Fictional Absence - Chapter 3: The Nineteenth Century

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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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(i) Sir Walter Scott

In some ways, nineteenth-century England – Victorian England especially – was much more self-consciously 'Christian' than the England of a century earlier. This was the era of the 'Evangelical Awakening'. But in the end, the fundamental direction of the novel form's development did not change: among most of the great English novelists, the loss of God outlived the Age of Reason.

At the start of the nineteenth century, we find Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen. These are two novelists who might seem, as the humanist critic Peter Faulkner says, to '*represent, at least superficially, a far more orthodox outlook*'[1] than some of their predecessors. But when we look more closely, we find their orthodoxy has more to do with ethics than with faith in the activity of a 'living God'. In both Scott and Jane Austen, a narrative is usually presented as complete without any reference to the Godward dimension of events, to the purposes of God in what is befalling the hero or heroine. In general, the sense of divinely-ordained patterns underlying events that had been part of *Robinson Crusoe*, *Pamela*, and *Amelia*, is missing.

We have already noted the influence on Scott of the reaction against the romances. It may be that his desire not to depart, along with '*the epic poem and the romance of chivalry*', into '*a world of wonders, where supernatural agents are mixed with human characters, where the human characters themselves are prodigies, and where events are produced by causes widely and manifestly different from those which regulate the course of human affairs*', and to avoid '*the relation of what is obviously miraculous and impossible*'[2], discouraged him from the introduction of providentialist material.

His characterization of an ideal supernatural tale as one in which the narrator, having professed general disbelief in its assumptions, confesses to '*something ... which he has been always obliged to give up as inexplicable*'[3], implies that a writer will not find anything supernatural to narrate that he would be obliged to believe because of its connection with his faith. The 'supernatural' is for Scott (as indeed it seems to be for Fielding) a category describing the content of ghost stories, folktales, and so on, rather than a term for the non-naturalistic content of Christian faith.[4]

The Heart of Midlothian is a partial exception to this. It tells how a Scottish girl, Effie Deans, is rescued from hanging through the exertions of her sister Jeanie, who walks nearly all the way from Scotland to London and, by a happy turn of events, succeeds in procuring a royal pardon. There can be no doubt that the mainspring of Jeanie's efforts is her faith in divine power upholding her, a faith she has acquired as part of the extreme 'Cameronian' Presbyterianism to which her family are committed.

Indeed, Effie's predicament has arisen because Jeanie has refused to tell a lie that would secure her sister's acquittal; and Jeanie has made this refusal – with great distress: Scott represents this refusal as something far removed from

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legalistic intransigence – because of her '*faith in Providence*'.[5] Her father's ambivalent advice to her on the topic concludes, '*If ye arena free in conscience to speak for her in the court of judicature, follow your conscience, Jeanie, and let God's will be done.*'[6] God's will, he dares to hope, can pick up the pieces if Jeanie follows her conscience. It is a similar faith-commitment that finally leads her to undertake the highly hazardous journey into England, because '*I am amaist sure that I will be strengthened to speak the errand I came for.*'[7]

Scott makes this foundation to Jeanie's actions abundantly clear. Soon after Effie's conviction, Jeanie decides – very prayerfully [8] – to risk her own life by a dangerous meeting alone with a criminal, in an attempt to assist Effie; she narrowly escapes being raped, and on arriving home hears her father praying for her. She concludes:

that while she was exposed to danger, her head had been covered by the prayers of the just as by a helmet, and under the strong confidence, that while she walked worthy of the protection of Heaven, she would experience its countenance. It was in that moment that a vague idea first darted across her mind, that something might yet be achieved for her sister's safety, conscious as she now was of her innocence of the unnatural murder with which she stood charged. It came, as she described it, on her mind, like a sun-blink on a stormy sea; and although it instantly vanished, yet she felt a degree of composure which she had not experienced for many days, and could not help being strongly persuaded that, by some means or other, she would be called upon, and directed, to work out her sister's deliverance.[9]

And so it turns out; the minor coincidences that help her on her way (such as her fiancé being a descendant of someone who had saved the life of an ancestor of the Duke of Argyll, the nobleman who eventually introduces Jeanie to the Queen), and indeed the fact that her enterprise is accomplished at all against great odds, suggest that her faith might be an accurate assessment of the realities of life.[10] Jeanie's providentialism receives further endorsement from Scott's depiction of the Deans family. This is splendidly comic at times[11], and can present the father in particular as possessing a definite element of self-righteousness[12]; but it is nonetheless sympathetic, and gives them a real wholesomeness, integrity and dignity – all of which reflects on the faith around which their life revolves.

However, there seems to be an ambiguity – or perhaps confusion – in the book's presentation of providentialism. Dorothy Van Ghent notices this confusion, but wrongly locates it in the doctrine of providence itself:

Where Providence provides all, individual willing is a derogation of Providential function; it is absurd to will or to do. And yet, in the Providential universe of Scott's book, the central determination of our attitudes is Jeanie Deans's immense exertion of stubborn willpower in legging it to London to upset whatever work Providence may have had in mind regarding Effie... Scott does not use the paradox. Because he ignores it, the work is sentimental, in the sense that it sets up feelings about a Providential kind of life – feelings of hope, trust, gratitude, and humility, let us say – while concretely it exhibits a way of life in which Providence has no part, a way of life in which the individual determines destiny, by using his legs if not his head.[13]

This is over-simplistic. Scott's readers would surely have been accustomed to the biblical understanding of this issue, embodied in Paul's words '*Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose*'[14] – to cite just one example. That is to say, while on the one hand there is a divine strategy that will be accomplished in the lives of human beings, yet that strategy is designed to be accomplished in good measure through the free decisions and labours of humans working in partnership with God, equipped by His grace. In such a worldview, the purposes of providence for Effie are intended to be brought about by Jeanie's labours; and indeed God is glorified precisely by and in those divinely-inspired and assisted labours. Scott's conception of this is suggested when he presents Jeanie deciding whether to save Effie through a lie, and '*resting on one only sure cable and anchor – faith in Providence, and a resolution to discharge her duty.*'[15] The two are in harmony; Jeanie rests on '*one only sure cable*', not two.

This paradox, then, is not the problem. The

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question is whether Scott has preserved this balance; whether he really intends to assert a providential pattern similar to Jeanie's beliefs to be the actual shape of reality (as the passages we have cited would suggest); or whether, in contrast, Jeanie's providentialism is presented as (or becomes, as the novel proceeds) mere 'local colour', biographical data, a component of the general uprightness of the Deans family (like their marvellous Scottish speech). In that case, the reader ends up understanding the narrative *solely* as an example of sisterly devotion and pluck; Jeanie's gamble of faith comes off, not because there is a God who works in such situations, but because of Jeanie's own good deeds.

