



Fictional Absence - Appendix 2: The Fictional Hypothesis

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In Fictional Absence, which has been slightly revised for publication here, Pete Lowman considers the presence and absence of God in English literature.

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APPENDIX II: THE FICTIONAL HYPOTHESIS

So much for texts that Ian Watt cites in his insistence that the novel must restrict itself 'rigidly' to the non-supernatural. Let us now turn to the theoretical issues involved. It is indeed true that a consistent supernaturalism will affect the causality of a novel at its very base. But this should not surprise us. *'Like a science, or like mathematics, the novel proceeds by hypothesis'*, writes Dorothy Van Ghent:

It says, implicitly, "Given such and such conditions, then such and such would take place." The hypothesis on which the novel is built is the abstract aspect of its form.[1]

In other words, *any* novel takes as its starting-point, its 'given', certain assumptions about the nature and contents of reality: these assumptions

will seldom be stated directly, but they are nevertheless determinative of what can and will happen in the novel, because some kind of selection is inevitable in the very act of composition.[2] Van Ghent gives two examples from early English fiction: in Bunyan, she says, the primacy of relationship with God decides what will be depicted; in *Moll Flanders*, in contrast, *'the depiction of a human creature "conditioned" to react only to material facts'* produces a world *'astonishingly without spiritual dimension'*.[3] It is impossible, then, for unmediated reality to be depicted in the novel: what is seen is at most a hypothetical model of reality, itself based on some kind of worldview, implicit or explicit. Art, says Rookmaaker, *'always gives an interpretation of reality, of the thing seen'*.[4] Mark Schorer likewise defines the novelist's technique as:

...any selection, structure, or distortion, any form or rhythm imposed upon the world of action... One cannot properly say that a writer has no technique, or that he eschews technique, for, being a writer, he cannot do so.[5]

'Technique' inevitably presents us with experience 'shaped', shaped by a particular set of attitudes towards reality, whether conscious or unconscious.

Thus even 'naive realism' is a technique that *'imposes a structure upon the world of action'*, and such involves a particular set of attitudes concerning the makeup of reality. In Defoe, for example, says Van Ghent,

an intense selectivity has limited the facts of Moll Flanders' world to a certain few kinds of facts, and has ignored great masses of other facts that we think of as making up the plenum of actual reality. Such selectivity warns us that this realistic novel is not actually an "objective", "reportorial", "photographic" representation of reality; its selectivity is that of the work of art, whose purpose is not that of an "objective" report.[6]

The same is true of late nineteenth-century Realism, which, as we noted in an earlier section, was motivated by its own creed and set of dogmas as to what occurred in the universe: the art of Zola, complained Arthur Symons, was *'nature seen through a formula... He observes, indeed, with astonishing minuteness, but he*

observes in support of preconceived ideas.[7] Looking outside the Naturalist movement, we can take note of F.W.J. Hemmings' remarks on Tolstoy:

To say that Tolstoy was realist because he reproduced the realities of life ... means in practice absolutely nothing... It needs little reflection to put the question: 'How can you tell Tolstoy is reproducing the realities of life? How do you know that his inventions are nearer to what actually is, than the invention of Dostoevsky – or indeed of any other writer?'[8]

Sure enough, Dostoevsky complained that *'What most people regard as fantastic and lacking in universality, I hold to be the inmost essence of truth!'*[9] In short, the use of the term 'realism' implies some kind of predetermined definition as to what is and is not real; and 'realism' as a literary technique for shaping narrative is only a certain type of fictive hypothesis based on a certain kind of metaphysic.[10]

Now, since, as Erich Heller has written, *'The confused history of man is largely the history of conflicting senses of reality'* [11], the novel tradition contains a wide variety of fictive hypotheses, and we as readers are offered a large number of alternatives. It may be, indeed, that the world is a little bit like Hardy's depiction. Or Dickens, or George Eliot; or Greene, or Charlotte Bronte; or Steinbeck or Faulkner, or Gabriel Garcia Marquez. If every novel is going to be based not on unmediated reality but on a fictive hypothesis, if, as Lawrence said, every novel implies *'some theory of being, some metaphysic'* [12], then there is no neutral authority that can declare that one or more such hypotheses is not to be given expression in the novel form. Hence a novel may with as good justification be written with Christian supernaturalism as the underlying hypothesis of its world as anything else. If not, if the Christian novelist must bow to some naturalistic consensus, she will find herself, ironically, voicing Theodore Dreiser's complaint:

