

# An Optimists Guide to Living in Dystopia: Literature for the Challenges and Blessings of Modernity

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Flannery O'Connor, the great southern author, once explained that *"the novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural."* She described her method of exposing the accepted conventions of modernity: *"to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures."* Her startling figures took shape in unforgettable characters. Misfits, unthankful sons, racist suburbanites, stubborn old men, and restless youth who revealed not only what was wrong with the world but what we, as the reader, hoped was still right. Like Walker Percy, TS Eliot, JRR Tolkien and other 20th Century novelists and poets with a similar moral squint, O'Connor placed the problems of modernity in conspicuous contrast to reality, pointing out the challenges they represented. Rather than arguing against the shortcomings of modernity with philosophy and theology, short story and novels serve as effective media to engage and illumine the existential challenges facing modern man. Here than follows an examination of a few such stories that illuminate the challenges of isolation, fragmentation, and misuse of technology.

## The Case for Good Fiction:

Nearly two decades of teaching college students has taught me that the errors of modernity are not resolved by simple anathema. Rejecting bad ideas outright, regardless of how warranted, does little to persuade, and often has the reverse effect. The truth is that most 'modern' men find dogma stifling rather than life giving. They are more often moved by emotion, than by logic. After all, it is easy to arrive at a feeling, but it takes real work to form a conclusion. In his 1956 text, *The End of the Modern World*, Romano Guardini asked if modern man was made freer independent of a belief in the transcendent? If secular modernity was not more isolated, more fragmented, and more seduced by technological promise than preceding generations. In the text, he offers a theological and philosophical reflection on modernity and in so doing provides a thoughtful account of the world that we now occupy. His perceptive analysis describes our current state and the effects of being *"dislocated"* from our past and from our sense of place. Reduced from individual moral agents to simply consumers at best, or spectators of inescapable material laws at worst, modern man seeks to find meaning devoid of the traditional anchors found in

religion and culture. The question of origin which has provided man a shared memory and basis for inherent dignity is replaced by the study of blind empirical processes. The question of purpose which has provided man a shared trajectory and the grounds for solidarity and meaning is replaced by the assertion of power and the desire to "make himself the master." The question of destiny which has provided the vertical horizon necessary for man to go beyond the finite world which can never fulfill him is replaced by a technocratic paradigm that confuses progress with goodness.

Regardless of his precision and cogency, Guardini's worthwhile assessment was not enough to convince my students of the shortcomings of the modern world, let alone provide a remedy to its problems. But when read alongside well-crafted novels, short stories and poetry, the truths that he unmasked became incarnate and gave voice to what my students already perceived to be amiss in the world. This was a valuable lesson for me. Persuading others that something is wrong cannot be based only on logic, as unassailable as it might be. Rather persuasion ought to be invitational, relational, and narrative. When logic cannot convince, beauty can woo. Art in general and literature in particular has a way of appealing to our deeper sensibilities, taking abstract ideas and making them real, tangible, and provoking a response from the reader.

### Isolation:

Modern man fundamentally experiences the world in isolation. His desire for sovereignty stands in conflict with the reality that he did not create himself and cannot ultimately fulfill himself. Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* speaks to this isolation. The main character, Binx Bolling gazes downward to what appears to be in his control, money, career, sex, hobbies, "the sad little happiness of drinks and kisses, a good little car and a warm deep thigh." In these things he continually finds emptiness rather than meaning. On the eve of his thirtieth birthday he reestablishes his role as pilgrim rather than sovereign. He searches first inward, and eventually upward, and in doing so he begins to find both meaning and context for what is in front of, and inside of him. Percy's Binx is introduced to the search for something more than temporary and fleeting pleasures and his self-imposed isolation is lifted as he sees the world as something more than passive, inert and meaningless.

In Flannery O'Connors short story, *Parker's Back*, the tragic Obadiah Elihue Parker searches in the wrong places for meaning and fulfillment. We are introduced Parker who at a young age discovers he is made for something more. "Parker had never before felt the least motion of wonder in himself. Until he saw the man at the fair, it did not enter his head that there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed. Even then it did not enter his head, but a peculiar unease settled in him. It was as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not

*know his destination had been changed.*" Yet, he begins to fill the void caused by his isolation, with no reference to anything other than himself. He covers his body with tattoos but leaves his back untouched for *"he had no desire for one anywhere he could not readily see it himself. As the space on the front of him for tattoos decreased, his dissatisfaction grew and became general."* His restless heart is temporarily occupied, but never filled. The story dramatically ends with Parker crashing a tractor and literally being forced to look upward. His own brush with death compels him towards another tattoo, this time a religious image *"the haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes."* When he first saw the image *"he sat there trembling; his heart began slowly to beat again as if it were being brought to life by a subtle power."* Ultimately Parker's search for meaning comes at a high price and we leave Parker *"leaning against the tree, crying like a baby."*

