



Fictional Absence - Chapter 1: The Birth of the Novel

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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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Chapter One: The Birth of the Novel

(i) Roots

The world created for us in most of the great English novels is one where the idea of a God who cares about us to the point of actually doing things in our lives seems to have been lost. How has that happened? What has gone wrong?

An important part of the answer must lie in the circumstances of the novel's birth. The English novel arose in the period we call the Enlightenment, with major writers like Defoe, Richardson and Fielding; and, in important respects, it remains essentially an Enlightenment form.

Some years ago, Ian Watt's influential study *The Rise of the Novel* argued convincingly that the

novel's emergence had much to do with the philosophical realism of the late 17th century and early 18th century Enlightenment; especially that movement's revolt against tradition, and its stress on the particular and individual as against that which was universal and general.[1] Both these tendencies offered a new legitimacy and importance for narratives of the everyday and personal: rather than the great (but traditional and general) themes of mythology or of the past, whether sacred or secular, that had preoccupied earlier writers. It was in this context that the novel was born.

Now, these tendencies need not necessarily have been anti-supernaturalistic or anti-Christian in nature. The revolt against the traditional emphasis on the universal and general was not so much a rebellion against Christianity as against Platonism[2]; and among its philosophical leaders were sincere Christians such as Locke. Nonetheless, Enlightenment realism seems to have begun a process that led eventually to the novel's anti-supernaturalistic convention. Perhaps the key factor was its exaltation of that which was perceived empirically by man, at the expense of that which was divinely revealed to him. In time, this approach drove a wedge between reason and faith, resulting in a restriction of faith and the loss of the whole dimension of the supernatural.

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The process can probably be seen as beginning with Descartes (1596-1650). He it was who launched the ambitious project of 'rationalism': he dreamed of building a total philosophical system that worked outwards solely from the starting-point of man's own thoughts. 'I think, therefore I am' was the famous opening move from which he began; and from there he hoped that everything might follow, purely by logical deduction. Again, this starting-point of human thoughts and perceptions need not have led automatically to an anti-Christian position.[3] What set it on this path was the fact that, even after Descartes' (somewhat dubious) proof of God, revelation was still more or less ignored, and complete faith set in the human reason. God had been 'proven' to exist, which meant (for Descartes) that our created senses could be relied upon; but the

universe still tended to be contemplated in man-centred terms. It was what *I* think that was primary; rather than any external reality that preexists me and exists whether I do or not – and that may indeed choose to speak to me and teach me. Colin Brown comments that:

Descartes was interested in God not for his own sake, but for the world's. God is invoked as a kind of deus ex machina to guarantee the validity of our thought about the world. Apart from that he remains eternally standing in the wings. It is not surprising that, when later philosophers came along who shared Descartes' assumptions but not his methods, they could dispose entirely of this unwanted prop.[4]

For many of his successors, it appeared to be a safer move to put faith in human sense-perceptions than in divine revelation.

Perhaps, too, the 'Empiricist' thought of such men as Locke and Berkeley served to move things in the same direction. Again, both Locke and Berkeley were Christians; but their heavy stress on the importance of sensory experience may be seen as assisting the change of emphasis from knowing ultimate reality supremely through what its Maker tells us about it, to knowing the world supremely through what we feel and see of it. From a more sociological perspective, it is arguable that the growth of capitalism in this period tended likewise to give priority to what was material, what could be measured, what was instantly observable by sense-perception. In Karl Mannheim's words, there was developing a "quantitative" rationalism' striving for 'a conception of the world which would ... explain the world as a mere compound of physical mass and physical forces' [5] – a world in which the supernatural would be pushed to the periphery.

Such a conception inevitably gives an important role to science; and here, says Basil Willey, there was arising:

a 'climate of opinion' in which supernatural and occult explanations of natural phenomena ceased to satisfy, and the universe came more and more to be regarded as the Great Machine, working by rigidly determined laws of material causation. The supernatural, in both its divine and its diabolical forms, was banished from Nature.[6]

Yet again, this need not have been to the

disadvantage of Christianity. After all, there is nothing particularly advantageous to belief in asserting a 'special' divine intervention to account for phenomena which are the result of natural 'laws' that are themselves divinely-established; a 'God of the gaps' has never been an entirely safe apologetic strategy. Many of the foremost scientists of the period were devout Christians who saw their task as an exploration of the works of God, and whose concept of scientific law was based on the concept of a divine and rational Lawgiver.[7] But as the Enlightenment wore on, the idea of the universe as a natural system ordained by God slowly modified into one of an exclusively *naturalistic* system, from which God remained absent.

The result of all this was the prevalence of Deism, the religion of God as the absentee landlord, the 'great watchmaker' who has set the world in motion but takes no further part in its affairs. 'The Divine', says Paul Hazard in the classic work on the period, 'was relegated to a vague and impenetrable heaven, somewhere up in the skies.'[8] Colin Brown agrees: 'God was pushed more and more to the perimeter and sometimes outside altogether.'[9] To borrow a phrase used by the Dutch art historian H.R. Rookmaaker, 'The sky is closed... the sole facts are the things that we can see – the things we see are really the only facts there are.'[10] R.G. Cox sees the main difference between the 'world-picture' when Donne began to write in 1592, and that at the time of Marvell's death in 1678, as being that in the earlier picture:

Faith and Reason were not commonly set in opposition to each other, and their spheres were not sharply distinguished. At the end of the period, very different assumptions prevail. Empirical science has emerged and is claiming the whole material universe as its field; the territory of Faith is coming to be strictly limited and fenced off so as to leave all the rest to Reason.[11]

The Reformation concept of a unified world that included both 'natural' and 'supernatural', was disappearing. Faith was becoming restricted to an area where it had little or no effect on daily life, and the stress was placed heavily on the world of the senses. This was the context in which the modern novel emerged.[12]

And this way of thinking worked through into most

areas of culture. C.A. Patrides' book *The Grand Design of God* demonstrates the change that took place in the dominant way of looking at events, from the historiography of the period. History was still seen theocentrically, that is, with divine supervision, well into the second half of the seventeenth century. But Milton's *History of Britain*, first published in 1670, and Bossuet's *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* of 1681 stand at the end of this tradition. Indeed a secularized historical picture (stressing the classical heritage) began to compete with the Judaeo-Christian, providentially-oriented approach from the beginning of the sixteenth century, in men like Guicciardini[13]: Machiavelli, for example, 'appears to have displaced Providence by the arbitrary goddess Fortune.'[14] By the end of the seventeenth century the onset of the Enlightenment was demonstrated by the general disappearance of providence from historiography. Patrides points out that, in contrast to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Dryden's opera *The State of Innocence and the Fall of Man* (1673-74) 'is not Christocentric for the simple reason that Dryden denied the God-man any active role in the affairs of mankind.'[15] Milton's *History of Britain*, he says, marked 'the termination of an era in the history of European thought.'[16]

Dryden has been said to mark the comparable triumph of Enlightenment presuppositions in the area of poetry. Buckley suggests that in him 'we have a ruling poet, who, for the first time in more than three-quarters of a century, can hardly be regarded as a religious poet'; and he goes on to point out the generally un-religious nature of the poetry of the period that followed – Pope, Swift, Thomson, even Johnson: 'Deism came gradually to replace Christianity as the effective motive power of poetry... "Religious poetry", what there was of it, tried ... to become a separate genre, and an intolerantly narrow one, which would admit very little of the poet's life-process.'[17] The sky was becoming closed: God and the everyday world had been compartmentalised and cut off from each other.

By the time the novel emerged, then, in novels like Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), a worldview had become dominant in which the supernatural was tending to be excluded from human affairs, and the stress was placed on the empirical, material world. Truth and meaning were to be found in

Nature and human reason without the aid of revelation – or with revelation banished to the perimeter. It is not surprising that the novel-form that arose in this situation should be one which fails to handle the presentation of God actively working out His purposes in life and society.

(ii) The Stories That Didn't Get Written

Things might have been different, and the modern novel might not have grown up with the shortcomings of Enlightenment thought built into it, if there had already been a tradition of prose fiction that took seriously the activity of God in everyday situations. But no such tradition existed.