You couldn't write about life as it was: you had to write about it as someone else thought it was – the ministers and farmers and dullards of the home.[13]

Such a fictive hypothesis based on a consistent supernaturalism will be radically different from naturalism, in that it will present certain events – notably the activity of God – that would be missing from other hypotheses. But we should note that these are not its whole concern. Donald Bell has objected to *'the tendency...to treat religion as a compartment of life, whereas the Christian faith is to permeate all areas of life.*'[14] Hence there can be no such thing as a limited 'Christian subject-matter'. Auerbach demonstrated in his famous study *Mimesis* that the historical Christian literary tradition was wedded to a love of reality in its fullness: and it must continue to be so. Indeed, the belief in God as Creator makes the entire length and breadth of creation 'Christian subject-matter': man and woman in the image of God, nature created by God, the sicknesses and developments of the God-ordained social structures of the family, local community and state, and so on: and, permeating and irradiating all these, the divine presence, because *'in everything God works for good with those who love Him'*.[15] A consistently providentialistic novel must measure up to the challenge posed by the humanist critic Peter Faulkner:

That note – the ability to find in the ordinary experiences of human life a quality that raises it to a higher level – is surely characteristic of humanistic writing, and very remote from the world of Graham Greene.[16]

Remote from Greene it is indeed, as we have noted: but this merely marks how far Greene drifted from the historical Christian literary tradition. The evangelical poet Jack Clemo writes in his usual swashbuckling manner that *'the creative spirit in the literary and plastic arts can only add to a human chaos unless it affirms, directly or indirectly, the value of a transcendent kingdom'*[17]; but, he adds, the latter is nothing other-worldly, or rather nothing solely other-worldly, because in authentic Christian discipleship *'every sphere of life is disturbed by these whispers from the Unseen; there is the secret pact with God, followed by reckless action to which the world has no clue.*'[18] It is *'a life completely overswept'* (ie. in every area) *'by the forces of the eternal world.'*[19] In short, the entire human enterprise is the arena of the divine invasion; and the novelist taking Christian supernaturalism as the basis of his fictional world

will not be limited to detailing his characters' devotions.

(i) Fiction and Propaganda

Several possible objections may be raised to this use of Christian supernaturalism as fictive hypothesis. Let's take them one by one.

The most likely objection – but perhaps less now than formerly – is that such an approach to fiction transforms art into propaganda. But no more licence is sought by the Christian novelist than is taken by – amongst others – Dickens, George Eliot or Lawrence, all of whom could often be said to have a message they wish to put across! Likewise R.W.B. Lewis remarked that what he called the 'second generation' of twentieth-century novelists – Moravia, Camus, Silone, Faulkner, Greene and Malraux – ... have somewhat departed from the traditional aim of presenting a picture or telling a tale...and have directed fiction toward rebellion or conversion or inquiry – disguises of another and equally traditional aim, the aim of instruction.[20]

Greene, indeed, has gone so far as to claim that it is *'the traditional and essential right of a novelist ... to express his views... Even the author, poor devil, has a right to exist.'*[21] For the Christian, the narrator of Salinger's *Seymour* has expressed the situation exactly:

An ecstatically happy prose writer ... can't be moderate or temperate or brief... In the wake of anything as large and consuming as happiness, he necessarily forfeits the much smaller, but, for a writer, always rather exquisite pleasure of appearing on the page serenely sitting on a fence.[22]

Hence T.S. Eliot rejects *'that Olympian elevation and superior indifference'* which accepts the role of being *'merely one among many entertainers'* [23]; and Jack Clemo attacks the idea that *'a certain amount of spiritual paralysis was ... essential to a balanced faith, essential to art'*[24], because *'nothing but disaster can result from the artistic integrity which compels a man to be a detached and cynical spectator of redemption'* [25] – as he would not be of, say, sex.

Writers such as these would not accept that ideological content in a novel is in principle wrong,

unless it can be faulted for manifest clumsiness.

