



Chronicles of Heaven Unshackled - Part 0 - Introduction

Pete Lowman

Chronicles of Heaven Unshackled is a lightly edited version of Pete Lowman's doctoral thesis. Links to each part will be enabled as they are published.

Part 0: Introduction: The Loss of God in the Novel.

INTRODUCTION: THE LOSS OF GOD IN THE NOVEL

was voted top as the most significant novel of recent times. Films of both Tolkien's and Lewis' fictions have made a huge impact worldwide. Many of us find them fascinating; and this despite the fact that, as any but their most diehard aficionados must admit, there are some real weaknesses in the books. What is their fascination?

There are several answers we could give to that question, and many books that do. This study has been written to focus on one aspect of their uniqueness that for some reason usually gets overlooked, yet is of enormous importance to us culturally and indeed to us individually – however, it is an aspect that seldom gets noticed.

The issue is this. The vast majority of the fictions we consume (and this goes for cinema, television fiction, even the 'reconstruction' of reality we get from the newspapers, as well as novels) are what we can call 'flatland narratives'. They happen in two dimensions only. Underlying the events we read about are causes, significant causes, but these are limited strictly to certain spheres:

psychological, sociological, military, economic. And yet meanwhile we live in a world where the majority of human beings – the overwhelming majority in the two-thirds world, but the majority (according to most surveys) even of the north Atlantic countries – believe in some sort of God, some sort of supernatural. And yet most of our fictions don't allow for that entire rich dimension to be active at all. (Think about it: we don't expect that dimension in our fictions, do we?) What they amount to, instead, is a ubiquitous imaginative training (one might almost say a brainwashing?) into a 'colourblind', two-dimensional view of the world.

And this is what makes Tolkien and Lewis so different. Theirs are worlds where that whole dimension operates. Three-dimensional worlds, worlds with the vertical dimension restored. Where God and the supernatural do things. And deep in our hearts, we know that that's how it is. But it is hard to write such narratives when the whole consensus tradition of fiction in our culture goes against it.

A colourblind tradition

How did we get into this situation?

Jump the whole of the rest of this introduction if you choose (the next chapter will take us straightaway into Tolkien), as it's about the history of the English novel. But some of us will find it useful, both in better understanding our consensus tradition (and its cultural effects on us), and also in pointing up what's unique about the authors we're going to look at.

Let's remark, then, that English literary history is a curious thing. And one especially curious thing about it is that it contains so very little of importance which might be termed a Christian novel. The novel, as a form, offers to tell its reader a story; it implies (by recording it) that this story is of significance, and indeed (at least usually) that it will include in its account all the main aspects necessary for a reader to grasp what it depicts. And yet, although the novel arose in the seventeenth century – a time when Britain considered herself the champion and printing-house of Christianity, the worldview that, above all others, emphasises the work of God in events – this whole 'aspect' of God in action is

conspicuously excluded from the novel; throughout almost the entire English tradition. Indeed, we may say that the convention that came to dominate the English novel was exclusively non-supernaturalistic – the fictional counterpart of deism, or, latterly, agnosticism. We don't find in the great English novels a depiction of the action of God in guiding, or answering prayer, or orchestrating events for the advancement of his kingdom. He is simply left out. So the 'realism' that writers like Ian Watt (*The Rise of the Novel*) have seen as characterising the novel (compared at least to other literary forms) is one that, to the Christian, is not so much realistic as myopic with reference to the most significant fact in the universe.

And yet prose fiction doesn't have to exclude God. In fact the English novel has credibly been argued by Watt and others to have emerged with the Reformation and with biblically-minded Christians – consider John Bunyan (*The Life and Death of Mr Badman*) and Daniel Defoe (*Robinson Crusoe*); and this because they had a worldview in which the doings of ordinary people were taken seriously (because they mattered in the eyes of God), and seemed worthy of record – rather than just the doings of kings, heroes and saints, as in the literary productions of the less biblically-shaped culture that preceded them. (H.R. Rookmaaker's famous *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* observes the same massively significant shift in the content of the painting of the period.)