Percy demonstrates in the character of Binx, as does O'Connor in Parker, the truth that modern man is not served by purely mechanical, biological, psychological or sociological abstractions about our origin, purpose and destiny. The restlessness of the human heart is not ultimately alleviated by the accumulation of wealth or pleasure, or the pursuit of honor or power. By presenting materialistic answers to the deepest questions of life, man is not made freer, but more restless, and more isolated as they seek to discover these answers independent from their source, without an elevated gaze towards the horizon. To use the words of Binx *"to become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair."*

### **Fragmentation:**

Modern man lives a more fragmented life. Work & family, faith & politics, entertainment & leisure, are not unified into a collective whole, rather they are disparate experiences that require us to play different roles within each. This fragmentation is conditioned by our lack of any unifying principles which are large enough to provide a context for the whole of one's life.

Walker's satirical book, *Lost in the Cosmos*, examines this fragmentation in terms of our typical dissatisfaction with most parties. *"Scene in one thousand movies: a party—any kind of party—but with the one common denominator of a failed festival, a collapsed and fragmented community. There is always the painfully perceived gap between what is and what might be. If there were such a device as a social-relationship indicator and one could quantify the relationship what-is/what-might-be, most parties would register less than 5 percent. Hence the booze. Unlike the use of spirits in the past, the purpose of alcohol is not to celebrate the festival but to anesthetize the failure."* The three institutions that have historically provided and encouraged these unifying principles are all systematically challenged by the priority of the individual

and the resulting fragmentation. The family provides one such unifying principle, especially when the family consists of multiple generations passing on its cultural, regional, and trade knowledge within each generation. Religion provides another. Providing an overarching and transcendent framework which unites the various activities and patterns of life. Finally, it was the various forms of education, with its apex the university and its pursuit of universal knowledge and liberal studies, that provided a systematic approach to unifying the whole of knowledge and experience. One can quickly see how the breakdown of the family and the privation of religion, two hallmarks of modernity, could lead towards fragmentation. What may be less obvious is how our current educational system and its emphasis on pragmatism and utility further encourage this fragmentation.

Over the past 100 years our educational system has grown more focused on technical education and the “productive sciences.” The concern has been overtly focused on the production of students who can meet current or anticipated social needs and labor demands. As a result, we have focused less on what it means to be a human fully alive, a citizen capable of describing and defending a particular ethos. At the university level this has meant the radical fragmentation of the humanities and the sciences. Students are taught to be specialist long before they are generalist. In the modern university the focus is clearly on the productive sciences without deference to the practical or contemplative sciences. In other words, the focus is on the technical rather than humane formation. This marks an unprecedented change in the historic approach to education and university studies. The term ‘liberal art’ was meant to signify the base knowledge needed for a man to be *liber*, free. It was upon this foundation of what it meant to be human, what it meant to be part of a society, that the much-needed technical formation was built upon.

One of the immediate results of this fragmentation is that unifying fields like philosophy and theology, which teach us how to think about the big questions, and the practical fields like rhetoric and grammar which teach us how to express and communicate truth, were no longer brought into dialogue with the other academic disciplines. Each discipline is increasingly found to be self-referential. More and more, religion and the religious sensibilities of man, and their penultimate role in both the sciences and art is ignored and denied to our own detriment. The poet Dana Gioia explains, “*Once you remove the religious as one of the possible modes of art, once you separate culture from the long-established traditions and disciplines of spirituality, you don’t remove the spiritual hungers of either artists or audience. You satisfy them more crudely with the vague, the pretentious, and the sentimental.*”

Collective personal fragmentation along with the imposed intellectual fragmentation disintegrate the unity that supports authentic development, maturation, and growth in virtue. In this way, fragmentation can lead towards one of two extremes. On one hand it can lead to an arrogance and overreliance on one field to solve

problems that are beyond its scope or are best served collaboratively. For example, the proverbial carpenter who sees every problem as a nail that can be solved by a hammer. On the other hand, fragmentation can also lead to a deep boredom. A boredom that comes from experiencing the ineffable but placing it within too narrow of framework to appreciate the totality of it. A refusal to let the experience contribute something new, to simultaneously elude and captivate the person. In other words, to be filled with awe rather than merely data. Walker describes this well in his short essay *The Loss of the Creature* when he describes the tourist at the Grand Canyon. *"Seeing the canyon is made even more difficult by what the sight-seer does when the moment arrives, when sovereign knower confronts the thing to be known. Instead of looking at it, he photographs it. There is no confrontation at all...At the end of forty years of preformulation and with the Grand Canyon yawning at his feet, what does he do? He waives his right of seeing and knowing."*

### Technopoly (The Misuse and overreliance on technology)

Man has always used their reason and will to shape nature, either through stewardship or domination. Properly understood, the history of mankind is a history influenced and even built upon technology. The third challenge of modernity is not technology itself, but rather what might be called technopoly, an unhealthy fascination with technology's powers that resists any human intervention to limit it.