Pre-Renaissance Catholic thought was, obviously, thoroughly supernaturalistic. However, its emphasis was on the universal and permanent rather than the particular and contemporary; and this, as Ian Watt has demonstrated, was not the sort of cultural context in which something like the realistic novel might be expected to develop.[18] There was also a marked tendency towards separating the spheres of 'grace', the world of God's activity, and 'nature', the world of the everyday. Such a separation can be traced a long way back in some areas of Catholic thought – as far, indeed, as the patristic interpreters of scriptural narrative who, as Erich Auerbach says, 'often removed the thing told very far from its sensory base. The sensory occurrence pales before the power of the figural meaning'.[19] It was a way of thinking that led, in the visual arts, to the icon, where 'the heavenly things were all-important, and were so holy that they were not pictured realistically... Only symbols were portrayed'[20]; indeed, so important was the world of grace that often 'simple nature ... held no interest for the artist.'[21]

In literature, the result of such thought could be works like the eleventh-century Old French *Vie de Saint Alexis*, where, says Auerbach:

On the one hand there is serving God, forsaking the world, and seeking eternal bliss – on the other, natural life in the world, which leads to "great sorrow." There are no other levels of consciousness, and external reality – the many additional phenomena which have their place in the universe and which ought somehow to constitute the frame for the occurrences of the narration – is submitted to such reduction that

nothing survives but an insubstantial background for the life of the saint.[22]

Buckley comments that much late medieval poetry is likewise 'a poetry ... envisaging the saving forces as existing quite outside the world of human manners and relationships.'[23] Where such an attitude was dominant there was little place for serious exploration of God's activity in contemporary social life. The only medieval vernacular prose literature that showed much interest in the world of 'nature' (apart from the historiography, which was thoroughly theocentric) tended not to be very serious in intention – popular folktales, and the like. And as for the romances, as Ryan has remarked:

While the bulk of medieval literature is subordinated to a greater or lesser extent to the influence of Christianity, the romances, entertaining narrative works whose gratification value seems to have been escape from the banality of day to day existence, are among the few types of literary activity that display little of that influence.[24]

There are, of course, many exceptions. Marianne Ailes suggests that in general the 'theological and structural separation of religious and secular' did not have the same impact on the more popular literature, and:

Popular romance did offer models of serving God within society, or at least in the secular world through pilgrimages – though these necessarily took you out of society for a period of time. Epics such as the Chanson de Roland show God intervening directly (he stops the sun as in the book of Joshua), through encouragement (he speaks to Charlemagne directly), or through human agency (he enables the right judgement to be made through the judicial combat). God is often seen answering prayer in chansons de geste. The Grail romances are also exceptions, perhaps because they are in part at least allegorical.... In other romances direct intervention by God is more rare, though of course protagonists attend church, pray and carry out penance. But in general it is the more learned literature that seems more likely to exclude God, whereas the popular literature tends to integrate secular and religious better.[25]

Still, the general tendency in these centuries prior to the rise of the novel was away from fusion of the realms of 'grace' and of 'nature' in the sense of

the everyday social world. And the situation did not really improve with the advent of the Renaissance, or rather Renaissances, and their rediscovery of the importance of physical nature. The separation of grace and nature was still a dominant idea; and in the form it took in scholasticism after Aquinas, 'the world of faith, of grace, of religion is the higher one, a world for which we have need of God's revelation... But the lower world, the world of men, the world of 'nature', can be understood by reason, and here in fact reason reigns. It is as such non-religious, secular.'[26] And, as Etienne Gilson argues, this dichotomy between faith and reason led to a parallel dichotomy ('new chasms') between God and His world[27]: 'Heaven began ... to seem farther off' – precisely the problem the novel would later inherit, exacerbated by the developments of the Enlightenment. The world of the natural creation and of day-to-day living were beginning to be, in Schaeffer's term, 'autonomous'[28], bearing little relation to the supernatural aspect of the universe.

Consequently, the discovery that nature was worthy of depiction in art – in Petrarch's poetry, for example, or Giotto's painting – led towards a situation where the rediscovered natural world replaced rather than complemented the supernatural universe that had inspired earlier ages.[29] Auerbach notes that even in the great Christian poetry of Dante there is a tendency for the image of man to eclipse the image of God; and when we move on to Boccaccio, 'Of the figural-Christian conception which pervaded Dante's imitation of the earthly and human world and which gave it power and depth, no trace is to be found... Boccaccio's characters live on earth, and only on earth.'[30]

So with the coming of the Renaissance, the split that had been allowed to open in earlier scholastic thinking between God's grace and the everyday world began to push grace out of sight altogether. Where 'grace' survived, it tended to be in a separate universe: '"The sacred" becomes a category, either a poem or a feeling, quite separate from others', as Buckley remarks of sixteenth-century religious poetry.[31] So if we set this schizophrenia of vision alongside the earlier scholastic disinterest in the everyday, we see why, by the time of the Enlightenment, there was not really an available tradition of story-telling that

took seriously the presence of grace in everyday reality. Instead, the Enlightenment worldview would provide a philosophical foundation for this schizophrenia. and so make it more widespread – and permanent.

(iii) Another Way to Close the Sky

But there was another factor too; and this was the rediscovery by Renaissance humanism of classical aesthetics, especially the concept of the *Stiltrennung* ('segregation of styles'). This was a critical doctrine involving a marked division between tragedy (where heroic characters were depicted performing lofty actions with elevated language) and comedy (where 'low' or rustic characters were involved in 'low' or everyday actions); with a resultant separation between the sublime and everyday reality.

Erich Auerbach discusses this doctrine in some detail in his book *Mimesis*. It may be seen – being wrestled with but transcended – as early as Dante[32]; and it grew in importance as the Renaissance progressed. Realistic prose came to be classed firmly in the comic category, as the earlier, more Christian vision disappeared:

[Dante's] sovereignty over reality in its sensory multiplicity remained as a permanent conquest, but the order in which it was comprehended was now lost, and for a time there was nothing to take its place... Early humanism, that is, lacks constructive ethical force when it is confronted with the reality of life; it again lowers realism to the intermediate, unproblematic and non-tragic level of style which, in classical antiquity, was assigned to it as an extreme upper limit, and, as in the same period, makes the erotic its principal, and almost exclusive, theme.[33]

Now the whole concept of such a dichotomy was completely foreign to the Judaeo-Christian tradition:

That the King of Kings was treated as a low criminal, that he was mocked, spat upon, whipped, and nailed to the cross – that story no sooner comes to dominate the consciousness of the people than it completely destroys the aesthetics of the separation of styles.[34]

Consequently, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition,

from the gospel narratives through the saints' legends and the *Divine Comedy* to the miracle plays, the doings of 'humble people' are depicted seriously: the sublime and the lowly can appear together. (And it was from this Judaeo-Christian tradition, mediated through writers like Bunyan and Defoe, that serious, realistic prose fiction about 'humble people' was later to develop.)

But the resurgence of classical aesthetics marked the triumph of a different outlook: and one result of the 'segregation of styles' was the near-impossibility of depicting God at work in history on either side of the dichotomy.[35] The 'comic' category, which at this stage was marked by its 'low' nature as much as by its 'happy ending', excluded God almost by definition; while the Christian view of history, and a belief in the action of God for good within history, are not easy to combine with the classical 'tragic vision', turning as that often does on what Nathan Scott calls 'a sense of shipwreck, a sense of radical fissure or rift in the realm of ultimate reality', the efforts of the tragic hero to put matters right, and the consequent disaster resulting from his limitations. ('The whole slant and bias of authentically tragic drama is humanistic', concludes Scott.[36]) Where this aesthetic was followed, Christian literature itself deserted realism as pertaining to 'low' characters: thus for example 'the great and significant Christian literature of the French seventeenth century ... is constantly elevated and sublime in tone... It shuns every "base" expression, every type of concrete realism.[37] The 'segregation of styles', then, excluded the depiction of God in the everyday; and perhaps it is not altogether surprising that there should be little scope for the expression of the Judaeo-Christian worldview within the conventions of a Hellenistic aesthetic.

Of course, as Ian Watt points out, 'In Protestant countries ... the *Stiltrennung* never achieved such authority, especially in England.'[38] Nonetheless, he adds, English literature was not unaffected. Certainly English prose fiction up to Defoe's time seems either to lack realism or else serious intention – or both. The romances tended to be non-realistic, neo-Platonist and concerned with the universal: the names of the characters either denoted particular qualities, as in Sidney, or 'like those of Lyly, Aphra Behn or Mrs. Manley carried foreign, archaic or literary connotations which

excluded any suggestion of real and contemporary life.[39] The position Sidney would have taken towards the notion of a realistic novel may be deduced from his criticism (obviously influenced by Platonism) of the historian as being regrettably '*captived to the truths of a foolish world.*'[40]

The Carde of Fancie, by the playwright Robert Greene, illustrates how a writer in this kind of classically-influenced tradition may well end up creating fictions that present a causality far from the Christian system (to which, of course, that same writer might well have been an adherent in everyday life). Castania, Greene's heroine, is to be found enduring '*a painful conflict between fancie and the fates, love and the destinies*'[41]; providence is not in view as a governing framework. She wishes Gwydonius '*such happie success, as either fortune or the fates can allow him*', and signs herself '*Thine, though the Gods say no.*'[42] And although she prays to the gods to preserve her lover, the gods in a romance of this kind are such that it is a positive quality for the heroine to trust her own judgment in love, rather than trusting heaven's guidance to be something reliable and utterly loving; her prayer is immediately followed by this passage:

For I hope though Fortune frowne, though the destinies denie it, though the fates forswear it, yea, though the Gods themselves saie no, yet in time we shall have such happie success, as the loyalty of our love, and the cleereness of our conscience by the lawe of justice do deserve.[43]

Here the gods are supreme by might rather than right, and not necessarily either just or almighty. This was probably not Greene's own creed; but the kind of fiction he was writing was not interested in a serious exploration of the real world, such as might bring his real beliefs into play and confront issues like the actions of providence in contemporary life: instead, he stays with the classical framework.