Scott evidently wishes to distance himself from some aspects of Jeanie's supernaturalism, for example her attitude towards divine guidance.[16] This is linked with a more general uncertainty. (That is not necessarily a criticism in aesthetic terms; it is merely an assessment of how far the book can be considered a providentialist novel.) For example, when Jeanie is captured by ruffians on the road south, she comforts herself with reflecting on how her Cameronian forebears had found divine deliverance: '*and I bethought myself, that the same help that was wi' them in their strait, wad be wi' me in mine, an I could but watch the Lord's time and opportunity for delivering my feet from their snare.*' Such a '*time and opportunity*' does indeed come, but any sense of direct deliverance is qualified considerably by the words with which Scott follows this soliloquy of Jeanie's: '*Strengthened in a mind naturally calm, sedate, and firm, by the influence of religious confidence...*' Here her Cameronian faith seems merely a useful addition to an already admirable character that is in itself sufficient to see Jeanie through.[17]

The other question is whether the worldview that Scott suddenly produces in the postscript he places at the end of the book is the same as the providentialism suggested by earlier passages. Jeanie's own attitude has been identical with that of her real-life original, Helen Walker, whose story is told in the introduction:

She was heard to say that, by the Almighty's strength, she had been enabled to meet the Duke at the most critical moment, which, if lost, would have caused the inevitable forfeiture of her sister's life.[18]

Here Helen's deliberate effort, strengthened by divine grace, was matched by specific divine intervention; and this kind of attitude to what happens in the world has clearly been Jeanie's too. It is noticeable, however, that Scott lessens the aspect of direct intervention in his fictional version of Helen's story, by omitting the aspect of timing in Jeanie's encounter with the Duke. And when we reach the postscript at the end of the book, Scott offers us something much more mechanical:

Reader, this tale will not be told in vain, if it shall be found to illustrate the great truth, that guilt, though it may attain temporal splendour, can never confer real happiness; that the evil consequences of our crimes long survive their commission, and, like the ghosts of the murdered, for ever haunt the steps of the malefactor; and that the paths of virtue, though seldom those of worldly greatness, are always those of pleasantness and peace.[19]

This is all rather deterministic, having more to do with the inexorable and automatic distribution of rewards and punishments than with the redemptive challenge and intervention of God transforming the human personality. Certainly, for the last eighty-five or so pages, it is difficult to see that Effie and her seducer-turned-husband Staunton are offered any option other than working out the unpleasant consequences of their misdeeds. These consequences include the deaths of their children [20]; the misery [21] that torments Effie even in her social triumphs (which seem given her merely to tantalise her); and finally – after the narrative has become somewhat longwinded and predictable – the rather implausible death of Staunton at the hands of his own son.

Scott seems forced to stretch the bounds of possibility in order to give his characters their deterministic comeuppance – in this life rather than the next. Also, there seems no opportunity for a new beginning. Staunton does marry Effie (it would have been very plausible for him to have deserted her), and Effie shows a conscious submissiveness to God's judgement in the loss of their children ('*God's will be done!*' [22]), leading her eventually to retire to a convent.[23] But there

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is no real possibility of redemption and restoration, no sense of a chance to 'start afresh'; grace does not function that way.

We may consider the question Dorothy Van Ghent raises: what is the crime for which Effie undergoes lifelong punishment?[24] The answer seems to be that she slept with Staunton in her youth. (And, perhaps, that she insisted on marrying her seducer despite his vices.) Admittedly biblical Christianity has always known that a single sin can often have far-reaching and irrevocable consequences. But it has also affirmed the possibility, if not always of the removal of the consequences of sin, at least of grace operating through them to a positive end. It is doubtful if we see such an offer of grace in *The Heart of Midlothian*.

In short, the whole personal dimension of providence is lacking: the love of a personal divine Father, and the individuality of the object of providence. The causality that underlies the loss of Effie's children, and the remarkable death of Staunton, seems more than naturalistic; but its ethos is that of the efficient, impersonal (but distinctly un-Cameronian) machine of the well-ordered but deistic Augustan universe. So in Jeanie's case the role of providence is ambiguous, and in Effie's there is no God who is a redemptive '*very present help in trouble*'. Even in *The Heart of Midlothian*, then, Scott's action is not really marked by a biblical providentialism.

It is not surprising that Scott's biographer Edgar Johnson, author of *Sir Walter Scott: The Great Unknown*, chooses the word 'stoic' to describe Scott's basic outlook. For a faith of a Presbyterian kind, that has been marked by the Calvinistic stress on predestination, is likely in a state of decay to lose the sense of God's presence in the outworkings of destiny. In such a situation, stoicism – including perhaps a basic conviction of the orderliness of the universe, as in Scott's case, but not a living vibrancy of faith – becomes a reasonable enough life-stance. But it is not the same as the exuberant supernaturalism of New Testament Christianity.

(ii) Jane Austen

Significantly, Jane Austen's heroines likewise can be seen in terms of 'stoicism'. Alastair Duckworth, for example, suggests that:

At the times of greatest distress, the 'reduced' self in Jane Austen's fiction is apt to fall back on its own 'resources', an idea which suggests a Christian stoicism, an inner resilience in the face of adversity. Elinor Dashwood, Fanny Price and Anne Elliot all at times approach a kind of Christian heroism which recognises that, whatever the distresses of the moment, this world is not after all the place of ultimate reward.[25]

This needs qualifying. While it is true that the endurance with which Jane Austen's heroines face misfortune would probably have been understood by her contemporary readers as being rooted in a basically Christian consciousness which she and they shared, the novels themselves do not stress any other-worldly dimension to their experience as the ground of their resilience. And one wonders what is particularly 'Christian' about a stoicism that falls back on '*its own "resources"*' and '*inner resilience*'; one would have thought that a hallmark of anything authentically Christian would have been a prayerful, dependent reliance on God for strengthening. In this sense, there is something much more explicitly Christian about the reactions to a crisis of Jeanie Deans or Robinson Crusoe, or even (one hates to say it) Richardson's Pamela, than of Jane Austen's heroines. The latter, marvellous ladies though they often are, suffer, agonize and meditate, but they do not pray:

The tumult of her mind was now painfully great. She knew not how to support herself, and from actual weakness sat down and cried for half an hour....She continued in very agitating reflections.... Elizabeth awoke the next morning to the same thoughts and meditations which had at length closed her eyes. She could not yet recover from the surprise of what had happened: it was impossible to think of any thing else, and totally indisposed for employment, she resolved soon after breakfast to indulge herself in air and exercise.[26]

As these considerations occurred to her in painful succession, she wept for him, more than for herself. Supported by the conviction of having done nothing to merit her present unhappiness, and consoled by the belief that Edward had done

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nothing to forfeit her esteem, she thought she could even now, under the first smart of the heavy blow, command herself enough to guard every suspicion of the truth from her mother and sisters.[27]

Mansfield Park is a partial exception; here the attitudes of Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram – their ill-ease at the flippancy of their companions, or their concern for the role of the clergyman and for family prayers [28] – seem to be grounded in the Evangelicalism of the day. Fanny's reaction to the elopement of Henry Crawford and Maria Rushworth is that 'as far as this world alone was concerned*, the greatest blessing to everyone of kindred with Mrs Rushworth would be instant annihilation*'.[29] Edmund wishes that God will support Fanny through this anguish [30], and later bursts out, '*Thank God!*' at the '*merciful appointment of Providence*' that Fanny has not suffered overmuch.[31] These, however, are what a clergyman should say; Edmund does not actually do any praying; and neither does Fanny, except on one occasion.[32]