Therefore D.H. Lawrence writes, *'The novel is not, as a rule, immoral because the novelist has any dominant idea, or purpose. The immorality lies in the novelist's helpless, unconscious predilection'*, or at any rate anything that causes him to put *'his thumb in the scale, to pull down the balance to his own predilection.'*[26] It is not the idea-content, but the idea-content mismanaged, that is wrong. It may be appropriate to cite E.M. Forster's remark that *'For me the whole intricate question of method resolves itself not into formulae but into the power of the writer to bounce the reader into accepting what he says.'*[27]

Yet in a sense the matter is still simpler than that. For Christian novelists to write with a supernaturalistic fictive hypothesis is no more propagandist than for the agnostic novelist to use a naturalistic hypothesis. Strictly speaking they are not even being didactic: they are merely depicting the world as they see it; and their intention is to arouse the sense of wonder [28] rather than to suggest that the whole religious thing is rather dubious and probably has a perfectly good psychological or sociological cause. Every novelist employs a fictive hypothesis, and none are entirely 'objective' beyond a certain point: the assertion and celebration of a God who exists and acts is the fictive hypothesis underlying the Christian's work, because it is the determining factor in their view of the world. Otherwise, indeed, they could be accused of unfaithfulness to their deepest vision, and of a craven capitulation to the dominant agnostic consensus. In this sense a supernaturalistic fictive hypothesis is merely a matter of honesty to, and faithful recording of, the artist's own vision.

(ii) Fiction and Proof

A second possible objection to a Christian-supernatural fictional hypothesis proceeds in the opposite direction, and argues that, if the supernatural is employed in the novel, it should be as the end-point of a process of proof, and not assumed throughout. *'The very brilliance of Dostoevsky's presentation shows that he cannot assume, but must prove, the reality of the spirit'*, writes Watt approvingly of *The Brothers*

Karamazov. [29] Such a suggestion seems dangerously close to confounding the function of the novel with the logical progression of ideas that one might expect to find in a work of apologetics. 'A novel is an impression, not an argument', affirmed Hardy in the Preface to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*: that is to say, its task is, at most, to give an imaginative working-through of its particular fictive hypothesis, rather than to justify the latter by the marshalling of arguments to a logical conclusion.

There would, indeed, seem to be something of a logical fallacy in Watt's position. For if, as he suggests, a novelist's means are '*rigidly restricted to terrestrial characters and actions*' [30], if a particular book's events have been limited to a closed naturalistic system, then it has already been decided, been presupposed, that no supernatural agent has any effect on the pattern of events; and no proof can retrospectively introduce something that has been explicitly and deliberately ruled out from the start. Logically, if something is entirely absent, then proving its presence will be impossible! It is the definition or tentative identification of divine activity, and not the instances of that activity, that can be left to the culmination of the novel: the revelation of the true nature or patterning of an element which has earlier been ambiguous, but must already be present in the novel's world at some level. This activity will thus be an integral part of the fictive hypothesis all along, although it may not have been revealed as such. If the novelist wishes to assert that God is at work in history, they have to indicate what they are talking about.

And in fact such a procedure, in which supernaturalism serves as the underlying hypothesis to be explored, rather than – or as well as – the culmination of the argument, is more in line than might be expected with the methodology of some contemporary Christian apologetics. The problems of constructing any kind of positivistic proof in a watertight logical progression have been amply illustrated by the vicissitudes of Descartes' minimal proposition '*I think therefore I am*'; and if the existence of the self, and the existence of the empirical universe (which Descartes was working his way towards) should be so difficult to demonstrate in any undeniable fashion, then 'proving God' by this sort of method appears a daunting task. Furthermore, both C.S.

Lewis [31] and Cornelius Van Til [32] have drawn attention to the fact that the very employment of the reasoning faculty in such a discussion is a presupposition that can really only be justified at a later stage of the argument; for example, by the suggestion that the reason is an instrument created by God, the activities of which may be expected (in some circumstances at least) to correspond to a fair degree with the reality of the universe outside it. Hence it has been argued that the Christian apologist should take as his starting-point God and not human reason: and then, having propounded a consistent biblical worldview that contains its own justification for its use of reason, proceed to demonstrate the correlation between its assertions and the universe as we know it. Francis Schaeffer, for example, argues that:

Scientific proof, philosophical proof and religious proof follow the same rules. We may have any problem before us which we wish to solve; it may concern a chemical reaction, or the meaning of man. After the question has been defined, in each case proof consists of two steps:

A. The theory must be non-contradictory and must give an answer to the phenomenon in question.

B. We must be able to live consistently with our theory. [33]

So that instead of working from the data to an inductive generalization, we can construct a hypothesis that answers the problem, which will then either be falsified or not falsified by its own internal consistency and its correspondence to the actual state of the universe. (Such a methodology is by no means peculiar to Christian apologetics, of course; it resembles the approach to scientific research expounded by Karl Popper, arguably the greatest philosopher of science of the century, in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959) and elsewhere. [34])