And Greene is not atypical. Jusserand has written of Elizabethan prose romancers in general:

What have we to do, thought men, with things practical, convenient, or of ordinary use? We wish for nothing but what is brilliant, unexpected, extraordinary. What is the good of setting down in

writing the incidents of commonplace lives? Are they not sufficiently known to us?... Authors ... took good care to relieve themselves of difficult search after the truth.[44]

The difference between such an attitude, and the ethos of the Enlightenment that gave birth to the modern realistic novel, is obvious. If reality was unworthy of serious exploration, a tradition of providentialist realism was not going to arise.

If reality was unworthy of serious exploration, a tradition of providentialist realism was not going to arise.

Nashe and Deloney are examples of the other alternative: realism, but realism of the low comic, unproblematic variety. Here providence is invoked only in casual phrases dropped in passing[45], or else for such purposes as adding solemnity to an execution scene; at the close of *The Unfortunate Traveller*, for example, Nashe presents Cutwolfe's death, and tells his audience, '*Prepare your eares and your teares, for never tyll this thrust I anie tragecall matter upon you. Strange and wonderfull are Gods judgments, here shine they in their glory... Guiltlesse soules that live every houre subject to violence, and with your dispairing feares doe much empaire Gods providence: fasten your eies on this spectacle that will add to your faith.*'[46] But this is simply drawing upon the providentialist heritage shared by writer and reader to add a resonance, and a backcloth of eternal judgment, when Nashe wishes to present 'tragecall matter'. The rest of the book is essentially a comic series of 'good yarns', too deliberately 'low-life' for the presentation of providence.

It seems, then, that under the influence of the 'segregation of styles', writers on both the 'high' and 'low' sides of the divide were hindered from making a serious exploration of reality such as has marked the modern novel at its best. Until Defoe, we may say with A.R. Humphreys that '*fiction's relation to life was peripheral, as idealization or moral doctrine or satire*'[47], or else simply as comic picaresque. And it is noteworthy that three of the main exceptions to the 'exclusion of God' from the early novel, Bunyan, Defoe, and Richardson, were all to be writers who for one reason or another were unlikely to be influenced by such matters as the neo-classical aesthetics of

the 'segregation of styles'. Neither Bunyan nor Defoe were seeking to create deliberate 'works of art' in quite the same way as, say, Fielding. Bunyan's fiction might be considered as emerging out of preaching; with his choice of material dictated by the strong concern of the preacher for the supernatural dimension to the lives of ordinary people. Defoe's work likewise owes much to his journalism. It would be in such areas of popular culture that the doctrines of neo-classical aesthetics would have least effect.

Richardson's Pamela may be considered as another example of supernaturalistic fiction; and Richardson too 'slid' into novel-writing, from the composition of exemplary letters. He was no friend of the classical heritage, and his attribution of a 'high' concept of sexual morality to an apparently 'low' character such as the servant-girl Pamela makes clear his hostility towards the divisions set up by the 'segregation of styles'.^[48] Clearly, the 'segregation of styles' and a realism that took seriously a Christian supernaturalism in the everyday world were mutually exclusive.

Looking back over the period preceding the birth of the novel, therefore, we are faced with a tragically recurrent schizophrenia of vision. In the scholastic heritage, there was a gulf between grace and nature that hindered the making of stories of grace at work in nature. The Renaissance inherited this dichotomy, and so there was less interest in the activities of grace even as there was much more interest in the world of nature. And, at the same time, the resurgence of classical aesthetics made it difficult to portray together the sublime with 'low, ordinary' life in any case. So, though providentialist beliefs were common in everyday culture, fictional expressions of these beliefs were in short supply. And so it was that, when the novel as we know it today began to emerge, it lacked models of how to depict the interest and involvement of God Himself in the lives of 'ordinary people'; even though, in its own serious attention to 'ordinary people', the novel was reintroducing a Judaeo-Christian attitude that had been lost under the rule of the classically-based 'segregation of styles'. To the Christian, the period of the rise of the novel looks like an opportunity missed. And as the Enlightenment gathered momentum, the surrounding cultural atmosphere became more radically dechristianised. In the further

development of the novel form, therefore, God was forgotten almost altogether.

(iv) The Puritan Alternative

Yet, once again, it need not have been so. For to summarise the story in these terms is to omit something of enormous importance; and that is the Reformation. One of the crucial things characterising the thinking of the Reformers was their insistence that God was concerned with the total lives of ordinary individuals. No separation of grace from nature here, nor of the sublime from the everyday; for Calvin and his heirs in particular, there was a passionate desire to express the implications of God's Kingdom in every area of life. It is not surprising, therefore, that when we look at the poetry of writers influenced by the rediscovered biblical faith of the Reformation – poets like Donne, Herbert and Marvell – we find that religious poetry has come back dramatically and excitingly into the real world. From this tradition, realistic and providentialist fiction might also have been expected to emerge. And indeed the Puritan culture, with its Reformation worldview, has been seen as a key factor in the birth of the novel form in England. To start with, Puritanism emphasised the salvation of the individual as the main issue in God's dealings with men; and this was as suitable a foundation for the novel's 'serious' depiction of everyday life as the Enlightenment philosophers' stress on particulars would be. (In a way, the 'salvation of the individual' could be said to have been a prominent theme in the novel ever since!) Along with this went a high valuation of the inner life, a result of the Puritan emphasis on spiritual self-examination.^[49] In contrast to the elitist 'segregation of styles' doctrine, there was in Puritan thought a more democratic approach regarding all classes seriously, in line with the main Judaeo-Christian tradition; and in contrast to the scholastic separation of grace and nature, there was a strong belief in the value of all activity, whether apparently 'spiritual' or not: that is to say, a greater interest in, and a higher valuation of, the affairs of daily life. *'If God had given the individual prime responsibility for his own spiritual destiny, it followed that he must have made this possible by signifying his intentions to the individual in the events of his daily life. The Puritan therefore tended to see every item in his personal experience as*

potentially rich in inward and spiritual meaning.[50] Such interests point towards narratives of the kind we see in the novel. And they did indeed bear fruit in fiction; as we can see from the work of Sidney, Bunyan, and Defoe.

Sidney is an intriguing figure. He is a Puritan, but a real 'Renaissance man' too, and his writing owes a great deal to the classical heritage. As we have already noted above, it bears the marks of the 'segregation of styles'; and his enormously long tale *Arcadia* is by no means a realistic book. But the story – which describes how an oracle becomes fulfilled despite all the efforts of the human beings involved to prevent its outworking – has as a major theme the exploration and enactment of a mysterious, omnipotent, but ultimately benign providence at work in the lives of individuals. Oracle fulfilments are a fairly ancient (and classical) topic; but as Sidney pursues his narrative, he makes use of an underlying providential causality that could have come straight out of his own, Christian, world-picture, and that is, in that sense, 'realistic', as far as he is concerned:

The almighty wisdom (evermore delighting to show the world that by unlikeliest means greatest matters may come to conclusion that human reason may be the more humbled and more willingly give place to divine providence) as at the first it brought in Dametas to play a part in this royal pageant, so having continued him still an actor, now that all things were growing ripe for an end, made his folly the instrument of revealing that which far greater cunning had sought to conceal.[51]

In this sort of vagabonding in those untrodden places, they were guided by the everlasting justice (using themselves to be punishers of their faults, and making their own actions the beginning of their chastisements) unhappily both for him and themselves to light upon Musidorus.[52]

The heroines of the story, Pamela and Philoclea, endure their sufferings with a fortitude grounded in their trust in such a providence. Pamela's prayer in her imprisonment arises directly out of the Christian tradition:

Look upon my misery with Thine eye of mercy, and let Thine infinite power vouchsafe to limit out

some proportion of deliverance unto me, as to Thee shall seem most convenient... Let not injury, O Lord, triumph over me, and let my faults by Thy hand be corrected... O Lord, I yield unto Thy will, and joyfully embrace what sorrow Thou wilt have me suffer.[53]

Arcadia is most definitely a romance, of course, and not a realistic novel. Nonetheless, as Evans observes, there is not a total disjunction between *Arcadia* and the work of the early novelists Fielding and Richardson, and 'it is no accident that Richardson gave the name of Pamela to his first heroine' [54] – who likewise turns to prayer when she finds herself imprisoned to further the interests of an unwelcome suitor. And if tradition is right that Charles I quoted Pamela's prayer when he was on the scaffold [55], then it demonstrates that, whatever its genre, *Arcadia* could be read as presenting, in all its deliberate non-realism and artifice, a model of the workings of providence in real life, as Christians – on either side of the Civil War – would have considered them to operate. (After all, it is just such a balance of fantasy and realism that we find in twentieth-century Christian fantasists such as C.S. Lewis.) *Arcadia*, then, is providentialist fiction of a kind – and is quite capable of depicting the outworkings of providence in the same volume with extramarital sex and attempted rape. From it a providentially-oriented novel tradition could conceivably have developed, once the Platonism that made Sidney disinterested in realistic narrative had gone out of fashion.