Peter Faulkner comments, '*The ladies ... never seek for guidance or consolation from any source beyond themselves*'.[33] That this should seem normal to us – as indeed it does – is a mark of our secularization. It is equally noticeable that the events of Jane Austen's novels are not generally presented as part of a providential design for the characters' lives – even in as perfunctory a fashion as that which we find in *Moll Flanders*. The universal on which *Pride and Prejudice* is based is that '*It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife*' (or some inversion of this maxim, Jane Austen's irony being what it is). Courtship and marriage are the truly vital and fundamental area of human activity. Edmund Bertram's defence of the role of the clergyman is equally illuminating:

But I cannot call that situation nothing, which has the charge of all that is of the first importance to mankind, individually or collectively considered, temporally and eternally – which has the guardianship of religion and morals, and consequently of the manners which result from their influence.... The manners I speak of, might rather be called conduct, perhaps, the result of good principles; the effect, in short, of those doctrines which it is their duty to teach and recommend.[34]

Here, indeed, the religious dimension of life is asserted as a priority (although it is a would-be clergyman speaking). But even in *Mansfield Park*, it exists almost entirely in the horizontal dimension. When one considers how else Edmund could have phrased his defence, it becomes plain that he does not (for example) describe the clergy as a channel for the means of grace, or as encouraging others to a deeper knowledge of God and a greater involvement with His purposes. Manners (in the widest sense of the term), not knowing God, is determinative.

And for a clergyman-hero like Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*, Sunday is purely a social occasion. As Laurence Lerner observes, Jane Austen's clergy regard '*religion as a social institution, not as a personal experience*'. Indeed, he says, there is '*in Jane Austen's conception of the clerical life as complete an absence of the religious dimension as she found in Mr. Collins' conception.*' Edmund Bertram and Henry Tilney '*will defer, and they will patronize*', but they will not be any more religious than Mr.Collins; '*and they certainly will not show enthusiasm*'. It is hard to disagree with Lerner's summary:

Whatever Miss Austen the sister of Henry may have believed, Jane Austen the novelist did not believe in God.... She did not arrange, control or interpret her deepest experience in the light of these opinions or this piety – did not, in such a sense, believe.[35]

Mansfield Park may be a partial exception; but in general, in Jane Austen as in Scott, the 'grand design of God' has gone, and little but stoicism is left behind.

(iii) Gothicism

Meanwhile, the supernatural had re-emerged in force in the Gothic novel, with its paraphernalia of ghosts, devils, and other marvels. This was a form that Jane Austen satirised. For instance in *Northanger Abbey*; and perhaps, like the eighteenth-century novelists, reacted against. Gothicism, however, could hardly be said to have much to do with Christian supernaturalism.

Walpole states as his presupposition in the preface to *The Castle of Otranto* that '*Miracles, visions, necromancy, dreams, and other preternatural events, are exploded now even from romances.*' In Gothic novels, says one recent critic:

the presence of the supernatural is of a piece with dislocated plots, frenzied passions, the use of chiaroscuro and underground passages and vaults containing guilty secrets and unbridled lusts: it expresses the revolt of a purely human subconscious against reason, figured in organised religion and social civility.[36]

The supernatural is left entirely alien, for the point is the shock, the '*frisson of the supernatural*' that is experienced both by the characters and the reader. That frisson is invariably one of numinous rage.[37]

It is for this reason that, as Dorothy Scarborough points out, '*In Gothicism we find that the Deity disappears though the devil remains.*' Pleasurable terror is the aim of this fiction.[38] It is 'escapist' rather than serious art; it is not concerned with any kind of reality.

There is an interesting parallel between Gothicism and some forms of Romanticism, in that in both cases an alternative to the rationalistic straitjacket of the eighteenth-century was produced outside reality, in the realm of the imagination. In both cases it tended to be a non-Christian alternative. Obviously there are distinctions to be made, in so far as Romantic art was intended to be serious rather than escapist. But at any rate the trend at the start of the nineteenth-century was not one of a return to a Christian supernaturalism: the Imagination could be offered as something of a religion-substitute. And even where Romanticism was firmly rooted in reality, as in Wordsworth, the tendency was to incorporate the supra-rational with the empirical world by a pantheistic fusion rather than a Christian one. (Fairchild points out that in Wordsworth, as against Donne, Crashaw or Herbert, '*Grace becomes, not something that human nature needs, but something that human nature possesses*'.[39])

(iv) Charles Dickens

When we turn to the Victorian era, we might expect that, strongly influenced as its worldview was by Evangelicalism, it would have produced some challenge to the dominant consensus. But generally this is not the case. C.S. Lewis has remarked on the predominantly secular nature of nineteenth-century fiction:

The novels of Meredith, Trollope and Thackeray are not written either by or for men who see this world as the vestibule of eternity, who regard pride as the greatest of the sins, who desire to be poor in spirit, and look for a supernatural salvation. Even more significant is the absence from Dickens' Christmas Carol *of any interest in the Incarnation. Mary, the Magi, and the Angels are replaced by 'spirits' of his own invention, and the animals present are not the ox and ass in the stable but the goose and turkey in the poulterer's shop*.[40]

The spirits have no reference to biblical-Christian supernaturalism. And this disinclination to '*look for a supernatural salvation*' that Lewis notes is accompanied in Thackeray and Dickens by a suspicion of the notion of 'special providence'. Thackeray expressed his dislike of those '*who are forever dragging the Awful Divinity into a participation with their private concerns*', and declared that he could not '*request any special change in my behalf from the ordinary processes, or see any special Divine* animus *superintending my illnesses or wellnesses*'[41] – a position which applied consistently would seem to rule out praying [42] for any everyday matter ('*Give us this day our daily bread*'). God is presumably not big enough or loving enough to be concerned with such things.

Dickens likewise sets a belief in providence in some fairly damning contexts: Mrs. Sparsit in *Hard Times* hauling in a captive Mrs. Pegler with '*It's a coincidence... It's a providence!*' [43]; the unpleasant Mrs Clennam's '*I know nothing of summer and winter, shut up here. The Lord has been pleased to put me beyond all that*' in *Little Dorrit* [44]; and, above all, the hypocritical Pecksniff in *Martin Chuzzlewit*: '*Providence, perhaps I may be permitted to say a special Providence, has blessed my endeavours*' – a complacency Dickens singles out for a paragraph's well-deserved demolition.[45] Certainly Dickens was no friend to the evangelicals, the section of the church that was most committed to providentialism[46]; and during

the 1840s at least he was closely linked with the anti-supernaturalistic Unitarians. It is highly significant that he should picture Mr. Weller presenting the new birth itself – the heart of the evangelical gospel, and a concept originating in Jesus' own words to Nicodemus [47] – as a Methodistical '*invention*'.[48] Even at its best, Dickens' own religion seems to match T.S. Eliot's description: '*still of the good old torpid eighteenth century kind, dressed up with a profusion of holly and turkey, and supplemented by strong humanitarian zeal.*'[49] Like Latitudinarianism, it is not a faith putting a great stress on the vertical dimension of supernatural grace.