Gaurdini's *Letters from Lake Como* investigates our relationship with technology. He finds our development and radical reshaping of the landscape into *urbanitas* "city living" can be a source of beauty. Done well, the *urbanitas* can be a place where *"nature can pass smoothly into culture."* The conditions of this proper use of technology require that they be rightly ordered to the three principal relationships between man and God, man and each other, and man and the land. The *urbanitas* for Gaurdini, is like the *Shire* for Tolkien. A place of rightly ordered relationships, where technology is used under the careful control and guidance of those it is meant to serve (i.e. where technology is a means to an end and not an end of itself.) In *The Hobbit*, the Goblins are described as technological creatures who *"make no beautiful things, but they make many clever ones."* A focus on efficiency rather than aesthetic. In *The Lord of the Rings* the peace and harmony of the Shire is disrupted when Sandyman's mill was knocked down and replaced with a new mill. The new owner, *"brought in a lot o' dirty-looking Men to build a bigger one and fill it full o' wheels and outlandish contraptions. Only that fool Ted was pleased by that, and he works there cleaning wheels for the Men, where his dad was the Miller and his own master. Pimple's idea was to grind more and faster, or so he said. He's got other mills like it. But you've got to have grist before you can grind; and there was no more for the new mill to do than for the old. But since Sharkey came they don't grind no more corn at all. They're always a-hammering and a-letting out a smoke and a stench, and there isn't no*

*peace even at night in Hobbiton. And they pour out filth a purpose; they've fouled all the lower Water, and it's getting down into Brandywine. If they want to make the Shire into a desert, they're going the right way about it.*" For Tolkien, technology is never morally neutral, machines are built based on intention and take on a distinct shape and purpose. Far too often, technology in the post-fall world results in a lust for power which serves the few at the expense of the many. The ring itself, and especially Mordor in *The Lord of the Rings* are symbols of how a misplaced trust in the power of technology can corrupt and enslave rather than contribute to man's natural purpose.

The great American essayist, Wendell Berry challenges the technocratic worldview in similar terms regarding farming and the contest between industrialism and agrarianism. One seeks to dominate the land and apply new technologies to make it more efficient but does so ultimately disconnected from the type of stewardship that is necessary to sustain its production. *"I believe"* he says *"that this contest between industrialism and agrarianism now defines the most fundamental human difference, for it divides not just two nearly opposite concepts of agriculture and land use, but also two nearly opposite ways of understanding ourselves, our fellow creatures, and our world."* The way that we treat the land, the forest, and the ocean as a commodity rather than a gift is of central concern to Berry. In his novel, *Jayber Crow*, the tragic hero and narrator, Jayber Crow, and the protagonist, Troy Chatham, incarnate these different concepts. Jayber and Troy both court the same love interest Mattie Keith. Jayber welcomes what the reciprocal relationship with the land requires of him. This partnership yields a fecundity that can be appreciated and improved upon with the right use of technology. Chatham on the other hand follows the mantra, *"Adapt or die," meaning that a farmer should adapt to the breakneck economic program of the corporations, not to his farm. He thought the farm existed to serve and enlarge him.*" Chatham's approach to the land, which sought to dominate rather than steward, is also reflected in his treatment of Mattie who he eventually marries and betrays. Progress and efficiency become the standard bearers of the goodness of technology, not the way the technology serves the land, or the men who work it. Berry's novels and poetry reflect an urgency to find a more appropriate and humane balance in our use of technology, something that he aptly calls "kindly use." A recognition of the objectivity of world that engenders humility, awe, and careful action, as opposed to a subjective world where power, efficiency, and consumption become the only standards to evaluate progress.