Of course there was a strong current in Puritanism that was thoroughly opposed to anything of the kind. A major cause of this may have been the dislike of the low morality of much Renaissance prose fiction; this certainly seems to have been the case with Elizabethan Puritanism – for example, Roger Ascham's attack on Italian fiction.[56] But a writer of the stature of Richard Baxter was capable of criticising as 'time-wasting' the literature that fell into the category of 'pastimes' [57], and believing that fictional literature '*dangerously bewitcheth and corrupteth the minds of young and empty people*', taking '*precious time in which much better work might be done.*'[58] There was also a definite unease about the lack of truthfulness of fiction in general. It is noticeable that Bunyan felt it necessary to protect himself by placing the biblical text '*I have used*

similitudes' and a defensive preface at the opening of both parts of *Pilgrim's Progress*. Nonetheless, Bunyan, like Sidney, demonstrates the feasibility of providentially-oriented fiction arising out of the Puritan tradition. Indeed, a good part of his work constitutes 'realistic fiction', given his beliefs about the nature of reality, and may be taken as a proof that fiction based upon a supernaturalistic realism is indeed a practical possibility. Bunyan's cast of mind is supernaturalistic as a matter of course: to him the world is above all a place where the drama of salvation and damnation is being played out. His autobiography, *Grace Abounding*, is subtitled 'A Brief Relation of the Exceeding Mercy of God in Christ, to His Poor Servant, John Bunyan.' That is to say, Bunyan's understanding of his own life is as a series of events in which the mercy of God has been active. In the preface, he quotes Moses' words 'Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness', and adds, 'Wherefore this I have endeavoured to do; and not only so, but to publish it also; that, if God will, others may be put in remembrance of what he hath done for their souls, by reading his work upon me.' God's activity is neither a myth nor something that has ceased: rather, the scriptural narrative provides a model for understanding Bunyan's own life, just as he hopes his own autobiography may do for his readers.

When he commences his story, it is with the presupposition that God is sovereign over each event in his life. 'I magnify the heavenly Majesty, for that by this door he brought me into this world', he says of his mean birth[59]: a sovereign God is predisposing for good the circumstances of Bunyan's origins. Likewise it 'pleased God to put it into [his parents'] hearts to put me to school'[60]; when he took to 'cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming,' it 'did so offend the Lord, that even in my childhood he did scare and affright me with fearful dreams.'[61]

Had not a miracle of precious grace prevented, I had ... perished.... But God did not utterly leave me, but followed me still, not now with convictions, but judgements; yet such as were mixed with mercy. For once I fell into a creek out of the sea, and hardly escaped drowning. Another time I fell out of a boat into Bedford river, but mercy yet preserved me alive.[62]

God is also active in Bunyan's thought-life:

But the same day, as I was in the midst of a game of cat... a voice did suddenly dart from heaven into my soul, which said, Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to heaven, or have thy sins and go to hell?[63]

Even the act of writing the autobiography takes place in the conscious presence of an active God: 'O Lord, thou knowest my life, and my ways were not hid from thee.'[64]

In such a universe, prayer and temptation involve dialogue with God and with the devil:

Once as I was walking to and fro in a good man's shop, bemoaning of myself in my sad and doleful state ... praying, also, that if this sin of mine did differ from that against the Holy Ghost, the Lord would show it me. And being now ready to sink with fear, suddenly there was, as if there had rushed in at the window, the noise of wind upon me, but very pleasant, and as if I heard a voice speaking, Didst ever refuse to be justified by the blood of Christ? And, withal my whole life and profession past was, in a moment, opened to me, wherein I was made to see that designedly I had not.[65]

Yet, thought I, I will pray. But, said the tempter, your sin is unpardonable. Well, said I, I will pray. It is to no boot, said he. Yet, said I, I will pray. So I went to prayer to God.... And as I was thus before the Lord, that scripture fastened on my heart, "O woman, great is thy faith" (Matt. xv.28), even as if one had clapped me on the back, as I was on my knees before God.[66]

When we turn to Bunyan's fiction in the light of this, its supernaturalistic mode of thought is evident. Christian's adventures in *Pilgrim's Progress* are not *entirely* allegorical, of course; they could not be; they must inevitably contain many elements of the real world.[67] And when the temptations Christian endures are considered in the light of the autobiography, it becomes plain that a 'devil' in Bunyan need not be considered as an allegorical depiction of an evil thought, but rather, like the highway robbers Christian's wife faces in Part II of *Pilgrim's Progress*, is a peril out of real life included in the story:

I took notice that now poor Christian was so confounded that he did not know his own voice, and thus I perceived it: just when he was come over against the mouth of the burning pit, one of the wicked ones got behind him. And stepped up softly to him, and whisperingly suggested many grievous blasphemies to him, which he verily thought had proceeded from his own mind.[68]

It is worth recording that, in communities where Bunyan's own supernaturalism is still current, this passage is read as realism rather than allegory, and as being a classic expression of the difficulty of distinguishing between the merely psychological phenomena of one's own thought-life and the spiritual warfare of temptation: the writer has heard it quoted to that purpose more than once. Bunyan certainly thought in both these categories (in *Grace Abounding* he speaks of temptations, 'both from Satan, mine own heart, and carnal acquaintance'[69]): so it is reasonable to understand this passage as a piece of intentionally realistic depiction, just as much as, say, the economics of *Vanity Fair*.

When we turn to *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, we are more or less in the world of the realistic novel. The name 'Badman' – and the names of the two narrators, Wiseman and Attentive – are obviously intended to be representative. But the rest of the details are to be understood as part of the real world. The preface says:

And although, as I said, I have put it forth in this method, yet have I as little as may be gone out of the road of mine own observation of things. Yes, I think I may truly say that to the best of my remembrance, all the things that here I discourse of, I mean as to matter of fact, have been acted upon the stage of this world, even many times before mine eyes... And why I have concealed most of the names of the persons whose sins or punishments I here and there in this book make relation of is, (i) For that neither the sins nor the judgements were all alike open; the sins of some were committed, and the judgements executed for them, only in a corner.... (ii) Because I would not provoke those of their relations that survive them.... (iii) Nor would I lay them under disgrace or contempt.... As for those whose names I mention, their crimes or judgements were

manifest; public almost as anything of that nature that happeneth to mortal men. Such therefore have published their own shame by their sin, and God his anger, by taking of open vengeance.[70]

The Life and Death of Mr. Badman, then, is intended to be thoroughly realistic: its narratives of divine judgement, and the pattern of supernatural causality underlying them, are as little 'allegorical' as its narratives of crime. Bunyan is asserting that his novel is just like life. For that reason, it may be seen as a clear example of deliberate 'supernaturalistic realism.'

Well, so it came to pass, through the righteous judgement of God, that Ned's wishes and curses were in a little time fulfilled upon his father; for not many months passed between them after this manner, but the devil did indeed take him, possess him; I mean, so it was judged by those that knew him, and had to do with him in that his lamentable condition.[71]

You must rather word it thus – it was the judgement of God that he did, that is, he came acquainted with them through the anger of God.[72]

For a family, where godliness is professed and practised, is God's ordinance, the place which He has appointed to teach young ones the way and fear of God (Gen.xviii.18.19). Now, to be put out of such a family, into a bad, a wicked one, as Mr. Badman was, must needs be in judgement, and a sign of the anger of God.[73]

But now, methinks, when he was brought thus low, he should have considered the hand of God that was gone out against him, and should have smote upon the breast, and have returned.[74]

To someone of Bunyan's beliefs, the single most important aspect of the career of an evildoer was that his life was lived out in the presence of God, experiencing and at the same time defying the judgements of God. The biblical material he cites provides the paradigms through which events are to be interpreted. Bunyan is thoroughly aware of the necessity of this interpretative process; the hand of God is not something to be discerned through the physical eye, but rather through a process of applying general principles about the forces at work in the universe to a new collection

of data. This process of interpretation may be seen clearly at work in the passages quoted above; it is embodied in the phrases '*I mean, so it was judged...*' '*you must rather word it thus...*', '*must needs be in judgement*', and the simple '*methinks*'.

To discern the spiritual universe in operation, Bunyan implies, requires the deliberate effort of thoughtful and perceptive faith; and he is not afraid to build that process of perception into his novel. The world he constructs thereby is one in which the hidden actions of both God and the devil stand revealed. By so doing, Bunyan sets out what he believes to be the all-important events underlying Mr. Badman's career, without which the narrative would be woefully inadequate. So when, at the close of the book, Wiseman asks Attentive to pray '*that I with you may be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation*', it is not merely a pious epilogue.

Rather, Bunyan has attempted to draw a realistic picture of life as he sees it, as being above all else a drama of grace and judgement: and the closing remark is the most logical thing to wish for if life is indeed like that. Bunyan's novel is written with an explicitness that would have to be assisted with an extraordinary brilliance of style if his book were to find readers among people unsympathetic to his supernaturalistic faith; a novelist writing with a similar worldview today would need to be far more discreet.

Bunyan has attempted to draw a realistic picture of life as he sees it, as being above all else a drama of grace and judgement

But at any rate, his work provides a clear example of a way in which a supernaturalistic worldview could be expressed in realistic fictional narrative, simply by recording events as he believed they would be, and including all the causes his worldview held to be present.