At the same time, of course, Dickens' imagination was of a type with an openness to – even a yearning for – the marvellous. So although a Christian supernaturalism is not a hallmark of his work, yet supernaturalism of other kinds is often present. (A good example of this is the dreams that haunt Mrs. Flintwinch in *Little Dorrit*.[50]) And he is writing as a popular, and populist, author in an age of overt religiosity. Consequently, Dickens does still make occasional gestures towards the notion of providence, suggesting that God is concerned about His world – even if Dickens himself is not altogether clear how that concern might manifest itself. The result is often a sentimental substitute for Christian supernaturalism, which lacks the robustness of its biblical equivalent. The dying Paul Dombey's vision of his mother is one instance; another is the '*mighty, universal Truth*' expressed in *The Old Curiosity Shop:*

When death strikes down the innocent and young, for every fragile form from which he lets the panting spirit free, a hundred virtues rise, in shapes of mercy, charity, and love, to walk the world, and bless it. Of every tear that sorrowing mortals shed on such green graves, some good is born, some gentler nature comes. In the Destroyer's steps there spring up bright creations that defy his power, and his dark path becomes a way of light to heaven.[51]

This is '*more akin to religious humanism, despite its use of orthodox vocabulary, than to Christian dogma*', as Elizabeth Jay rightly comments [52]; and it is not entirely clear what it means in practical terms. Divorced as it is from a notion of a close relationship with God, it becomes almost deistic.

Oliver Twist contains similar problems. Here Dickens introduces a notion of providence towards the end of the narrative, when Mr. Brownlow comments that Oliver '*was cast in my way by a stronger hand than chance*'[53]; and also on the last page, where '*the two orphans, tried by adversity, remembered its lessons in mercy to others, and mutual love, and fervent thanks to Him who had protected and preserved them*'.[54] In addition, the Christian supernatural seems present in the dreams of heaven that comfort the dying Dick [55], and – in inescapable judgement – in the vision of the murdered Nancy that torments Sikes: '*Let no man talk of murderers escaping justice, and hint that Providence must sleep.*'[56] But there is something ironic in the fact that Dickens, the scourge of loveless theologies, should create in this manifestation of judgement the most powerful image of providential causality in the book. Elsewhere, the marvellous is most strikingly present in contexts outside any suggestion of providentialism: Nancy's premonitions of coffins before her murder[57]; Monks finding Bumble '*by one of those chances which the devil throws in the way of his friends sometimes*' [58]; and perhaps the 'folktale' manner in which Fagin and Monks vanish without trace – or footprint – after sighting Oliver in the house at Chertsey.[59] It is not in the perception of providence at work, but in the delineation of characters far distant from divine providence, that Dickens' presentation is most effectively deepened by overtones resonating beyond the natural. Indeed, it is in the portrayal of the evil characters that Dickens' imagination comes alive. The good characters come across to the reader as lacking colour and energy. And that, in turn, reflects on the providence that is supposedly backing them: there is no hint of glory about its instruments. While it is true that the New Testament conception of providence is one where God has '*chosen what is weak in the world*' in order '*to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us*' [60], yet it is plainly meant to manifest the presence and power of God too.[61] This dimension is clearly lacking from the '*alternative community*' of goodness that Dickens presents, here and elsewhere. As Graham Greene observes:

How can we really believe that these inadequate ghosts of goodness can triumph over Fagin,

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Monks, and Sikes? And the answer, of course, is that they never could have triumphed without the elaborate machinery of the plot disclosed in the last pages. The world of Dickens is a world without God; and as a substitute for the power and the glory of the omnipotent and omniscient are a few references to heaven, angels, the sweet faces of the dead, and Oliver saying, 'Heaven is a long way off, and they are too happy there to come down to the bedside of a poor boy.' ...We have witnessed Oliver's temporary escapes too often and his inevitable recapture; there is the truth and the creative experience.[62]

As a whole, says Greene, *Oliver Twist* depicts '*the nightmare fight between the darkness, where the demons walk, and the sunlight, where ineffective goodness makes its last stand in a condemned world.*' As we shall see in a later chapter, Greene himself is predisposed to sense the '*eternal and alluring taint of the Manichee, with its simple and terrible explanation of our plight, how the world was made by Satan and not by God*' [63]; but in this case, the imagined world that Dickens has created does indeed seem one where the power is all on one side; where the happy ending brought about by unconvincing coincidences (Oliver's two robberies are on his father's best friend and his mother's sister's guardian) does not seem plausible. And that must go for the involvement of providence too; as we remarked earlier, the optimistic assertions of faith have become a myth divorced from the particulars of reality.

It is arguable that these characteristics of Dickens' vision grow still more marked in his later work, where there seems to be a deepening sense of pessimism. Some of his characters still express themselves in providential terms, of course: Little Dorrit for example is willing to go to prison with Arthur '*if it should be the will of God*' [64]; but pious comments of this kind are to be expected from the good characters in a novel of the 1850s. Dickens' '*alternative communities*' continue to lack vitality – 'dear old' Tom Pinch playing the organ at the end of *Martin Chuzzlewit*; the motley crew of eccentrics and simpletons who are the (vastly entertaining) heroes of *Dombey and Son*, out of date, out of touch with the world, and scarcely to be rescued by Dickens' desperate remark that '*instead of being behind the time ... as he supposed, he was, in truth, a little before it*' [65]; Arthur Clennam and his wife going '*quietly down into the roaring streets*', completely unnoticed by the world around them making its '*usual uproar*', at the close of *Little Dorrit*. If any providence is at work here, it is maintaining little beyond an ineffectual bridgehead.

And what is conveyed most powerfully in *Hard Times* is the direct opposite of providentialism: the truth of the dying Stephen Blackpool's summary, '*Aw a muddle! Fro' first to last, a muddle!*'[66] In the final chapter of *Bleak House* Esther speaks of '*the Eternal wisdom*' and of receiving through the train of events '*a new sense of the goodness and the tenderness of God*' [67]; but the perspective of the novel's other narrator is far more nihilistic, and the novel does not resolve the tension between the two.[68] Esther's faith in providence must be balanced against Jo's experience:

And there he sits munching, and gnawing, and looking up at the great Cross on the summit of St. Paul's Cathedral, glittering above a red and violet-tinted cloud of smoke. From the boy's face one might suppose that sacred emblem to be, in his eyes, the crowning confusion of a great confused city; – so golden, so high up, so far out of his reach.[69]

The absence of a providential dimension is made all the clearer by Dickens' sense of the interconnectedness of events, which could have been part of a '*grand design*' but are equally probably '*aw a muddle*':

What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom...? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together?[70]

Strange, if the little sick-room fire were in effect a beacon fire, summoning some one, and that the most unlikely some one in the world, to the spot that must be come to.... Which of the vast multitude of travellers, under the sun and the stars, climbing the dusty hills and toiling along the weary plains, journeying by land and journeying by sea, coming and going so strangely, to meet and to act and re-act on one another, which of the host may, with no

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suspicion of the journey's end, be travelling surely hither?[71]

Dickens' anti-evangelical faith did not have the intellectual robustness to build a credible providential world-picture out of such a vision.

