Biblical portrayal of Solomon as the epitome of wisdom in order to show him as being a seeker of truth. In anger Vridar writes to his wife:
Let them not publish me at all, for I'd rather be unknown, or if known then quickly forgotten, than be (or for money and fame pretend to be) one with the small souls who pervert history and whore its truths, to elevate themselves in the esteem of cowards like them.

The prejudice against his work is even worse, he maintains, when he deals with the Christian era. As an example he quotes from a letter by a prospective publisher urging him to change the ending of *A Goat for Azazel*, to make the protagonist's son a devout Christian who burns his father's scholarly treatise on the origins of Christianity. He also quotes the publisher as saying that no one in his senses would battle to destroy organized religions. In *The American Book Collector* Mr. Fisher reiterates that his critics were themselves trying to evade the truth of his novels:

"... the novel about Solomon led most of the "Jewish" critics to wash their hands of me. By the time I began to write about what some people call the Christian era most reviewers had had enough of me. ... I have no quarrel with their interpretation of the Jesus or any other symbol, but I do feel that my side, on which are so many of the world's greatest men and women, has a right to be heard. Long ago it should have been said that when all the facts are in the truth of any matter turns out to be greater and usually far greater, than any of its explanations to be found in myth, legend, and tradition. This is because the

myth-makers have had so little knowledge to stand on.²

It may well be that many of Mr. Fisher's critics have had an aversion to his work on the basis of their personal disagreement with his thematic ideas. However, several voices have been raised against not his content, so much as his crusading zeal in presenting that content. These criticisms are certainly valid, it would seem, in the light of this study.

Reviewing Mr. Fisher's eighth novel, *Forgive Us Our Virtues*, Wallace Stegner observed in 1938, Mr. Fisher's fifth year as a novelist:

... He has all the introspective intensity of a New England divine, all the zeal for walking with God, though his God is an alien to the orthodox. He is as dogmatic at times as Increase Mather. In his feeling that most of the world is mad and that only the sane and honest few can save it, in his conceiving of himself as a hummock of sanity and integrity in a wilderness of boggy decay, he is merely modernizing the doctrine of the elect.³

Nine years later in 1947 when the Testament series was in its fourth book, George Snell included a discussion of Vardis Fisher's work in his book *The Shapers of American Fiction*. Though in general favorably disposed toward Mr. Fisher's work, he noted the author's lack of critical


success and attributed this to a certain extremism. "With him," Mr. Snell wrote, "a point had not been made until it had been doubly made. . . . It is evident that Fisher's novels have sometimes cloaked a resurgent tractarian, and that the message has often gotten in the way of the story." 4

This crusading zeal may be a reflection of Mr. Fisher's personality, according to a description written by one who knows the author personally. In the 1963 American Book Collector devoted to Mr. Fisher's work, Ellis Foote wrote, "It is my observation that Fisher over-compensates at the drop of a hat—or a careless remark. Action with him, becomes excess of action; statement becomes over-statement; and truth becomes excess of truth." 5

Whatever the reasons for this author's crusading zeal, it must be observed from this study that the scholar-teacher in Mr. Fisher has overcome the artist in all but perhaps the earliest novels of the series. His thematic ideas are revealed by the same three methods: the abundant use of authorial asides, the development of characters who are types rather than individuals, and the manipulation of dialogue, which takes on a Platonic style.


5. Ellis Foote, "The Unholy Testator," The American Book Collector, XIV (September, 1963), 10.
The artist's inability to temper the convictions of the scholar-teacher leads Mr. Fisher to violate some of his own best advice in his zeal to present themes that no one can misunderstand. At one point in *God or Caesar?* he advocates the use of "editorial comment." "... today, and particularly in this country, critics jump on a writer if he dares to offer editorial comment..." This prejudice against editorializing is, it seems to me, a great pity. The full-length study of an egoist which Meredith made rests not 'on the sole basis of his acts' but on the author's verbal surgery.\(^6\)

It is not so much the use of "editorial comment," however, that one may object to in these twelve books. It is the way in which the author leads his reader by the hand, explaining, guiding, and directing even when the story itself has made his point. The editorializing is overdone. It is most annoying when redundant, and it retards the progress of the story as action is halted by a paragraph or a page or more of authorial aside. The scholar-teacher seems unable to trust his reader to draw conclusions from the story itself. Thus, by lecturing to the reader the author insults the intelligence of the type of person that he most desires his work to reach—the thoughtful,

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6. *God or Caesar?*, p. 89.
enlightened reader who would delight in the interpretation of the story.

On the other hand, he admonishes the aspiring young writer of serious fiction not to make his presence felt in the scenes he writes. "The reader should never sense your presence in the scene or anywhere around it: the more you impose on your people your values, judgments, and views the less convincing they are likely to be." 7 Earlier in this work, writing on the importance of an author's empathy for his characters, he indicated that the character should have a life of its own into which the writer must project himself, discarding all his own ideas, prejudices, and beliefs. A review of the author's character types and their dialogues as noted in this study reveals that Mr. Fisher did not employ his theory of empathy in dealing with his own characters. His protagonists all live and think with Mr. Fisher's own set of ideas, values, and judgments.

On the subject of historical fiction Mr. Fisher wrote in The American Book Collector:

If an author writes what is called historical fiction, that in fact is historical only in such matters as dress, houses, and transportation, and portrays people who think and feel and talk like those of his own time, he may be read by the millions, but his novels are not historical novels at all. 8

7. God or Caesar?, p. 111.
When the author has a character in the first century reflect on the story of the prodigal son that "maybe he was only rolling his old man for another stake," one must wonder whether this kind of expression was current in the first century or if the author in his ardor to express the idea has chosen to disregard his own advice.

Early in *God or Caesar?* Mr. Fisher states that the creative writer uses chiefly his subconscious mind or intuition. The more creative the person, he says, the more active the subconscious mind. The early "primitive" books of the Testament series most nearly represent the use of this intuitive process and are the most successful of the novels. To be sure, the authorial asides are present, but the characters are not types and their dialogue (perhaps because so primitive) is not manipulated. In the early novels the author's theme ideas are frequently illustrated and illuminated by the stories themselves. However, the method is not sustained.

The author's direct statements of theme ideas in his non-fiction writings also indicate that his Testament works did not arise from the subconscious. Furthermore, Mr. Fisher places such emphasis on his scholarship as the source of his ideas that it must be doubted he has trusted much to intuition.

That the writing of the Testament of Man series was a monumental task born of serious purpose no one would
deny. Unfortunately the scholarly zeal demonstrated by the author in his presentation of the past proved to be his downfall--the budding artist did not blossom.
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