(v) 'Robinson Crusoe'

But the most important example of a novel arising out of the Puritan heritage and marked by an explicit supernaturalism must be Defoe's *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719). The preface to this book announces as one of its purposes '*to justify and honour the wisdom of Providence in all the variety*

of our circumstances, let them happen how they will' [75] – a statement of intent none too far removed from John Milton's resolve to '*justify the ways of God to men*' at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*. And this providential theme marks the narrative throughout the book.

The opening of the story presents Crusoe in his youth, restless and eventually running away to sea. This restlessness is very deliberately set in the context of a spiritual pattern by his father's reaction: '*tho' he said he would not cease to pray for me, yet he would venture to say to me, that if I did take this foolish step, God would not bless me, and I would have leisure hereafter to reflect upon having neglected his counsel when there might be none to assist in my recovery.*' Crusoe describes these remarks as '*truly prophetick*' [76], and they do indeed match what takes place in the rest of the story. This elucidation of the book's shape beforehand implies that the events are part of a divinely-foreknown providential pattern. [77] (Defoe does not, of course, tell us so much about them that he destroys the book's suspense.)

Crusoe ignores his father's warning, and this attitude is depicted in thoroughly theistic terms. He goes off to sea '*without asking God's blessing, or my father's...in an ill hour, God knows*'.

When a storm blows up he sees himself as '*justly...overtaken by the judgement of Heaven*' for his '*breach of my duty to God and my father*', and vows that '*if it would please God here to spare my life*' he would return home '*like a true repenting prodigal*' [78] – that is, according to the pattern of the well-known biblical story of the Prodigal Son. These good resolutions do not, however, survive the abatement of the storm. To a Puritan, going on in sin despite a direct warning from God was a doubly culpable '*hardening of heart*', as Starr points out. [79] Defoe makes it very plain that this is exactly what is taking place: '*I was to have another trial for it still; and Providence, as in such cases generally it does, resolv'd to leave me entirely without excuse. For if I would not take this for a deliverance, the next was to be such a one as the worst and most harden'd wretch among us would confess both the danger and the mercy.*' [80]

The 'trial' that follows is a far more severe storm; but even after that Crusoe does not return home. Again, his determination is described in terms of a

providential framework. Crusoe's experiences are now not only seen as reenacting the pattern of the story of the Prodigal Son, which is explicitly alluded to, but also he is told that disaster might conceivably have befallen his ship *'on your account, like Jonah in the ship of Tarshish.'*[81] (Jonah, like Crusoe, embarked contrary to God's instructions, and the result was a tempest that endangered the ship.) He is warned not to *'tempt Providence to my ruine'*, and told that *'I might see a visible hand of Heaven against me.'* But, says Crusoe:

my ill fate push'd me on now with an obstinacy that nothing could resist; and tho' I had several times loud calls from my reason and my more composed judgment to go home, yet I had no power to do it. I know not what to call this, nor will I urge that it is a secret overruling decree that hurries us on to be the instruments of our own destruction...[82]

Starr notes that such a *'process of subjection, first of reason to rebellious inclination'* (as here), *'next of action in general to external circumstances'* (as when Crusoe becomes enslaved in Barbary soon afterwards), *'traditionally marks the worsening predicament of unregenerate man'*, and points out that in the pages that follow references to 'Providence' are displaced by references to 'Fate', as when Crusoe escapes from slavery.[83] Crusoe's lack of repentance cuts him off both from free action and God's benign care, producing a growing obtuseness towards providential threats and deliverances; this, Starr argues convincingly, is the reason why Defoe devotes so much space to the slavery episode.[84] The Godward dimension, then, is a major factor shaping the narrative.

The same is true when, after his escape from slavery, Crusoe settles down in Brazil, and begins to make good. After a time, discontent and wanderlust seize him again, *'in contradiction to the clearest views of doing himself good ... which nature and Providence concurred to present me with, and to make my duty.'*[85] Lack of companionship makes him feel, he complains, *'just like a man cast away upon some desolate island.'* The punishment ordained by providence for this discontent is to fit the crime; that is to say, his later exile on just such an island is presented to us as an educative process. *'But how just has it*

been, and should all men reflect, that, when they compare their present conditions with others that are worse, Heaven may oblige them to make the exchange, and be convinc'd of their former felicity by their experience.'[86]

When Crusoe becomes a castaway on the island that is to become his home, his initial reaction is to *'consider it as a determination of Heaven, that in this desolate place and in this desolate manner I should end my life'*, and to wonder *'why Providence should thus compleatly ruine its creatures.'*[87] But all he concludes is that *'All evils are to be considered with the good that is in them, and with what worse attends them'*; 'the good' including the fact that *'God wonderfully sent the ship in near enough to shore'* for him to be able to retrieve many tools and provisions from it.[88] It seems that at this stage Defoe wants to bring home to his reader the difference between the casual attitude to religion that can be expressed in such a phrase, and a life lived out in full awareness of the presence of God.

The issue recurs a little later when Crusoe is astounded to find some stalks of barley growing:

I had hitherto acted upon no religious foundation at all; Indeed, I had very few notions of religion in my head, or had entertain'd any sense of any thing that had befallen me, otherwise than as a chance, or, as we lightly say, what pleases God; without so much as enquiring into the end of Providence in these things, or His order in governing events in the world. But after I saw barley grow there, in a climate which I know was not proper for corn, and especially that I knew not how it came there, it startl'd me strangely, and I began to suggest that God had miraculously caus'd this grain to grow... This touch'd my heart a little, and brought tears out of my eyes.[89]

But this response has little depth. When Crusoe recalls that he has shaken a *'bag of chicken's meat out in that place ... my religious thankfulness to God's providence began to abate too.'* That is to say, it was an attitude of no greater significance than the casualness that unthinkingly (*'as we lightly say'*) tosses off a phrase like *'what pleases God.'* Such religion, Defoe is saying, is merely being dazzled by the apparently inexplicable, rather than exercising faith in God as the provider and sustainer of all things, and looking beyond

the immediate event to God's overall 'order in governing events in the world.' The same weakness appears two pages later, when in an earthquake Crusoe 'had not the least serious religious thought, nothing but the common Lord ha' mercy upon me; and when it was over that went away too.'[90]

Defoe's careful delineation of this distinction emphasises the seriousness with which he is contemplating providential causality. Soon afterwards he devotes eight pages to portraying Crusoe coming genuinely to terms with his God. It begins with Crusoe falling ill, and praying seriously for the first time since his initial experience of a storm, off Hull: 'but scarce knew what I said, or why, my thoughts being all confused.' He is at least serious about what he is doing, however: six days later 'I lay and cry'd, "Lord look upon me, Lord pity me, Lord have mercy upon me." I suppose I did nothing else for two or three hours.' That night he dreams of a man 'as bright as a flame' coming down 'from a great black cloud', menacing him and telling him, 'Seeing all these things have not brought thee to repentance, now thou shalt die.'[91] Crusoe is horrified. He becomes conscious that he has been overwhelmed by 'a certain stupidity of soul, without desire of good or conscience of evil', and this is marked by his 'not having the least sense, either of the fear of God in danger, or of thankfulness to God in deliverances... I was meerly thoughtless of a God or a providence; acted like a meer brute from the principles of nature, and by the dictates of common sense only, and indeed hardly that.'[92] The sign of 'stupidity of soul' is an attitude that views the development of events through naturalistic 'common sense' only, and fails to penetrate to the underlying providential ordering or to respond in awe and thankfulness.

These reflections 'exhorted some words from me, like praying to God, tho' I cannot say they were either a prayer attended with desires or with hopes; it was rather the voice of meer fright and distress.' As he reflects further, however, and sees his plight as the fulfilment of his father's warning, he articulates something more specific: "'Lord, be my help, for I am in great distress.'" This was the first prayer, if I may call it so, that I made for many years.' Defoe makes clear that Crusoe is now at last penetrating to the true final causes of events,

as he presents him thanking God for his supper of turtle's eggs: 'This was the first bit of meat I had ever ask'd God's blessing to, even as I cou'd remember, in my whole life.'[93]

Robinson Crusoe is clearly a fictional analogue of the spiritual autobiographies written in large numbers by Protestant Christians of the seventeenth century

He continues his reflections, and does so, insists his author, under the hand of God. He searches in a chest for some tobacco, 'directed by Heaven, no doubt; for in this chest I found a cure, both for soul and body', that is, some Bibles. He attempts to make use of the tobacco – in various ways – and reads the Bible as he does so:

My head was too much disturb'd with the tobacco to bear reading, at least that time; only having opened the book casually, the first words that occur'd to me were these: Call on me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver, and thou shalt glorify me The tobacco had, as I said, doz'd my head so much, that I inclin'd to sleep ... but before I lay down, I did what I had never done in all my life, I kneel'd down and pray'd to God to fulfil the promise to me.[94]

He goes on reading the New Testament twice daily, and finally comes to the words:

He is exalted a Prince and a Saviour, to give repentance, and to give remission. *I threw down the book, and with my heart as well as my hands lifted up to heaven, in a kind of extasy of joy, I cry'd out aloud, "Jesus, thou son of David, Jesus, thou exalted Prince and Saviour, give me repentance!" This was the first time that I could say, in the true sense of the words, that I pray'd in all my life; for now I pray'd with a sense of my condition, and with a true scripture view of hope founded on the encouragement of the word of God; and from this time, I may say, I began to have hope that God would hear me.*[95]