Those, however, were the days of the novel's infancy. Its further development coincided with the decay of the Reformation, and the coming to dominance of a very different worldview indeed; that which we call the Enlightenment. And the eighteenth-century novel, far from being the objective embodiment of unsullied realism, bears very clearly the marks of its development in that much less Christian era. For Enlightenment philosophy, following Descartes, generally stressed the empirically-perceived at the expense of the divinely revealed: it tended to restrict faith and the supernatural. ('*The Divine*', says Paul Hazard in his classic work on the period, *The European Mind*, 'was relegated to a vague and impenetrable heaven, somewhere up in the skies.') Faith tended to become set against reason: the unified world of the Reformation,

which combined both the natural and supernatural, disappeared. And the growth both of capitalism and of modern science accentuated the centrality of what was material, what could be measured, what was empirically there and was instantly observable by sense-perceptions rather than by faith.

It is not surprising, then, that as the novel develops we find the supernatural getting banished to its periphery. *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is indeed an exception, with a strong sense of residual Puritanism alongside the emergent materialism: but when Defoe moved on to *Moll Flanders* just three years later, he wrote a novel with a notorious and almost total preoccupation with the material, cash-value aspects of existence. What grips Defoe's imagination here is the cataloguing of possessions of market-value, and the accumulation of material stock. Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740-41) is likewise concerned with laying up treasure on earth as morality's reward. Admittedly the subtitle '*Virtue Rewarded*' is a glance at an organising principle behind events; but as there is not much real sense of divine involvement in practice, this merely gives us a fictional expression of deism. In Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747-48) the moral issue of chastity is at the centre of the stage, but the result is merely to show the decadence of Puritanism in one of its worst aspects: relationship with God seems to have little value until after death, and the entire spiritual pilgrimage on this side of the grave seems to turn on a single act of rape. *Clarissa* can hardly be said to offer an exploration of divine grace permeating every area of life.

In Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), certainly, we find '*Fortune*' shaping the events to a productive end: coincidence plays an important role, and this '*Fortune*' and coincidence would have been attributed by Fielding's favourite divines to the activities of a benevolent Providence. But Fielding's concern, as a good neo-classicist, was with drawing a moral for 'human nature' in general, not as something visible in particular instances. *Tom Jones* seems only to express Fielding's faith in the benign ordering of the universe in general: similar claims for the individual he regards as a falsification of reality.

In these three key authors, then, supernaturalism comes to receive little expression in particular, existential terms. And we may see in them a second reason for the secularisation of the novel, namely the reaction against the romancers of their day. Richardson objected to romances because 'they dealt so much in the marvellous and improbable'; Fielding too stressed the need for novelists to keep 'within the rules of probability'. And at the end of the eighteenth century, Sir Walter Scott characterised the novel as 'differing from the Romance, because the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events and the modern state of society', as against 'what is obviously miraculous and impossible'. But the 'religious supernatural' tended thereby to be bundled up and rejected along with the purely 'fantastic'; and, to be fair, that was an amalgam the earlier saints' legends had provided in plenty. Hence the young novel tradition's need to mark out a territory distinct from that of the romancers, combined with the Enlightenment's sense of an ordinary, regular universe, established a consensus as to what was 'probable' that stayed firmly within a closed naturalistic system. The novel form, Leslie Fiedler has complained, was 'invented precisely ... to drive the "marvellous" and "wonderful" from the realm of prose fiction'; and the actions of providence, which tend to be 'wonderful' in one way or another, were a casualty.

At the risk of getting into even deeper waters we may note a third factor: there was in some of these authors a strong influence from neo-classical aesthetics, which stressed the general, the temporally static and the typical and was uninterested in causality, and was therefore not very suited to a depiction of divine providence and its historical development of the lives of particular individuals. And alongside this we may also note the classical doctrine of the 'separation of styles'. This was an aesthetic doctrine which divided subject-matter between the tragic (which had noble characters, lofty sentiments, elevated language), and the comic (which had 'low' or rustic characters, everyday actions). Obviously there was little room for God on either side of that dichotomy. Christianity and the tragic vision were not very compatible; and God could certainly not be depicted in the low/comic tradition in which, say, Fielding and Smollett saw themselves. (Fielding, indeed, apologises for the introduction

*of a clergyman into his fiction.) As Auerbach remarks in his famous study *Mimesis*, this was an aesthetic to which the implications of the Gospels, with their union of the realistic, the everyday, and the sublime, were totally opposed. So it is not surprising that the dominance of the Hellenistic aesthetic left no scope for expression of the content of the rival Judaeo-Christian worldview. (The main exceptions to this, Bunyan's work and Robinson Crusoe, both owed a great deal to popular culture, and so were less within the reach of the ruling aesthetic.)*

These three factors combined, then, to create a kind of 'lowest common denominator' convention, stressing the empirically-perceived world, and the generally-agreed virtues. It should be noted, too, that the dominant theological outlook in the state church in the years of the novel's rise in England was 'Latitudinarian', and this outlook stressed charity and ethics to the exclusion of any radical revolution of grace. Its tendencies towards salvation by works inevitably made divine activity less significant. So one way or another, the novel's development took place in a context not at all favourable to the presentation of God in action.