The application of this to the supernaturalistic novel is clear. To say that the writer '*cannot assume, but must prove, the reality of the spirit*' is to employ ideas obsolete in disciplines more rigorously concerned with the nature of proof. It is only by assuming the fictional hypothesis, demonstrating its meaningful consistency, and then 'matching it up', as it were, with the actual state of things outside the novel, that the original

hypothesis can in any sense whatsoever be 'proven'. This matching up or proof will take place in the reading process. The novel may be considered as a hypothesis claiming to bear some similarity to reality; the 'proof' is brought into being by (to use Conrad's phrase) '*making you see*' and recognise a consistency and a correlation with external reality – and '*making you see*' throughout the entire length of the novel. This too is appropriate because, as Colin Brown writes, '*The kind of hypothesis that the Bible presents is not a remote, static, abstract one, but an interpretation of life which makes sense as we go along living it.*'[35] The supernatural, then, may rightly be assumed from the start, and if 'proof' is in any way the business of the novel at all, that proof emerges in the overall working-through of the underlying hypothesis.

For various reasons such a 'proof' will not be total in a novel. In the real world faith is not very often the product solely of observation of the patterning of events in one's own life. Accordingly, it might be unrealistic to present the events of a novel as being in themselves a totally *conclusive* apologetic for faith, unless it is clear that what the novel portrays is not claimed as normal. The Christian, believing in providence, will obviously be more likely to see a patterning in the events of their life than will the agnostic: they supply an interpretation which is feasible but is not usually (in the events of their own life, as against those of the Bible) absolutely assured or proven. The rational foundation of their faith may well lie mostly in other areas. Furthermore, it is not often that the Christian will feel able to make an absolutely definite assertion as to the exact nature of providence in their life: they are more likely to make a tentative statement about the direction of God's leading, that may have to be revised in the light of further events and further leading. There is, then, an element of uncertainty in the Christian's interpretation of providence in the events of their own life; and this element exists because they are usually supplying their interpretation of the events by means of their own fallible and only partially-trained judgement, whereas in the Bible (in the events of Exodus, say, or of the book of Acts) interpretation is supplied by divine revelation. And, of course, a novelist, as against a biographer or a historian, is presenting events that are fictional rather than actual. For all these reasons the Christian

novelist's aim cannot be to provide a total vindication of their faith(!), to 'prove', conclusively, *in toto*, the 'reality of the spirit'; but rather, eventually, to offer a tentative report, or more accurately a possible model, of the workings of providence in daily life. This model, offered as a hypothesis, certainly has a place in a total apologetic: it will hardly be a complete proof. That is, after all, not its purpose.

It seems unreasonable, then, to expect the novelist to 'prove rather than assume' the presence of the supernatural in their work. It is only if they transcend the naturalistic convention and, as it were, set forth their fictional hypothesis, that they can in any sense and in any measure 'prove' it by its imaginative working-through in their fiction.

(iii) Mimesis and the Novel

A third possible objection is of a different kind. It may be objected that we are prioritizing the relationship between the work of art and an external, pre-existing reality which it in some way represents, whereas in fact the important feature of a work of art is the work itself as an autonomous structure of language.

Now we must certainly accept that the primary reference of the aesthetic object (under God) is indeed its own intrinsic reality. Obviously the Christian critic is far from being committed automatically to an aesthetic based entirely on realism or imitation of the 'outside world': the idea that humans are made in the image of a God who is a creator implies that we too are beings capable of 'making it new'. (References to the aesthetic awareness as early as the second chapter of Genesis imply that the biblical view of humanity includes that awareness as an essential characteristic.[36]) A 'Christian' novel may, then, be primarily about itself, about its own newly-invented events and characters, about its own words and sentences and paragraphs. Unlike other objects, writes Teselle:

the art object is experienced as a self-sufficient object presenting its own highly-valued and structured set of particulars. It is this distinctive valuation or new insight or novel shape that initially attracts the eye, not the relationship between this reality and reality more broadly conceived.[37]

However, there are always a large number of things that can be said about any work of art (as has been amply proven by the mushrooming of the literary-critical industry!). And one of these many is the relationship of a work to the reality that pre-exists it, even though, as Teselle reminds us, that reality is perceptible:

only through the experience of it, the particular experience expressed in the poem. Another way of putting this would be to say that a poem is about something else only by way of itself, about a wider reality only by way of its own reality.[38]

Hence Francis Schaeffer, rejecting the two alternatives of 'art for art's sake' and art as 'only an embodiment of a message', states as a basic principle that while 'a work of art is first of all a work of art', yet 'the artist makes a body of work and this body of work shows his worldview'. [39] While the primary reference of a work of art may be itself, there is an almost inevitable connection between the nature of a work of art and the external reality in which it comes into being; or rather the artist's *perception* of that reality, that is, their worldview. The artwork cannot simply emerge *ex nihilo*; there must be some correlation between the 'secondary world' created by the artist and the 'outside world' as *perceived* by their worldview. The worldview – with all its inconsistencies, ambiguities and competing 'codes' – will leave its mark.