This is not just 'Sunday religion,' as Ian Watt suggests[96]; it is not something in a separate compartment from the rest of the book's action. Rather, it is presented as marking a crucial shift in Crusoe's priorities. He is – of course – still concerned to escape from the island, but he now construes the scriptural promise 'I will deliver you'

in a different sense: *'My soul sought nothing of God but deliverance from the load of guilt that bore down all my comfort.'*[97] And the consequences are numerous: *'a constant reading the scripture and praying to God'*[98], observing the sabbath, and keeping the anniversary of his shipwreck as a day of prayer and fasting.[99] Indeed, when he is joined by the native he names Friday, Crusoe turns missionary, until through his efforts Friday becomes *'a good Christian, a much better than I.'*[100] And – despite Watt's bizarre assertion that a *'functional silence, broken only by an occasional "No Friday," or an abject "Yes Master," is the golden music of Crusoe's ille joyeuse'*[101] – Defoe presents Crusoe and Friday spending much time in studying the Bible together:

The conversation which employ'd the hours between Friday and I was such as made the three years which we liv'd there together perfectly and compleatly happy... I always apply'd myself in reading the scripture, to let him know, as well as I could, the meaning of what I read; and he again, by his serious enquiries and questionings, made me, as I said before, a much better scholar in the scripture knowledge than I should ever have been by my own private meer reading.[102]

We have surveyed the providential element and Crusoe's own struggle with and surrender to God in the first half of *Robinson Crusoe* at some length, in order to demonstrate the crucial part that these themes play as organizing principles within the narrative. A survey of this kind makes it difficult to see how a writer like Watt could have concluded that *'otherworldly concerns do not provide the essential themes.'*[103] *Robinson Crusoe* is clearly a fictional analogue of the spiritual autobiographies written in large numbers by Protestant Christians of the seventeenth century (of which Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* is, of course, the prime example). As such, it is a clear instance of a major novel in which the 'vertical dimension' of relationship with God plays an integral role.

It is this that Watt denies, asserting that:

If, for example, we turn to the actual effect of Crusoe's religion on his behaviour, we find that it has curiously little.... Both Marx and Gildon were right in drawing attention to the discontinuity between the religious aspects of the book and its

action.... His spiritual intentions ... manifest themselves in somewhat unconvincing periodical tributes to the transcendent at times when a respite from real action and practical intellectual effort is allowed or enforced.[104]

But Watt's remarks are simply false to the text. Crusoe's basic attitude to his experiences undergoes an immediate and marked change as a result of his spiritual rebirth:

I gave humble and hearty thanks that God had been pleased to discover to me, even that it was possible I might be more happy in this solitary condition, than I should have been in a liberty of society, and in all the pleasures of the world; that He could fully make up to me the deficiencies of my solitary state, and the want of humane society, by His presence and the communications of His grace to my soul, supporting, comforting, and encouraging me.[105]

It is true that this contentment is not maintained without difficulty; but the Christian life is not supposed to be a state in which a thoroughly *'renewed mind'* (Romans 12:2) is retained without deliberate effort. The effect of his faith on his actions is apparent in other ways too. When he first discovers the cave that becomes his stronghold, he is frightened by seeing two eyes shining deep within it, and what motivates him to go on is the reflection that *'the power and presence of God was everywhere, and was able to protect me.'*[106] And more generally, as Starr observes, Crusoe's earlier rash and unthinking behaviour becomes replaced by a greater prudence and circumspection, as a result of his *'attending, interpreting and obeying the various manifestations of the divine will towards him.'*[107]

Defoe makes it very clear, in fact, that Crusoe's faith is by no means limited to *'times when a respite from real action and practical intellectual effort is allowed or enforced':*

Having regularly divided my time, according to the several daily employments that were before me, such as, first, my duty to God, and the reading the scriptures, which I constantly set apart some time for thrice every day; secondly, the going abroad with my gun for food, which generally took me up three hours in every morning, when it did not rain; thirdly, the ordering, curing, preserving and

cooking what I had kill'd or catch'd for my supply; these took up great part of the day.[108]

Prayer is sufficiently significant to Defoe for him to be able to devote space to a consideration of what psychological state is most conducive to it.[109] Indeed, his depiction of Crusoe's spirituality is generally perceptive. Soon after his 'conversion', as it may be termed, Crusoe is giving thanks to God for bringing him to a place where such a thing could occur, when suddenly he thinks that this smacks of hypocrisy:

'How canst thou be such a hypocrite,' said I, even audibly, 'to pretend to be thankful for a condition, which however thou may'st endeavour to be contented with, thou would'st rather pray heartily to be deliver'd from?' So I stopp'd there; but though I could not say I thank'd God for being there, yet I sincerely gave thanks to God for opening my eyes, by whatever afflicting providences...[110]

Crusoe's spiritual health does have its sicknesses too. His terror at finding a footprint on his island banishes his faith and courage; he recovers these after the 'words of the scripture... Call upon me in the day of trouble' had returned to his mind, motivating him to 'pray earnestly to God for deliverance,' and then to further Bible reading. However, he suffers another setback when he finds the footprint to be far bigger than his own, and 'did not now take due ways to compose my mind, by crying to God in my distress, and resting upon His providence, as I had done before, for my defence and deliverance.'^[111] It is several pages before his faith is once more firmly expressed. But this, again, does not mean that the book's religion is 'Sunday religion': Defoe is simply drawing a realistic picture of how the calm that should flow logically from reliance on God can be swamped by an outburst of fear. This subjective (and, Defoe implies, unreasonable) condition can coexist perfectly well with the objective shaping of events by providence.^[112] At any rate, this loss of faith is not permanent, and a clear reference to faith in providential overruling occurs almost every ten pages till the end of the book, with the exception of the section immediately preceding his escape from the island. He describes his eventual condition – as he did his earlier wanderings – by referring to a providentially-oriented biblical narrative as model; in this case, the story of

Job.^[113]

Clearly, then, Crusoe's spirituality is not separate from the mainstream of his life. Rather, it is an integral part of his existence, and its strength or weakness is a significant aspect of his story. Writers like Watt have posed the critical problem in the wrong terms; the question is rather whether Crusoe's spirituality is convincing to the modern reader. Many contemporary readers find the attempt to see signs of God's hand in everyday life as fanciful and absurd; and the dream of the avenging angel that has so powerful an effect on Crusoe may appear simply as a case of psychological disturbance. But it would not have appeared so to readers of Defoe's time. As Starr points out, Defoe's contemporaries believed that man was responsible to observe and heed such phenomena as declarations of the divine will.^[114] Perhaps the writer can add from personal experience that the signs and dream would appear perfectly credible in many non-Western cultures today (including the academic circles in those countries!) The issue of whether it is reasonable to conceive of a supernatural presence omnipresent enough – and caring enough – to manifest itself in such ways is not a literary-critical issue. It seems fair to suggest that the difficulty with Defoe's providentialism lies as much with the mind of the twenty-first century reader as with the words of the text.

But the crucial point about *Robinson Crusoe* for this study is that it too is an unabashedly supernaturalistic work standing in the mainstream of the English novel. It is not merely a 'book about religion'. Crusoe's spirituality supplies an organizing pattern to the novel; arguably the most significant such pattern. That is only reasonable: if there is an eternal yet knowable God, then logically a person's relationship with that God must be the most significant thing about their life-story. *Robinson Crusoe* stands as an example of the tradition that might have been, a novel based on the Reformation worldview including in one rich vision both the natural and the supernatural. God was banished from the novel as a result of the Enlightenment; but it need not have been that way.

(vi) After Crusoe

But *Robinson Crusoe* had no offspring of

significance. It was a book with an underlying worldview that ran counter to many powerful forces of its period: to the exclusive Enlightenment emphasis on the world of sense-data, to the prevalence of deism in religion, to the stress of emergent capitalism on material things. In Defoe's own later novels such forces came to overwhelm the spiritual pilgrimage that gives *Robinson Crusoe* its shape.

Even in *Robinson Crusoe* itself, other elements are present, of course. Watt is perfectly right when he observes that Crusoe and Defoe's other heroes have the 'book-keeping' mentality which '*Weber considered to be the distinctive technical feature of modern capitalism.... They.... keep us more fully informed of their present stocks of money and commodities than any other characters in fiction.*'[115] Crusoe's lament that he had gone wandering '*in contradiction to the clearest views of doing my self good in a fair and plain pursuit of those prospects and those measures of life which nature and Providence concurred to present me with, and to make my duty*'[116] (emphasis mine) is as clear an example of late Puritanism's tendency towards making a moral imperative out of economic growth – the so-called 'Weber-Tawney hypothesis' – as could be wished. In *Robinson Crusoe* these tendencies are matched by the heavy emphasis on Crusoe's relationship with God. In *Moll Flanders*, they virtually take over the story.