*But the vital point is that this exclusively anti-supernaturalistic convention was to reign almost unchallenged in the English novel right up to our own time. Thus, although Scott and Jane Austen, for example, were apparently strongly influenced by Christianity, the causality in their novels remains naturalistic. Scott does raise the issue of providence in *Heart of Midlothian*; but even there it is hard to tell whether this has objective existence, or whether it is merely local colour, the attitude of the main figures in the story. Besides, providence appears there to be more a matter of the mechanical and inexorable distribution of rewards and punishments than of the personal challenge of a personal grace. Jane Austen was strongly influenced by Evangelicalism, particularly in the ethos of *Mansfield Park*; but she too accepted the convention that had arisen. As Peter Faulkner points out, the ladies in her novels 'never seek for guidance or consolation from any source beyond themselves'; again, a vaguely Christian stoicism seems the order of the day. Her clergymen – even Edmund Bertram – regard religion as a social institution rather than a personal experience: manners, not the knowledge of God, is determinative.*

Nor, indeed, did the high tide of Victorian Evangelicalism challenge this dominant convention to very much effect. Victorian Evangelicalism was not always noted for the stringency of its intellectual aspect: certainly it was uneasy about fiction in principle, often seeing it as 'mere entertainment' of a dubious kind, rather than a serious exploration of reality. Hence it's not surprising that the religion of fiction of this period – Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope for example – tends to be vague in content, and primarily ethical in orientation. The spirits of Dickens' Christmas Carol are blatantly not those the Gospels associate with the incarnation, as C.S. Lewis pointed out. Jane's flight from Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, on the basis of faith in God's guidance and overruling, seems the only case of a supernaturalistic approach in the major Victorian novels: apart, bizarrely, from the fiction of the agnostic George Eliot, whose strong identification with the Methodist Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede* and with Maggie Tulliver in *Mill on the Floss* carries an unexpected providential worldview right across into the narration itself.

But as the nineteenth century wore on the move towards fictional 'realism' gathered strength: the novel began to be turned into a sterilised character laboratory, from which coincidences and irregularities were to be rigorously excluded. ('Fiction is bound as fact is not', proclaimed Mrs. Oliphant, 'and must consider vraisemblance' – ie. the popular consensus view of reality – 'as well as absolute truth.') This selectivity was based on a dominant worldview that was now starting to be shaped strongly by the celebrated nineteenth-century 'loss of faith'. George Meredith boasts that 'our people ... move themselves – are not moved by any outside impulsion' – providence included. In these fictions, therefore, faith comes to be seen as a biographical item, rather than the point of contact with the supernatural universe. And as time goes on this naturalistic convention receives its purest formulation in Zola and his school, where it reveals itself clearly as part and parcel of the worldview of deterministic materialism. 'Realism', in the French nineteenth century novelists, is not so much a matter of objective record as the projection of a particular atheistic ideology.

Finally, then, we come to the modern era; and

modern fiction has been described by Josipovici and others as characterised by the 'death of God' and an exploration of what this must entail. Here there can be no sense of a providence guiding events, and few authors have been prepared to venture anything more hopeful than Conrad's description of destiny in *Heart of Darkness* as a 'mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose'. In modern fiction, God is usually dead.

All in all, then, we find ourselves faced today with a conception of the novel that has preserved the limitations of post-Enlightenment naturalism almost inviolate. The absence or inactivity of God is the norm, is a certainty, a fact of life; the novel has become an imaginative training in atheism. And the main reactions against the straitjacket of naturalism have tended to dissipate themselves in sentimentalism. Is a Christian alternative possible?