And thus our concern in this study has been to explore this basic relationship, in examining the means by which a major aspect – a fundamental, highly significant aspect – of the Christian vision of the world finds expression in that fusion of the mimesis of reality and the ordering or 'making anew' by the artist that is the final work. This section has sought to demonstrate that supernaturalism and prose fiction are not inherently incompatible: rather, the 'new world' of a novel may as justifiably be built upon a fictional hypothesis in the shape of Christian supernaturalism as any other. And the fact that this has so seldom happened in the English novel tells us a good deal about its function as a form embodying (and thereby reinforcing) a post-Enlightenment vision of the world; no fictional hypothesis is altogether an island...

(iv) Modes of Supernaturalism

Finally there is a theological issue. It may be argued that an overemphasis on the miraculous is unbiblical, in that 'signs and wonders' are not presented in the Bible as an entirely everyday matter, and Scripture records long stretches of history without any mention of an overt miracle at all; and likewise that it is unrealistic, in that the Christian does not live in expectation of a miracle every five minutes. The divinely-ordained laws of the universe do not require constant alteration and suspension.

Much of this is true, and it is important to note that the supernaturalistic and the overtly miraculous are not synonymous. The doctrine of providence covers the *whole* of existence. The New Testament depicts God as the one who 'upholds all things by the word of His power' [40]; and the prayer 'Give us this day our daily bread' sets all the activities and structures of daily life within a context of divine sovereignty. God's activity, then, is not to be seen only in terms of the miraculous. Rather, the Christian sees the whole world as the arena of God's redemptive strategy. Before the Fall, according to Genesis, the creation was in total harmony.[41] At the Fall man rebelled against God, demanding the right to be 'as gods', autonomous and self-determining units without any responsibility to God or to divine law.[42] As man had been placed as God's regent on the earth [43], the consequence of human rebellion was that the whole earth became 'subjected to frustration'. [44] Henceforth the natural laws of cause and effect would no longer operate purposively to a creative and harmonious conclusion for all involved.[45] Within the human world there would be cycles of meaningless, directionless repetitiveness, as Ecclesiastes, in its survey of what is 'under the sun', describes:

Vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose... That thing which hath been, it is that which shall be...and there is no new thing under the sun.[46]

The New Testament presents the Incarnation as

the divine reply to this predicament. Christ advanced into Galilee proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God, and verifying his claims with miracles, healing the blind, raising the dead, casting out demons.[47] These actions were the signs of the Messiah predicted by the Old Testament, the public demonstration that the reversal of the meaningless disorder of the Fall had begun. Christ's death, as an atonement for sin, and His resurrection are accordingly the inauguration of an entirely new era. As a result history becomes an arena in which the kingdom of God begins to be manifested.

Paul writes:

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the first-born among many brethren.[48]

God is at work, active in the lives of His people to bring about a return in far greater fullness to the expression of God in man that was defaced at the Fall. Human history has recovered shape and direction.

Now, while it is obviously possible for the Christian to give an account of a day's events purely in terms of general providence, with no reference whatsoever to supernatural causality of any other kind, yet as the scope expands or deepens this overall strategy of redemption will come into view. The novel form tends to take a wide view of life and reality; and also, by the very act of choosing certain events, facts, characters and so forth for depiction, the novelist highlights their material as being in some way significant and worthy of record. For the Christian novelist the divine plan of salvation will obviously be the primary underlying fact in any significant human history (not least because of its all-inclusiveness): and in a narrative with the scope and breadth of a novel, not to express this aspect would in some sense be to relegate it as of secondary importance.