It is true that *Moll Flanders* can conceivably be read as spiritual autobiography, depicting a progression from a false, merely prudential or sentimental 'repentance' to a real change of heart, as Starr indicates in his chapter on the novel in *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography*. It is true, too, that Moll's adventures take place in a nominally supernaturalistic universe: there seems no reason to doubt (given the interest in the supernatural evident in Defoe's other work) that Defoe endorses the worldview expressed when Moll speaks of '*the devil, who began, by the help of an irresistible poverty, to push me into this wickedness.*'[117] And, as Starr points out, it is a sign of Moll's reformation when her perceptions of her experience as governed by 'fate' give way to references to 'providence'. [118]

However, *Moll Flanders* does not present a supernaturalistic vision of the world and the

events that take place within it with the clarity of its predecessor. Moll's notorious preoccupation with the material, cash-value aspects of her world dominates the novel to such a degree that we find it hard to take her comments about providence or repentance seriously, and indeed '*laugh at the concept of reformation through hogs and cows*' presented when Moll's husband's penitence is confirmed by such acquisitions.[119] Moll's providence seems to enable her to do very well for herself by rather ungodly means, despite the moral protestations of the novel's introduction. The spiritual concerns and Godward dimension that gave the dominant shape to *Robinson Crusoe*'s presentation of the world only come into the foreground in the apocalyptic situation of Moll's arrest, where material well being has (temporarily) been lost.[120] But when she escapes execution, the story once again becomes preoccupied with the 'stock' she can take with her in her transportation to Virginia, the inheritance she receives there from her mother, and how much it would bring in a year, until she and her current husband '*were now in very considerable circumstances, and every year increasing.*'[121]

In *Moll Flanders*, then, the precise, realistic notation for which Defoe is justly renowned has become separated from any significant awareness of the spiritual dimensions of events, and the fundamental value-system throughout the narrative is economic: whether a marriage enables Moll to live well or leaves her penniless, whether a pearl necklace is of 'good' quality, and so on.[122] What seizes Defoe's imagination is the cataloguing of possessions of market-value; laying up treasure on earth, by fair means or foul, is the order of the day. It is a world where God may possibly be at work in Newgate at the foot of the gallows, but scarcely anywhere else.

There has of course been a good deal of critical debate as to whether Moll's narrowly money-oriented view of the world is presented ironically by her creator or not. For our purposes, it is not of crucial importance; whether the attitude depicted is just Moll's, or Defoe's as well, her view of life will not be received by the reader as a trustworthy presentation of the world under the hand of providence, whatever other attractions its vitality may possess. Moll's assessment of the operations of providence can have no more authority than the opposing armies in the last

century's world wars all invoking the Almighty as the supporter of their particular cause. And the providential dimension does not feature in any aspect of the novel that can be read as the expression of the authorial perspective as distinct from Moll's own.

That the spiritual, and (as part of it) the providential, content of Defoe's work dwindles as time goes on may be gauged from the fact that, while Starr tries manfully to make *Moll Flanders* read credibly as spiritual autobiography, he is forced to recognise that 'some portions of the narrative ... are not fully assimilated into the spiritual framework'[123]; and that in *Roxana* and *Colonel Jacque* this element has almost disappeared. In *Roxana*, he says, the 'sheer bulk and vitality' of the unassimilated material 'tend to obscure the somber implications and indeed the very outlines' of Roxana's spiritual development.[124] It is arguable that Watt's comment that *Robinson Crusoe* 'embodied the struggle between Puritanism and the tendency to secularization which was rooted in material progress'[125], while unfair to *Robinson Crusoe* itself, is nonetheless a fair description of Defoe's work as a whole. In short, Defoe illustrates the process R.H. Tawney describes as taking place in this period:

From a spiritual being, who, in order to survive, must devote a reasonable attention to economic interests, man seems sometimes to have become an economic animal, who will be prudent, nevertheless, if he takes due precautions to assure his spiritual well-being.[126]

That is more or less the difference between *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*; and as Defoe's work underwent that transition, so the possibility of a providentially-oriented novel tradition drawing on the Puritan heritage dwindled away.

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References:

[1] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957; Pelican

edition of 1972), ch.1.

[2] Cf. *ibid*, p.23.

[3] Cf. Francis Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* (1968), pp.88-91.

[4] Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (1969), p.52.

[5] Karl Mannheim, *Essays in Sociology and Social Psychology*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti (1953), pp. 85-87.

[6] Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background* (1957), p.4.

[7] Cf. R. Hooykaas, *Philosophia Libera: Christian Faith and the Freedom of Science* (1957); also A.N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (1953), pp.15-16.

[8] Paul Hazard, *The European Mind. 1680-1715* (1935), p.xvii.

[9] Brown, *op. cit.*, p.39.

[10] H.R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (1970), p.52.

[11] R.G. Cox, 'A Survey of Literature From Donne to Marvell', in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, ed. Boris Ford, Vol.III (1956; revised edition of 1968), p.45.

[12] It may be objected that the Enlightenment worldview should not be seen as a direct cause of the novel's naturalistic causality, in that writers like Defoe and Fielding were all in print before some of the works that would seem to be important examples of Enlightenment thought; *Moll Flanders* (1722), or *Tom Jones* (1749), are earlier than the most important works of Hume, for example. But Descartes, Spinoza and Locke all belong to the seventeenth, rather than the eighteenth, century. A heavy stress on reason over revelation appears in the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonists; and deism emerged fully fledged in 1696 in Toland's *Christianity Not Mysterious*. In fact Paul Hazard's classic study operates on the premise that all the main features in Enlightenment thought are visible in the period from 1680 to 1715. But we are not asserting a strictly causal relationship between the philosophers and the writers. Instead, as Watt says, 'Both the philosophical and the literary innovations must be seen as parallel manifestations of larger change' (*op.cit.*, pp.33-34). Both disciplines reflected changing views as to what was central to life and what peripheral.

[13] See C.A. Patrides, *The Grand Design of God: the literary form of the Christian view of history* (1972), esp. ch.4.

[14] *Ibid*, p.68, n.74, where Patrides cites Burleigh

T. Williams, 'Machiavelli on History and Fortune', *Bucknell Review* VIII, 1959, pp.225-245.

[15] Patrides, *ibid*, p.125. Leopold Damrosch compares the 'absolute and invulnerable' place of Christian faith in Dante, and its 'embattled and problematical' situation in Milton (*God's Plot and Man's Stories* (Chicago, 1985), p.7). Milton's deliberate objective of 'justifying the ways of God to men' reflects the faith-struggle in which he was involved, a struggle that was turning against biblical Christianity by the time of Dryden.

[16] Patrides, *ibid*, p.124.

[17] Vincent Buckley, *Poetry and the Sacred* (1968), pp.40-42. See also Hoxie N. Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry* (New York, 1939-57). On Pope see Willey, *op. cit.*, p.296.

[18] Watt, *op.cit.*, ch.1. Patrides points out that this attitude was also a hindrance in historiography (Patrides, *op.cit.*, pp.32-33).

[19] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Berne, 1946), trans. W.R.Trask (Princeton, 1953), pp.48-49.

[20] Schaeffer, *op.cit*, p.10. See also Rookmaaker, *op.cit.*, pp.11-14.

[21] Schaeffer, *ibid*.

[22] Auerbach, *op.cit.*, pp.111-112.

[23] Buckley, *op.cit.*, p.23.

[24] J.S. Ryan, *Tolkien: Cult or Culture?* (Armidale, NSW, 1969), p.213.

[25] There are other such exceptions later, again in popular literature. Langland's magnificent and still very readable fusion in his poem *Piers Plowman* is one; the miracle plays can be seen as another. (And cf. Auerbach's comments on French vernacular mystery plays, eg. *op.cit.*, pp.158, 160.)

[26] Rookmaaker, *op.cit.*, pp.34-35.

[27] Quoted in C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (1936), p.88.

[28] Schaeffer, *op.cit.*, p.11.

[29] *Ibid*, pp.11-16. Basil Willey comments that 'It was ... in this region of "things" that the new age wanted soberly and continually to live'. He adds that in Francis Bacon the supernatural was already beginning to be excluded from the natural: in Bacon's writings 'Religious thought... must be "skied", elevated far out of reach, not in order that it may be more devoutly approached, but in order to keep it out of mischief' (*The Seventeenth Century Background*, pp.26, 29.) This separation was kept at bay for a while by the strong insistence of the Reformation thinkers on a unified field of knowledge, in which God and the supernatural were relevant to every area of life;

but the Reformation worldview lost much influence in England at the time of the Restoration, and the Enlightenment marks the end of its dominance.

[30] Auerbach, *op.cit.*, pp.202, 224.

[31] Buckley *op.cit.*, p.29.

[32] Auerbach, *ibid*, pp.185-187.

[33] *Ibid.*, p.228.

[34] *Ibid.*, p.72.

[35] The question of the historical nature of God's activity was a key point of conflict whenever the Judaeo-Christian and Hellenistic worldviews met, as both Patrides and Fuller have pointed out. Cf. Patrides, *op.cit.*, pp.13-14, and Daniel P. Fuller, *Easter Faith and History* (1965), pp.25-26.