(v) The Novel and the Believers

Nor, for different reasons, did the evangelicals[72]. They were extremely uneasy about fiction for a good part of the century. When the *Christian Observer* reviewed Scott's *Pirate* in 1822, for example, the aim was to demonstrate the dangers of reading even the least offensive novels; and from 1826 to 1844 that magazine carried no reviews of fiction at all, as a matter of principle.[73] *The Christian Lady's Magazine* remarked in 1834 that '*The impression seems also very strong, and very general, that we should not indulge in fictitious narrative.*'[74] Even Charlotte Brontë (who was more towards the centre of the Anglican spectrum) could write, '*For fiction, read Scott alone; all novels after his are worthless*' [75]; while George Eliot – who was much influenced by evangelicals in her youth – expressed one of the concerns many evangelicals felt regarding fiction when she wrote of Scott, '*The spiritual sleep of that man was awful... Sir W.S. himself is the best commentary on the effect of romances and novels. He sacrificed almost his integrity for the sake of acting out the character of the Scotch Laird, which he had so often depicted.*'[76]

Among dissenters, the brilliant Baptist leader C.H. Spurgeon insisted that '*The chaff of fiction, and the bran of the quarterlies, are poor substitutes for the old corn of Scripture*' [77]; and Edmund Gosse's mother believed that '*to compose fictitious narrative of any kind, was a sin.*'[78] A more liberal approach to fiction appeared among Congregationalists in the middle of the century, spreading to the Baptists and Methodists in the 1870s; and this was accompanied by the emergence of a good deal of 'religious fiction'.[79] But none of these evangelical writers – Anglicans or dissenters – were of major significance as novelists. And what Henry James referred to as '*the old evangelical hostility to the novel*' [80] was in fact part of a wider phenomenon. The evangelicalism of the nineteenth century was perhaps not marked by the stringency of its intellectual aspect, outside the area of biblical scholarship. Colin Brown notes the lack of concern that existed among evangelicals for study of the philosophical implications of their beliefs [81]; Rookmaaker comments that an anti-cultural stance, and an absence of any realisation of the presuppositional shift that had occurred since the Enlightenment, produced a similar result in the area of painting.[82] And there was on occasions a quite overt anti-intellectualism: for example, Shaftesbury, the great evangelical social reformer, said that '*Satan reigns in the intellect, God in the heart of man.*'[83] It should also be remembered that for a large part of the century the novel was still regarded primarily as an 'entertainment' rather than as a serious exploration of life and reality. (A 'higher' view of the novel may be seen as gaining in strength as the second half of the century progressed.[84]) This meant on the one hand that novels were viewed as frivolities that lured people's minds away from eternal considerations; it also meant that the depiction of God's activity within such a context would verge on the blasphemous. Alternatively, the presentation of God's activity in fiction could appear blasphemous on the grounds that it was misrepresenting God: and this attitude survived into the mid-twentieth century in some quarters. I am indebted to Professor David Gooding for the comment that, in the conservative evangelical circles in which he grew up, it was believed to be:

wrong in any work of fiction to represent someone being 'born again', for instance. It was not that representing such a solemn thing in the context of 'mere entertainment' was felt to be wrong: no one minded how entertaining a story of an actual regeneration was, so long as it did actually take place; for then, the story was simply a report of a work that the Holy Spirit had been pleased to perform. What was objected to was the novelist's representing the Holy Spirit as having done a work that in fact He had not done.

These are some of the factors that hindered the development of the 'evangelical novel'. Novelists in other wings of the church were perhaps less likely to be concerned for the depiction of the supernatural in the everyday; some because their emphasis was on humanitarianism, some because they would limit the motions of grace to the sacraments, some (particularly later in the century) because the development of

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biblical 'higher criticism' had weakened their faith in biblically-based supernaturalism in general. Thus even where it was accepted that the novel had an '*outright moral or philosophical function*', this was generally interpreted '*in the familiar Victorian terms of a vague ethical idealism*'.[85]

We should note in passing that providentialism did find brief expression during the last part of the century through the notion of 'poetic justice'. Ruskin defined this as consisting:

not only in the gracing of virtue with her own proper rewards of mental peace and spiritual victory: but in the proportioning also of worldly prosperity to visible virtue; and the manifestation, therefore, of the presence of the Father in this world, no less than that which is to come.[86]

R.H. Hutton attacked Henry James for neglecting this, and for failing to show the '*providences of fiction*' which best express the '*moral equities of life*'.[87] But 'poetic justice' of this kind usually amounted to a comfortable, bourgeois belief, that the gods smile on the economically victorious, and that 'worldly prosperity' is a sign of virtue: Weber-Tawney encore. Such a belief would to sensitive minds (and to careful readers of the New Testament) suffer from a crippling lack of verisimilitude; Christians who were convinced that the world was not as God-deserted as in *Hard Times* or *Little Dorrit* would nonetheless know by bitter experience that the actual fate of Stephen Blackpool or Arthur Clennam was all too realistic, and that the presence of the Father in this world was by no means manifested always in '*the proportioning of worldly prosperity to visible virtue*'. It was, after all, the *poor* whom God had chosen rich in faith, according to the epistle of James.

Taken literally and universally, then, 'poetic justice' was neither realistic nor biblical. And taken as a more general expression of a faith that 'all manner of thing shall be well', it faced the same problem as we noted above in connection with *Tom Jones*: if matters do not work out like this in the details of everyday reality, what does it mean in practice? It is possible that Dickens' progression, from the happy ending of *Oliver Twist* and the passage quoted above from *The Old Curiosity Shop* to the grimmer but less facile conclusions of *Little Dorrit* or *Hard Times*, amounted to a loss of faith in 'poetic justice', combined with an uncertainty as to how otherwise the 'presence of the Father' manifests itself. At any rate, 'poetic justice' did not have the potential for a lasting tradition.