Fictions and world views

In fact it is. As Dorothy Van Ghent has argued, any novel must take as its starting-point, its 'given', certain assumptions about the nature and contents of reality: 'Like a science, or like mathematics, but unlike history, the novel proceeds by hypothesis. It says, implicitly, "Given such and such conditions, then such and such would take place."' This hypothesis, these assumptions as to what the world is like, determine what events can happen in the novel, and control the inevitable selective process that takes place. So the novelist does not present unmediated reality; even if the intention is supposedly 'realistic', what gets depicted is merely a hypothetical model of reality, based upon a worldview, whether implicit or explicit. (Art, as Rookmaaker puts it, 'always gives an interpretation of reality.') So even so-called 'naive realism' is a technique based on a particular set of attitudes, a fictional hypothesis grounded in a particular view of the world; it is most certainly not an objective record, because it begins, as Van Ghent puts it, with an assumption, the assumption that 'spatiotemporal facts are the only "real"'. And its claim to be 'realism' will be accepted only at cultural moments when it matches with the popular consensus of a conventional humanistic or atheistic view of reality.

But this means that a novel may, with as good justification, be written with Christian supernaturalism as its underlying hypothesis as anything else. This is not a question either of propaganda or of didacticism; it is merely a matter of the Christian writer depicting the world as (s)he believes it is – exactly as the agnostic writer uses a naturalistic hypothesis. Indeed, to do otherwise, to omit the concept of the God-who-acts that is the fiery centre of the Christian’s worldview and lifestyle, is to capitulate to the dominant agnostic consensus. The issue here is one of honesty to, and faithful and consistent recording and working out of, the artist’s own vision.

And once we realise this, we begin to see something remarkable arising in the achievements of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and Jack Clemo. For theirs are worlds where the supernatural genuinely does things, actively shaping events. (In Tolkien less obviously than in Lewis, admittedly – but very clearly once we pick up the hints as to how his largely Christianized imagination works, and what kinds of events it creates.) We begin to see these writers as the radicals, flying in the face of a consensus tradition that has dominated most of British fiction for two hundred years. Their works are three-dimensional; they are not ‘flatland’ narratives. And this, no doubt, is one key reason why many of us find their fictions so refreshing.

So this study explores just how they have attempted this heretical strategy, and how far they can be said to have succeeded. How do their fictional worlds operate? What works in this revolt against the dominant consensus tradition, and what doesn’t? We’ll be looking at The Lord of the Rings, Lewis’ planetary trilogy, and Lewis’ unusual, complex and remarkable myth-fantasy Till We Have Faces. And to get a helpful side-perspective we’ve included, alongside the fantasies, a single, powerful but little-known work of ‘supernatural realism’, set in Cornwall rather than Perelandra or Middle Earth: Jack Clemo’s Wilding Graft. Clemo helps us ponder how far the fantasy mode is the only means currently available to challenge the dominant consensus; for it would be somewhat troubling to come to the conclusion that the ‘vertical dimension’ can currently only be accessed in fantasy worlds.

Because in the end all this matters a lot. If

Christian faith is true (and who knows, it might be), then there is nothing more vitally important to our existence than ‘knowing God’ – which includes coming to grasp his purposes. As we said at the beginning, what the dominant consensus narratives of our world are doing (and again we include cinema, television fiction and the newspapers), is training us to look at series of events in purely sociological, psychological and economic – purely horizontal – terms, and to regard the result as adequate for living. It isn’t; it may be training us to miss out the most vital (because most permanent, eternal) dimension of all. Which means it’s deeply (even fatally) impoverishing. Those two sentences raise huge issues: but at any rate to pick up on that perspective is to see something of why the fictions we shall consider in this study matter – and why it is that, somehow in our hearts, we sense that they do.

This study, and its companion Fictional Absence, arose from a doctoral thesis completed some years ago. Fictional Absence explores the development of the dominant consensus (and the few exceptions to it) in the English novel tradition, along the lines sketched out above. It’s unfortunate that these issues have received so very little scholarly attention, when they have been significant for the entire imaginative training of our culture. And that’s why these two studies are circulating in this form, in the hope that they may be of use to some of the many people who love English novels – an area on which very little has been written from a biblical-Christian standpoint – and also to the many who have loved the work of Lewis, Tolkien and Clemo.

But there is more. What has struck me in returning to (and completing a fairly superficial edit on) this material is just how spiritually significant the achievements of these three writers are – despite real weaknesses. I’ve been struck again how much these remarkable narratives, and the questions they raise, enrich our entire grasp of how the living God works. And that is something immensely valuable. My hope is that, as we journey together, my readers will experience something of the same.

© 2008 Pete Lowman

Chronicles of Heaven Unshackled are published here by the kind permission of the author.