[36] Nathan A. Scott Jr., *The Broken Center* (Yale, 1965), pp.123-27. Auerbach notes that, in seventeenth-century French tragic drama (in which the 'segregation of styles' reached its most marked expression), the 'exaggerated tragic character...and the extreme cult of the passions are actually anti-Christian' (Auerbach, *op.cit.*, p.393.) All this is not to say that Christian tragedy is an impossibility: the biblical narrative of Saul would disprove that. But, as Auden suggests, where Greek tragedy arouses the feeling 'What a pity it had to be this way', a Christian tragedy would suggest something different – 'What a pity it was this way when it might have been otherwise' (quoted Damrosch, *op.cit.*, p.98). In the resurgence of classical aesthetics, the Greek alternative obviously dominated, without the redemptive 'possible other case' of God's grace.

[37] Auerbach, *ibid*, pp.393-94.

[38] Watt, *op.cit.*, p.88.

[39] *Ibid*, pp.17, 20.

[40] Sir Philip Sidney, *Apology for Poetry* (c.1583), quoted Maurice Evans in the introduction to his edition of Sidney's *Arcadia* (1590-98; Penguin edition of 1977), p.23. Sidney, indeed, was a committed Christian, and the causality in his romances reflects this, as we shall see; but he was not concerned to introduce this causality into a presentation of everyday life.

[41] Robert Greene, *The Carde of Fancie* (1584), reprinted in the Everyman *Shorter Novels: Elizabethan and Jacobean* (1929), p.188.

[42] *Ibid*, pp.223-24.

[43] *Ibid*, p.249.

[44] J.J. Jusserand, *The English Novel in the time of Shakespeare*, trans. Elizabeth Lee (1890; new edition, ed. Philip Brockbank, 1966), pp.103-104.

[45] Eg. in Deloney's *Jack of Newberie* (1597)

and *Thomas of Reading* (1600) in the *Everyman Shorter Novels*, pp.20, 134, 136.

[46] Thomas Nashe, *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594) in the *Everyman Shorter Novels*, p.350.

[47] A.R. Humphreys, 'The Literary Scene', in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, ed. Boris Ford, Vol.IV (1957, revised edition of 1968), p.75.

[48] Cf. Watt, *op.cit.*, pp.188, 276-78.

[49] Watt, *ibid*, pp.83-85. And cf. Damrosch: 'For the Puritans the self is all-important not because it is one's self but because it represents the sole battleground of the war between good and evil... But the self is duplicitous and complex, requiring the most stringent analysis... The truth can only emerge from a sustained scrutiny of behaviour over a period of time, and thus the need for temporal narrative is born... The relevance of Puritanism to the novel... lies... in the peculiar power, as a basis for fiction, of a faith that sees human life as a narrative invented by God' (and hence containing a real pattern) 'but interpreted by human beings' (*op.cit.*, p.4).

[50] Watt, *ibid*, pp.88, 85. It is also worth noting in passing Coleman O. Parsons' suggestion that the English short story 'originated as narrative proof of immortality and an overseeing deity', having its forebears in the tales of 'apparition evidence' gathered by such men as Glanville and Baxter, and then partly secularized in Defoe's *A True Relation of the Apparition of one Mrs. Veal*. Even this, adds Parsons, 'when used as a preface to *Drelincourt's The Christian's Defence Against the Fears of Death ... disclosed its theologico-propagandic affinity.*' (Reported in PMLA, LXVII, February 1952, p.144.)

[51] Sidney, *Arcadia*, p.715. Pp.27-36 of Evans' introduction give a useful survey of the providential theme in the book.

[52] *Ibid*, p.754.

[53] *Ibid*, p.464.

[54] *Ibid*, p.9.

[55] *Ibid*.

[56] Quoted Jusserand, *op.cit.*, pp.74-75.

[57] Richard Baxter, *Christian Directory*, quoted Leland Ryken, *Triumphs of the Imagination* (1979), p.16.

[58] Richard Baxter, *Treatise of Self-Denial*, quoted Ryken, *ibid*.

[59] John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding, and The Life and Death of Mr. Badman* (1666,1689), p.7. All references are to the Everyman edition of these two books, published in one volume in 1928.

[60] *Ibid*.

[61] *Ibid*, p.8.

[62] *Ibid*, p.9.

[63] *Ibid*, p.12.

[64] *Ibid*, p.9.

[65] *Ibid*, p.53.

[66] *Ibid*, p.63.

[67] Just as a later novel like Fielding's *Tom Jones*, with characters with names like Allworthy and Supple, is not *entirely* non-allegorical. Allegory and novel are not watertight categories.

[68] John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678; Penguin edition of 1965), p.90.

[69] Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, p.24.

[70] *Ed.cit.*, pp.139, 146-47.

[71] *Ibid*, p.171.

[72] *Ibid*, p.177.

[73] *Ibid*, p.192.

[74] *Ibid*, p.200.

[75] Daniel Defoe, *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719), p.1. All references are to the Everyman edition of 1945.

[76] *Ibid*, p.7.

[77] Ian Watt, who believes that 'otherworldly concerns do not provide the essential themes of Defoe's novels', suggests – at first sight plausibly – that if this 'filial disobedience' was indeed an 'original sin' on a scale that should be seen as the mainspring of the narrative, then 'no real retribution follows since he does very well out of it' (*op.cit.*, p.89). However, as Pat Rogers responds, to see it as such a mainspring is to give to the phrase 'original sin' (in Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p.142) the significance it would have had for most readers in Defoe's time (Pat Rogers, *Robinson Crusoe* (1979), p.63); that is, of a fundamental disobedience expressed in an outwardly minor action but leading to drastic consequences – exile in the case both of Crusoe and of Adam in the Genesis account. It is also important to note that, while Crusoe 'does very well' out of his adventures, it is only after 28 years on his island (fairly 'real retribution', one would have thought). His final prosperity would presumably have been seen by contemporary readers as proof that God can bring good even out of wilful rebellion, provided that the individual concerned truly repents, as Crusoe does. It is the pattern of the *felix culpa* from the original sin in Genesis.

[78] Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, pp.8-9.

[79] G.A. Starr, *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography* (Princeton, 1965), pp.58, 87-88, 133.

[80] Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p.10.

- [81] *Ibid*, p.13.
[82] *Ibid*.
[83] *Ibid*, pp.14, 19. But cf. p.16 for a reference to the 'hand of Heaven'.
[84] Starr, *op.cit.*, pp.85-89. Starr cites contemporary preachers to show that Defoe is portraying what was regarded as a common progression in spiritual experience.
[85] Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p.30.
[86] *Ibid*, p.28.
[87] *Ibid*, p.47.
[88] *Ibid*, pp.48, 50.
[89] *Ibid*, pp.58-59.
[90] *Ibid*, p.61.
[91] *Ibid*, p.65.
[92] *Ibid*, p.66.
[93] *Ibid*, pp.67-68.
[94] *Ibid*, pp.69-70.
[95] *Ibid*, p.72.
[96] Watt, *op.cit.*, p.90.
[97] Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p.72.
[98] *Ibid*.
[99] *Ibid*, p.77.
[100] *Ibid*, p.160.
[101] Watt, *op.cit.*, p.77.
[102] Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*. pp.160-61.
[103] Watt, *op.cit.*, pp.90-91. G.A. Starr's study *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography* draws out the dominant shape of Crusoe's 'pilgrim's progress' with considerable and convincing detail. Cf. also J. Paul Hunter, *The Reluctant Pilgrim* (Baltimore,1966). For a survey of the debate see Rogers, *op.cit.*, chs. 3 and 7.
[104] Watt, *op.cit.*, pp.89-90.
[105] Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p.83.
[106] *Ibid*, p.130.
[107] Starr, *op.cit.*, p.119.
[108] Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, pp.84-85.
[109] *Ibid*, p.120.
[110] *Ibid*, p.84.
[111] *Ibid*, pp.114-17; cf. p.144.
[112] Defoe extends this shaping to the extent that the date of Crusoe's beginning life on the island is the date of his birth; the date of his original departure from home (and becoming enslaved by wanderlust?) is also that of his being enslaved by the Moors; the date of his escape from slavery is that of his escape from the Yarmouth storm (likewise an escape from judgement?), and also the day in the month when he finally escapes from captivity on the island (*ibid*, pp.98, 202).
[113] *Ibid*, p.206.

- [114] Starr, *op.cit.*, p.90.
[115] Watt, *op.cit.*, pp.69-70.
[116] Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p.30. Damrosch makes the useful point that Crusoe, unlike Bunyan's characters, is very much at home in this world (cf. Damrosch, *op.cit.*, pp.192-93).
[117] Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders* (1722), p.173; other examples are to be found on pp.167, 170, 174. (All references are to the 1930 Everyman edition.)
[118] Starr, *op.cit.*, pp.159-60.
[119] As Ian Watt points out (*op.cit.*, p.141).
[120] Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, pp.243 ff.
[121] *Ibid*, pp.269.
[122] Dorothy Van Ghent has an excellent analysis of this aspect of the novel in *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York, 1953; Harper edition of 1961), pp.33-37.
[123] Starr, *op.cit.*, p.162. A large number of Moll's successful escapades might be said to come into this category!
[124] *Ibid*, p.183.
[125] Watt, *op.cit.*, p.93.
[126] R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1922), p.279.

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