The moral component of technopoly contributes in a direct way to the isolation and fragmentation outlined above. CS Lewis described a conversation he once had with



Tolkien, perhaps over a pint at the Eagle and Child, and it serves as a good summary here. *“Tolkien once remarked to me that the feeling about home must have been quite different in the days when a family had fed on the produce of the same few miles of country for six generations, and that perhaps this was why they saw nymphs in the fountains and dryads in the wood—they were not mistaken for there was in a sense a real (not metaphorical) connection between them and the countryside. What had been earth and air and later corn, and later still bread, really was in them. We of course who live on a standardized international diet (you may have had Canadian flour, English meat, Scotch oatmeal, African oranges, and Australian wine today) are really artificial beings and have no connection (save in sentiment) with any place on earth. We are synthetic men, uprooted. The strength of the hills is not ours.”*

## The Blessings of Modernity

Despite the interrelated challenges of isolation, fragmentation, and technopoly, modernity provides enormous gifts. It is worth briefly identifying those which have so richly blessed modern man. Pope Francis enumerates several such benefits in *Laudato Si'*. *“We are the beneficiaries of two centuries of enormous waves of change: steam engines, railways, the telegraph, electricity, automobiles, aeroplanes, chemical industries, modern medicine, information technology and, more recently, the digital revolution, robotics, biotechnologies and nanotechnologies. It is right to rejoice in these advances and to be excited by the immense possibilities which they continue to open up before us, for ‘science and technology are wonderful products of a God-given human creativity’... Technology has remedied countless evils which used to harm and limit human beings. How can we not feel gratitude and appreciation for this progress, especially in the fields of medicine, engineering and communications?”* Among these technological advances three ideas and capabilities are worthy of increased appreciation and can themselves offset the negative effects of the isolation, fragmentation and technology.

## Expanded horizons

Modern man can gaze further into space, more profoundly contemplate the molecular structure of all of creation, and more deeply consider the complexity of the cellular activity that sustains every living thing. We have more reasons than ever before to approach the material world with awe rather than arrogance, and with a sense of gratitude rather than entitlement.

These expanded horizons are not limited to the merely material observation of the world. So too, our appreciation and experience of diverse cultures, customs, foods, etc. have grown. The advent of mass transit has made the world smaller and more accessible than ever before. The internet has revolutionized communication and the

access to information. Books that only existed in remote and inaccessible libraries are now one click away, as is the research of top experts in virtually every field. Cell phones and improved communications make access to loved ones nearly instantaneous. These expanded horizons have rightly contributed to deeper appreciation of man's ingenuity and his limitations.

### **Increased opportunity for leisure**

An acute symptom of our restlessness is the high level of busyness that fills the lives of nearly everyone. However, this is a result of the symptoms outlined above. In his text, *Leisure the Basis of Culture*, Josef Pieper explained that we will not get work right if we do not first get leisure right. Leisure is not just what we do when we are not working. Far from it. Leisure is an openness to entering into the reality of the world and who we are. While most people see either working or not-working as the two fundamental movements of our day, this is far too limited in scope. While work is good and a central part of our creative human response to participating in the world, work only describes what we do, not ultimately who we are. Leisure, on the other hand directly contributes to who we are and what matters most. Said simply, we do not leisure for the sake of work, rather we work so that we can be at leisure and enter into those things that truly support our becoming who we are. Leisure and the feasts that accompany it *"affirms the basic meaningfulness of creation and one's sense of oneness in it."*

Given the technological marvels of the day, less time is spent working. While it is true more time may be arbitrarily busy, that does not negate the fact that we spend less time having to provide for the essentials of life. For most of us, water comes from a faucet, not a two hour walk to the river. For most of us, our interaction with friends and neighbors is a moment, not weeks of hard travel away. It may be unnerving for modern man to hear, but we have more time than ever before to be occupied with those things that achieve our *being*, rather than define our *doing*.

Modernity, with its gains in so many areas, can contribute to deeper levels of contemplation, and more meaningful and lasting experiences of personal and communal leisure.

### **New technologies**

As alluded to above, the new technologies—especially those that are intrinsically instrumental to serving human needs—provide greater health, greater promise of stability, and much should be celebrated in them. I doubt even Luddites would reject the achievements in anesthesia, let alone modern dental care. Of course, these new technologies bring with them a host of new ethical considerations, however, here too is an opportunity for man to grow in the knowledge, ability, and the practice of virtue. While new military technologies make unimaginable sufferings possible, so too does it provide humans with the opportunity to react more altruistically, compassionately, and



more Christ-like in the face of more easily wielded power.

## Conclusion:

The challenges of modernity are many, but they are the symptoms of dis-ordered world, one that yearns to be put back together. It is not compelling just to reject that which is broken in modernity. The vocation of every person of good-will is to elevate what is good, beautiful, and true, with great courage and joy while simultaneously rejecting with great charity and clarity that which what is bad, ugly, and false. In fact, we do greater service to shine light on those things that appeal to the deepest longings of the human heart, as their absence is immediately perceptible. Modernity is not so much wrong, as it is insufficient. It is these insufficiencies that are so wounding because we know that we are made for more. Art can provide a clarity that speaks to our senses and moves our heart to see things as they ought to be. And once seen to move towards incarnating what is good, true, and beautiful in our lives. As TS Eliot explained... *"For it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order **in** reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation, and then to leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed towards a region where the guide can avail us no further."*