And if the created universe and created history exist primarily as the arena of redemption, then that fact has implications that are tangible in all but the most truly 'insignificant' areas: can be

visualised, let us say, except where the focus is extremely small. It may be that within a very limited compass the actual bearing of the redemptive purpose of the events narrated is imperceptible and will, quite appropriately, be left out. But as the scope of the narrative expands to cover months or years, or as it is to some extent universalised, it reaches a point where the Christian will feel that the divine strategy must be taken into account, as an important 'figure in the carpet', a pattern giving meaning to the whole.

Thus, while a Christian may buy a loaf of bread without consciously reflecting on its salvational context(!) [49], if they are reflecting on a period of three years of their life, or the development of their marriage, or the part their life plays in their community, or a series of encounters which made a profound impression on their character – the kind of material that is commonly the scope of the novel – then they will think in terms of the God to whose care and overruling they have entrusted these areas. Within such a context, as we noted earlier, love, war, art, politics, in short the whole of human society, can be seen. And the phrase 'care and overruling' implies a positive supernaturalistic strategy at work within the created world of human history maintained by providence.

We may tentatively distinguish three broad areas of this 'care and overruling'. Firstly, there is the basic situation in which this strategy operates primarily within the personalities of individuals (whether Christian or not), with the goal of bringing them to know Christ and '*forming Christ*' [50] in them. Much of the New Testament is concerned with events on this level: God's initial calling, conviction of wrongdoing and alienation, rebirth through the Spirit, daily empowering, the deepening revelation of God to the Christian, loving and God-inspired service to the world, and much else besides can be seen in these terms, where there is no alteration of 'normal' causality in the external, visible world. Furthermore, the Christian on earth is not intended to be kept safely out of reach of the historical consequences of the Fall: Jesus prayed, '*My prayer is not that You take them out of the world, but that You protect them from the evil one.*'[51] Accordingly there will be occasions when the events of the fallen universe come upon the individual in all their anarchic, destructive futility: and though '*in*

everything God works for good with those who love Him', though He is not absent from such situations, yet He may in His sovereignty choose for a time to work only within the Christian – seeming, even, to be absent – rather than in altering the external situation. We are here in the area of God's permissive, rather than His active, will.

The book of Job is a good example; not until the end of the book does God alter the external circumstances, yet the whole narrative is set within a clear context of divine sovereignty.[52] Or there is the book of Habakkuk, where it is precisely the apparent inactivity of God that is the problem (and the challenge to growth in maturity and faith). In this respect a volume like Solzhenitsyn's *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* likewise finds its place within the biblical worldview. In such narratives there may be no miraculous deliverance, but the possibility will be present that in some sense God can be 'a very present help in trouble'. Paul promises, as a man who knew intense suffering, that:

God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it.[53]

That 'way of escape' may be internal rather than external. But there is in this passage a sense of an ongoing, sustaining *relationship* with God that is the all-important distinction from the situation in Greene's trilogy, for example, where God seems almost absent from both the external and internal spheres.

Secondly, the Bible depicts situations in which God is organizing the various currents of history to produce particular configurations and particular issues at various points, whether in the life of an individual, or in the extension of the divine kingdom in a particular situation. Here no obviously 'miraculous' occurrence is involved: what is 'more than natural' is the collocation of events. Berkouwer has noted that in the Old Testament *'it is striking to observe how often the purpose of God is reached without radical intervention'*. [54]

For example, in Genesis 37 Joseph is saved from his brothers by Reuben, then sent on to Egypt by his brothers: but it is God to whom Joseph attributes his arrival in Egypt, which is the cause of the deliverance of both Egypt and Israel from famine. *'Thus the activity of God is revealed, not as a deus ex machina, but in the action of the brothers.'*[55] Similarly in the book of Esther it is the normal proceedings of the Persian Empire, and the emperor's search for a new queen, that place Esther in a position to preserve her people; and, in the wider context of the Old Testament as a whole, to ensure the uninterrupted progress of divine strategy. But clearly this is to be read as a divine deliverance. Obviously such a narrative presupposes that God is intervening in, or giving direction to, the general movement of history, if only in the particular choice or temperament of individuals. But it is what one might call a covert rather than an overt providence.

Besides this there is of course the category of overt 'miracle'. It should be pointed out that a miracle does not involve the temporary incursion by God into a closed naturalistic universe that is otherwise autonomous: that would be close to deism. The rationale of the miraculous is, as Berkouwer says, that *'in miracles God takes another way than that which had come to be expected of him in the usual course of events.'*[56] The normal causes are superseded by the action of the First Cause Himself: His divinely-ordained laws are overruled by the special and purposive fiat of the divine Lawgiver. This is what one might call 'overt providence'. How common such events may be is a matter on which there is some disagreement amongst Christians. What is plain is that miracles are not comparable to the magician's bag of tricks: they are never arbitrary or merely spectacular, but are always closely related to God's strategy in history.