(vi) 'Jane Eyre'

All in all, then, providentialism finds little expression among the major nineteenth-century novelists. There are two major exceptions: Charlotte Brontë, and – in one sense most ironically – George Eliot. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is emphatically a product of the Romantic movement. And as David Lodge observes:

The 'gothic' elements so often noted by commentators on the novel – the Byronic hero-with-a-past, the mad wife locked up in an attic, and so on – constitute only a small part of Charlotte's debt to Romantic literature. Far more important is the characteristically Romantic theme of the novel – the struggle of an individual consciousness towards self-fulfilment – and the romantic imagery of landscape, seascape, sun, moon, and the elements through which this theme is expressed.[88]

This note is visible in Jane's paintings of subjects such as '*clouds low and livid, rolling over a swollen sea...a half-submerged mast, on which sat a cormorant, dark and large, with wings flecked with foam; its beak held a gold bracelet*' [89];in Rochester's wife with her '*demoniac laugh – low, suppressed, and deep*' [90]; in the significant image of the chestnut-tree, '*black and riven: the trunk, split down the centre, gasped ghastly. The cloven halves were not broken from each other...though...the sap could flow no more*'[91] (foreshadowing, Lodge suggests, the union of Jane and the crippled Rochester at the book's close [92]); in the moon, '*blood-red and half overcast*' which illuminates the tree [93]; or in the content of Jane's dreams of disaster.[94] And perhaps it is not surprising in a work of late Romanticism to find a strong element of wish-fulfilment, as Charlotte Brontë's apparently shy surrogate twists the seemingly terrifying male in her life round her little finger, with a marvellous display of cool, composed and neatly-phrased wit.[95]

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Into all this Romanticism Charlotte Brontë introduces providence. There is no reason why she should not; a Christian Romanticism is every bit as feasible as a Christian Augustanism or a Christian Renaissance humanism. But it has its own particular problems: and *Jane Eyre* demonstrates ways in which the fusion can fail. The combination of providence and a wish-fulfilment-dream is all too easy; the notion of providential overruling adds credibility to the achievement of the desired developments, while at the same time enhancing the whole structure (how much more pleasant it is if your desires are being endorsed by providence!)

Providence is introduced into the novel by several trustworthy characters: Helen Burns [96], Mrs Fairfax ('*daily thankful for the choice Providence led me to make*' in appointing Jane as governess [97]), and Jane herself: '*I ... brought my own water-jug, baptized the couch afresh, and, by God's aid, succeeded in extinguishing the flames.*'[98] Jane tells Rochester, '*Yesterday I trusted well in Providence, and believed that events were working together for your good and mine.*'[99] (There is an allusion here, presumably, to the Authorised Version of Romans 8:28: '*And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God.*')

As the story develops, Rochester's passion for Jane and Jane's Christianity come into conflict. '*God pardon me*', he says of their relationship, '*and man meddle not with me: I have her, and will hold her*' [100] – a remark for which Jane (wisely?) seeks no explanation at the time. She too faces the conflict of commitments: '*He stood between me and every thought of religion, as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun. I could not, in those days, see God for His creature: of whom I had made an idol.*'[101] When their wedding is interrupted (by a witness insisting that Rochester is already married) Rochester's reaction is that '*fate has out-manoeuvred me, or Providence has checked me – perhaps the last*'[102] – the expression of the two alternatives making it clear that the use of the phrase is not a casual commonplace.

As for Jane, God is suddenly all she has left when the wedding breaks up:

To rise I had no will, to flee I had no strength. I lay faint, longing to be dead. One idea only still throbbed lifelike within me – a remembrance of God: it begot an unuttered prayer: these words went wandering up and down in my rayless mind, as something that should be whispered, but no energy was found to express them.
'Be not far from me, for trouble is near: there is none to help.'[103]

The almost-prayer is answered. Jane finds the moral courage to decide to leave Thornfield (as distinct from waiting passively for circumstances to force her out) [104]; and when she has to inform Rochester of her decision, she feels '*an inward power; a sense of influence, which supported me.*'[105] Here, however, an artistic danger in this sort of providentialism is revealed: the sense of crisis is lessened – particularly given the slight tinge of wish-fulfilment that accompanies her ability to resist Rochester's wrath: '*The crisis was perilous; but not without its charm: such as the Indian, perhaps, feels when he slips over the rapid in his canoe.*' Charlotte Brontë handles the narrative better two pages later when Jane:

did what human beings do instinctively when they are driven to utter extremity – looked for aid to one higher than man: the words 'God help met' burst involuntarily from my lips.[106]

This time, the answer to prayer comes through Rochester changing the topic of the conversation – a tactical move on his part, but a relief for Jane, and one which gives less sense of being facile. From this point on, Jane is committed to her submission to providence. When Rochester asks what he should do, she replies, '*Do as I do: trust in God and yourself. Believe in heaven.*'[107] (The Romantic element is still present too: it is nothing less than a vision of her mother that eventually pushes Jane to carry out her flight [108] – not, for example, prayerful reflection based on the Bible.) But there is a complex issue at stake. Jane is aware that she is leaving Rochester to '*misery, perhaps ... ruin ... self-abandonment.*'[109] And it is this point in the narrative that marks out *Jane Eyre* as a novel committed to Christian supernaturalism beyond almost any other of the great Victorian novels. For where a vaguely religious humanist – a situational ethicist, for example – might expect Jane to subordinate her sexual ethics to Rochester's needs, she instead works on the biblical principle that the ends never

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justify the means, that the first priority is to obey God in what we are sure of and trust His love to care for what is uncertain:

Still I could not turn, nor retrace one step. God must have led me on... Gentle reader... May you never appeal to Heaven in prayers so hopeless and so agonized as in that hour left my lips; for never may you, like me, dread to be the instrument of evil to what you wholly love.[110]

To trust and obey God in such a situation is to live by faith. Charlotte Brontë has succeeded in creating a narrative situation that reveals this faith with all its pain and complexity; there are few other novelists that have dared to suggest that an action like Jane's might be right, and that there might be a God who will actively and lovingly overrule the results, in defiance of the human probabilities of the situation.

As Jane looks up at the Milky Way, her conception of the greatness and reliability of God is – with total realism – strengthened and broadened:

Remembering what it was – what countless systems there swept space like a soft trace of light – I felt the might and strength of God. Sure was I of His efficiency to save what He had made: convinced I grew that neither earth should perish, nor one of the souls it treasured. I turned my prayer to thanksgiving: the Source of Life was also the Saviour of spirits. Mr Rochester was safe: he was God's, and by God would he be guarded. I again nestled to the breast of the hill; and ere long in sleep forgot sorrow.[111]

Having reached this significant point, Charlotte Brontë begins a somewhat more complex exploration of her character's understanding of providence. It is while Jane is sitting in a state of despairing faith at the Rivers' door, having been denied entry ('*I can but die ... and I believe in God. Let me try to wait His will In silence*'[112]), that her rescuer, St. John Rivers, appears. He turns out to be a close relative (shades of the unexpected relatives in *Oliver Twist*, which was published ten years before *Jane Eyre*). But this rock-like figure – '*a good and a great man*', as Jane describes him even when he is most a threat[113] – develops an unfortunate conviction that Jane should accompany him to India as a missionary – and as his wife.