Many Christians would agree that some remarkable advances in the history of Christianity have been accompanied by a clear awareness of God answering prayer, guiding, and providing resources and contacts as His kingdom advanced. One could instance the lives of such people as Hudson Taylor, C.T. Studd, or George Muller. The poet Jack Clemo has gone on to claim that the unbelief of the Church is the main

reason why such overt divine activity has come to seem abnormal rather than normative: *'The nominal church member may go through life with as little sense of plan or purpose as the ordinary outsider'*, he says, *'but the true convert is trained for a specific place in God's redemptive strategy. This is the next step beyond surrender.'*[57] Certainly it is a feature of Christian experience that God sometimes acts in the most striking way when the Christian follows His leading in a manner which will prove disastrous if God is absent: there is a relationship between the Christian's self-committal to God and God's to him. The hiddenness of God, then, may at times be the result of human unbelief and timidity.

However, many modern accounts of providence have tended to put much more emphasis on what we have called the 'covert providence', the orchestrating of ordinary events, as the norm, than on the 'overt miracle' where normal causality is suspended altogether. This is by and large true of the lives of Hudson Taylor *et al* as well. But it should be noted that this in no way represents a retreat from the claim of direct divine intervention. There is still a pronounced sense of God at work in the progression of events. Clemo remarks, *'Since the object of the covenant is to show that God's ways are not man's ways, there is usually an element of resistance to common sense in the divine proposal.'*[58] William MacDonald concurs: *'Faith does not operate in the realm of the possible. There is no glory for God in that which is humanly possible. Faith begins where man's power ends.'*[59] Faith is not merely a pious application of religious terminology to commonplace events. Even if no overt miracle is involved, the divine strategy may well be marked by a tendency to run counter to the apparent probabilities of the situation.

But the biblical picture is one in which this purpose may not be universally recognised; it is entirely possible (up until the last judgement!) for the individual to neglect or ignore the divine patterning in experience. Christ Himself taught that the direction of God would in general be perceived only by those who were willing to follow God.[60] The divine strategy becomes meaningful in this life to those who cooperate with it: *'in everything God works for good with those who love Him'*.[61] Otherwise, events may well seem merely the directionless results of closed

causation; no plan will appear where the Planner is rejected. So the scheme of providence cannot biblically be depicted as something blatantly apparent; nevertheless, to the Christian it is present as a shape that can be discerned by the perspective of faith within the flux of events.

Consequently the Christian cannot settle for a vision or model of events that is devoid of the strategy of God. His/her faith is built on a triumphant hope that God is at work in every situation, even when He is apparently absent – indeed, even when we are doing our best to build our own decrepit kingdoms. The providential pattern (in its various modes) cannot sensibly be ignored in a narrative of events that has a scope as wide as that which the novel usually claims. The miraculous may not be an everyday event; but even where providence operates only within human personalities, there is something definite, some trend or meaning in the situation as it is finally to be perceived, that would be capable of depiction.

And that is the ultimate significance of events. To neglect or ignore it is easy. But such a failure of vision amounts, to the Christian, to the neglect or ignoring of final significance, of the all-important meaning of what our lives are about. To allow our life-narratives to be shaped by an entirely fictional absence of God (and to train other readers that way) is to miss their point in the most vital way conceivable.

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References:

- [1] Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Fiction* (New York, 1953; Harper edition of 1961), p.3.
- [2] Cf. also George J. Becker: *'And if we wish to pursue the "I am a camera" metaphor, we must remember that even what the camera presents us with is a made thing in the sense that it is composed and selected – which is certainly verified the moment we consider cinematic art even of the most documentary sort.'* (Introduction to *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*)

(Princeton, 1963), pp.37-38).

[3] Van Ghent, *op.cit.*, p.34.

[4] H.R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (1970), p.236.

[5] Mark Schorer, 'Technique as discovery', in *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, ed. David Lodge (1972), p.388.

[6] Van Ghent, *op.cit.*, p.35.

[7] Quoted K. Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel 1865-1900* (1965), p.57.

[8] F.W.J. Hemmings, *The Russian Novel in France 1884-1914* (1950), p.42.

[9] Quoted Miriam Allott, *Novelists on the Novel* (1959), p.68.