God and nature intended you for a missionary's wife.... You shall be mine: I claim you – not for my pleasure, but for my sovereign's service.... Do not forget that if you reject it, it is not me you deny, but God.[114]

He goes so far as to suggest (and this heightening of the tension is unjustified from his doctrine, and perhaps unfitted to his character) that Jane will court damnation by refusing.[115] Jane challenges his dogmatic assessments of God's will: '*God did not give me my life to throw away; and to do as you wish me would, I begin to think, be almost equivalent to committing suicide.*'[116]

St. John Rivers is stern, unyielding, and clearly not in love with Jane, but neither sanctimonious nor a hypocrite (as perhaps he might have been in Dickens). He brings matters to a head when taking family devotions; his manner is a '*calm, subdued triumph, blent with a longing earnestness*', and he prays with '*stern zeal... He was in deep earnest, wrestling with God, and resolved on a conquest.*'[117] This is the crisis point. Everything seems to endorse Rivers' unambiguous directness. The authoress invokes all the religious imagery at her command, in a passage that, while visionary, does not appear to be intended as overblown:

The Impossible – that is, my marriage with St. John – was fast becoming the Possible. All was changing utterly with a sudden sweep. Religion called – Angels beckoned – God commanded – life rolled together like a scroll – death's gates opening showed eternity beyond: it seemed, that for safety and bliss there, all here might be sacrificed in a second.[118]

Here Jane comes right to the verge of accepting Rivers' understanding of providence and throwing in her lot with him. She is stopped at the last minute. But, fascinatingly, Charlotte Brontë does not present her disentangling her perception of God's providential will from Rivers', or choosing between her deeper convictions and this burst of vision. Instead, she is rescued by the return of Romanticism, and its displacement of providentialism.

'Show me, show me the path!' I entreated of Heaven... Whether what followed was the effect of excitement, the reader shall judge... The one candle was dying out: the room was full of

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moonlight. My heart beat fast and thick: I heard its throb. Suddenly it stood still to an inexpressible feeling that thrilled it through, and passed at once to my head and extremities... I heard a voice somewhere cry – 'Jane! Jane! Jane!' – nothing more.

'Oh God! what is it?' I gasped.[119]

It is, of course, the voice – or telepathic summons – of Jane's Romantic lover, Rochester; and the exclamation with which Jane greets it may be a prayer, but sounds more like the expletive of a Romantic heroine.[120] Jane rushes out; there is nothing – except Romanticism: '*The wind sighed low in the firs: all was moorland loneliness and midnight hush.' Was it, then, 'superstition'? No: 'This is not thy deception, nor thy witchcraft: it is the work of nature.*' But the very categories she employs here make clear the sudden change that has taken place. Six pages earlier a conflict within Rivers was described as a '*struggle ... between Nature and Grace*'.[121] Nature has now altered from a tempter into a deliverer, and a force to be obeyed. Jane orders Rivers to leave her: '*He obeyed at once*' (another triumph for the heroine over males of seemingly-terrifying power). She prays – '*a different way to St. John's, but effective in its own fashion. I seemed to penetrate very near a Mighty Spirit*' – and the very vagueness of the terminology makes it sound as if she is worshipping alongside Keats or Wordsworth in his pantheistic phase.

Charlotte Brontë cannot quite bring her heroine to affirm the direction of providence in her return to Rochester with the same forcefulness as when she left him ('*God directed me to a correct choice: I thank His providence for the guidance!*'[122] was the earlier version):

'My flesh, I hope, is strong enough to accomplish the will of Heaven when once that will is distinctly known to me. At any rate, it shall be strong enough to search – inquire – to grope an outlet from this cloud of doubt.'...

I asked was it a mere nervous impression – a delusion? I could not conceive or believe: it was more like an inspiration. The wondrous shock of feeling had come like the earthquake which shook the foundations of Paul and Silas's prison.[123]

That Christian experience could be *like* Romantic experience was never in doubt. What Charlotte Brontë fails to give her character is any reason to believe that her telepathic voice is a *divine* message that brings with it an imperative; rather than the 'sympathies' which she earlier suggested exist between '*far-distant, long-absent, wholly estranged relatives*'[124], but which represent no divine command. The fusion of Christianity and Romanticism has a ragged edge at this point. And no further reference to providence appears for the next twenty-four pages, during which Jane returns to Rochester.

Rochester responds to her arrival in images not of providence but of magical enchantment.[125] It is only later, when Jane has accepted a proposal of marriage. that Rochester bursts out '*God bless you and reward you!*'[126]. and – now that the crisis is over – launches into a thoroughly providentialist account of his sufferings:

Jane! you think me, I daresay, an irreligious dog: but my heart swells with gratitude to the beneficent God of this earth just now. He sees not as man sees, but far clearer... I would have sullied my innocent flower – breathed guilt on its purity: the Omnipotent snatched it from me... Divine justice pursued its course; disasters came thick on me: I was forced to pass through the valley of the shadow of death. His chastisements are mighty; and one smote me which has humbled me for ever... Of late, Jane – only – only of late – I began to see and acknowledge the hand of God in my doom. I began to experience remorse, repentance, the wish for reconcilement to my Maker. I began sometimes to pray... Now, I thank God... Yes, I thank God.[127]

This brings the two streams of Romanticism and Christianity together again. Even so, it is an uneasy alliance. Jane does not tell Rochester of how she heard his voice: '*That mind, yet from its sufferings too prone to gloom, needed not the deeper shade of the supernatural. I kept these things then, and pondered them in my heart.*'[128] This may be expressed in biblical language (the last sentence is almost a direct quotation of the Authorized Version of Luke 2:19); but the 'supernatural' still seems to have rather unbiblical connotations – there is a note of the ominous in 'the deeper shade', rather than of the radiance and trustworthiness that accompany the supernatural in scripture; a sense of something to be avoided by those inclined to gloom, rather than something to be welcomed, trusted and rejoiced over. And when

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Jane relates that she now knows, in her Romantic paradise, '*what it is to* live entirely for *and with what I love best on earth*' (my emphasis)[129] , the memory arises of Rivers' warning against a life of '*selfish ease and barren obscurity*'.[130] The missionary vision which seemed so important to her earlier (her objections to service in India had been over marrying Rivers, finally abandoning Rochester, and her fragile health) has vanished. One thinks of the energetic activities of Goldsmith's Mr. Primrose in jail as a comparison.

Charlotte Brontë seems to have felt these problems. Now that she has resolved the book's ambiguity and given the victory to the Romantic impulse through the narrative action, the final paragraphs seem to represent a last glance back at the other alternative. They are about Rivers, and the praise they give him is virtually unalloyed: '*His is the exaction of the apostle, who speaks but for Christ, when he says – "Whosoever will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me"*'. But '*speaks but for Christ*' throws a huge question-mark, surely, over Jane's earlier choice. His last letter, she records, '*filled my heart with divine joy*' – something Rochester never manages to do. So the book ends, expressing something unresolved in its fundamental vision:

Providence and Romanticism have made, at best, a difficult marriage. Still, it has to be said that this very ambivalence adds to the book's interest; it records an 'implied author' (and, almost certainly, a real author too) on the horns of a dilemma, and enacting that dilemma in fiction. At any rate, much of it succeeds in presenting a providentialist vision in fictional narrative: and that is a rare achievement among the great Victorian novelists.

(vii) 'Shirley' and 'Villette'

What Charlotte Brontë does in *Shirley* is something different, but equally significant. *Shirley* is a somewhat flawed novel, but one that has been praised for its social realism.[131] It has several themes: the 'condition of England', a twofold love theme, issues of women's roles, the clash of imagination and reality. What is striking for our purposes is the straightforward way in which a very natural providentialism forms part of the fundamental basis of the novel, in terms of casual references to prayer, God's overruling, and so on. Such content might seem virtually inevitable to us; but to see its simple introduction in *Shirley* is to realise the significance of its absence in, say, Walter Scott, or Jane Austen.