[10] Cf. Roger Fowler, *Linguistics and the Novel* (1977), p.99: 'Note that "realism" is not an actuality, but a convention, a theory. Henry James in *The Portrait of a Lady*, or in his more withdrawn way Hemingway in *The Killers*, writes to a theory of the way people have knowledge of each other; Joyce articulates the thoughts of Leopold Bloom in an artificially constructed language which, by convention, has come to be accepted as the representation of a fragmented, unfocused consciousness of that sort.' Van Ghent summarises the issue thus: "'Realism" ... implies, when it is used to describe the factually-oriented novel, that spatial-temporal facts are the only "real"... What is blurred over by the statement is the hypothetical structure of even the most "documentary" or "circumstantial" kind of fiction' (*op.cit.*, p.33).

[11] Erich Heller, quoted in Becker, *op.cit.*, p.592.

[12] D.H. Lawrence, 'Study of Thomas Hardy' in *Phoenix* (1936), quoted Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1961), p.79.

[13] Quoted Becker, *op.cit.*, p.18.

[14] Quoted Merle Meeter, *Literature and the Gospel* (Nutley, New Jersey, 1972), p.98.

[15] Romans 8:28. There may, of course, be differences in treatment: for example, the Bible's presentation of subject-matter pertaining to both normal and corrupted sexuality is quite overt, but it does not employ the kind of voyeuristic specificity we might find in a blockbuster paperback.

[16] Peter Faulkner, *Humanism in the English Novel* (1975), p.169.

[17] Jack Clemo, *The Invading Gospel* (1958: Lakeland edition of 1972), p.37. This remark might seem to be of particular relevance to Greene.

[18] *Ibid*, p.46.

[19] *Ibid*, p.30.

[20] R.W.B. Lewis, *The Picaresque Saint* (1960), p.214.

[21] Graham Greene, *Collected Essays* (1969; Penguin edition of 1970), pp.92-93.

[22] Quoted Wayne Booth, *op.cit.*, p.66.

[23] T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods* (1934), pp.37, 34.

[24] Clemo, *op.cit.*, p.62.

[25] *Ibid*, p.37.

[26] D.H. Lawrence. 'Morality and the Novel', in Lodge, *op.cit.*, pp.128-129.

[27] E.M. Forster, in *ibid*, p.143.

[28] This, of course, can be argued to be the goal of the aesthetic experience in general, as in Sallie McFague Teselle, *Literature and the Christian Life* (Yale, 1966), p.73.

[29] Watt, *op.cit.*, p.94.

[30] Watt, *ibid*, p.93.

[31] Cf. C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (1947; Fontana edition of 1960), ch.3, esp. pp.26-27.

[32] Cornelius Van Til, *The Defence of the Faith* (Philadelphia, 1955), p.119.

[33] Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (1968), p.100.

[34] A useful non-specialist introduction to Popper's thought is Bryan Magee, *Popper* (1973); see particularly the second chapter.

[35] Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (1969), p.266. Cf. John 7:17.

[36] Genesis 2:9. Cf. also the creative (though also reality-oriented!) use of language in the naming of the beasts, vv.19-20, and the poetic (though again reality-oriented) outburst of v.23.

[37] Teselle, *op.cit.*, p.85.

[38] Teselle, *ibid*, p.88.

[39] Francis Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (1973), pp.34-36.

[40] Hebrews 1:3.

[41] Genesis 1:31.

[42] Genesis 3:5.

[43] Genesis 1:26, 2:15.

[44] Romans 8:20.

[45] Genesis 3:18-19.

[46] Ecclesiastes 1:2-5, 9.

[47] Luke 4:18-21, Matthew 11:2-5.

[48] Romans 8:28-29.

[49] Perhaps this is a bad example: the practice of 'saying grace' for a meal, and the prayer 'Give us this day our daily bread', represent just such a 'conscious reflection'!

[50] Galatians 4:19.

[51] John 17:15.

[52] Cf. Roger Forster and Paul Marston, *God's Strategy in Human History* (1973), pp.3-12 *et passim*.

[53] 1 Corinthians 10:13.

[54] G.C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, trans. Lewis B. Smerdes (Grand Rapids,1952), p.92.

[55] *Ibid*, p.90.

[56] *Ibid*, p.214.

[57] Clemo, *op.cit.*, pp.43-44.

[58] Clemo, *op. cit.*, p.45.

[59] William MacDonald, *True Discipleship* (1963), p.30.

[60] Cf. John 7:17.

[61] Romans 8:28.

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