For Caroline Helstone, one of the book's two heroines, prayer is unashamedly a natural rhythm in her life:

'Nothing will happen, Lina. To speak in your own language, there is a Providence above all – is there not?'
'Yes, dear Robert. May He guard you!'
And if prayers have efficacy, yours will benefit me: you pray for me sometimes?'
'Not sometimes*, Robert: you, and Louis, and Hortense are* always *remembered.'*[132] *She heard Mr. Helstone come in; she saw Robert stride the tombs and vault the wall; she then went down to prayers.*[133]

'The repeal of Orders in Council saves me. Now I shall not turn bankrupt; now I shall not give up business... I breathe; I can act.'
'At last! Oh! Providence is kind. Thank Him, Robert.'
'I do thank Providence.'
'And I also, for your sake!' She looked up devoutly.[134]

In this novel, belief in providence is both a faith for difficult times, as expressed by the admirable Mr Hall ('*His will be done! but He tries us to the utmost*'[135], and an overall worldview underlying the narration's approach to the activities of the church ('*It was a joyous scene... the work, first of God, and then of the clergy... Britain would miss her church, if that church fell. God save it! God also reform it!*'[136]), or the developments of the Napoleonic war in Moscow or Spain, which are recorded as dependent ultimately on '*the word of the Lord of Hosts*'.[137] Whether we are dealing with England's church, the fate of Bonaparte or the political-economic developments of Orders in Council, an adequate presentation of events is for Charlotte Brontë one that takes note of the Godward dimension. And what is important for us is that this dimension is not the book's central theme: *Shirley* is not a 'religious novel', but a combination of a 'condition of England' fiction, a love-story, and a number of other things. In this respect, Charlotte Brontë has provided a good example of how an outlook that is firmly

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providentialist can without jarring serve as backcloth and foundation for a realistic novel whose main narrative themes are mostly 'this-worldly': she exemplifies a providentialist 'way of seeing'. Not that this viewpoint is easily held. Caroline goes through a crippling experience of frustration in love, and in this experience she faces severe doubts about her Christian beliefs.[138] '*She wished she could be happy: she wished she could know inward peace: she wondered Providence had no pity on her, and would not help or console her.*'[139] Even so, the crisis is presented as having a 'vertical dimension', as it were – unlike most such situations in Jane Austen. And in her narration, Charlotte Brontë insists we are not dealing with mere biographical phenomena, but that God Himself is really at work:

Caroline was a Christian; therefore in trouble she framed many a prayer... She believed, sometimes, that God had turned His face from her... Most people have had a period or periods in their lives when they felt thus forsaken; when, having long hoped against hope, and still the day of fruition deferred, their hearts have truly sickened within them. This is a terrible hour... Yet, let whoever grieves still cling fast to love and faith in God: God will never deceive, never finally desert him... The household was astir at last; the servants were up; the shutters were opened below.[140]

As a whole this is a somewhat longwinded passage, probably too much so to make its point effectively today in a colder climate; and the author might have been wiser to remain content with setting out the pattern in the narrative, rather than addressing her reader herself. But the world she is seeking to image is clear. Caroline's own faith is renewed as she hears the sad story of Mrs Pryor (who will turn out to be her mother), along with a providentialist reading of those events ('*None saw – none knew. There was no sympathy... It is over, and not fruitlessly. I tried to keep the word of His patience: He kept me in the days of my anguish*'[141]. What is being modelled in the action here is the belief that, when life seems to have turned into a trap, the central issue must be finding God's purpose in it. The extensive use of biblical or quasi-biblical language makes these passages less accessible to a reader of a century later: however, we need to recognise that these allusions are used precisely because Charlotte Brontë is asserting the Bible to be the ultimate model and paradigm, containing the full causality and significance needed to interpret the enigmas in our own experience, and the experience of her contemporary heroine.

The novel's crisis comes as Caroline's deep-seated frustrations – extending, as they do, beyond her romantic loss to a profound sense of fruitlessness about her entire existence – lead to severe illness. She struggles with her feelings in a long and not unrealistic soliloquy, verging from complaint ('*Oh! I* should *see him once more before all is over: Heaven might favour me thus far!*') to desperate prayer.[142] She reaches the point where her sanity is fading fast; and at this point Charlotte Brontë concludes a chapter by describing her mother, who is nursing her, spending the night '*like Jacob at Peniel*' (another biblical paradigm): '*Till break of day, she wrestled with God in earnest prayer.*'[143] This is realistic, in the sense that that is what would happen in the circumstances in many Christian families – but it is something very few characters do in the works of the major English novelists! Again we can recognise the rarity of *Shirley* by considering how many characters ever spend a night praying in Jane Austen, Dickens, or Trollope – let alone James or Lawrence. In *Shirley*, Charlotte Brontë reflects and recreates a world where people do such things, and where their prayers receive answers: Caroline is restored to health, and indeed (eventually) to both love and fulfilment.

To any Christian, however, the statement that God answers prayer is not the same as the idea that we will automatically get what we ask for. Charlotte Brontë begins the following chapter of *Shirley* with a careful reminder to this effect. And in *Villette,* which seems currently to be her most critically-acclaimed novel, she grapples with this aspect of providentialism. Lucy Snowe, the heroine of Villette, is, like Caroline Helstone, a woman trapped in frustrating circumstances. But, unlike Caroline, Lucy faces these in deep loneliness. Even so, there is not the sense that God is absent: there are, Lucy believes, divine purposes at work; but she fears she is destined to experience their darker side.

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In *Villette*, therefore, as in *Shirley*, providentialist references appear periodically. Lucy finds a comfortable position as companion to an old lady, Miss Marchmont; but it is an existence she is forced to recognise as 'crawling on' ('*I had wanted to compromise with Fate: to escape great agonies by submitting to a whole life of privation and small pains*'). But if there is a providence it will not be satisfied with that for her: '*nor would Providence sanction this shrinking sloth and cowardly indolence*'.[144] That same providence is what she senses watching over her when she migrates to Belgium, loses her trunk, is chased by '*moustachioed men ... hunters*', and completely loses her way to the inn she is seeking – yet suddenly finds herself before the house of the woman she (rightly) hopes may employ her: '*Providence said, "Stop here; this is your inn."*'[145] '*My devotions that night were all thanksgiving: strangely had I been led since morning – unexpectedly had I been provided for.*'[146] For Lucy, as for Caroline, prayer is a daily exercise that is worthy of record in her own narrative[147], and '*inwardly thanking God*' is likewise an automatic response to a good occurrence.[148]

Yet in all this there is an overpowering sense of the pain that may be involved in the providential design. The night the old lady she is nursing dies (a few hours before she is to alter her will to Lucy's advantage), she tells Lucy of how the one love of her own life met with a fatal accident: '*I cannot – I* cannot *see the reason; yet at this hour I can say with sincerity, what I never tried to say before – Inscrutable God, Thy will be done!*'[149] And as events proceed, Lucy comes to see herself as someone else who may be called to live by faith in the face of this inscrutability:

How I used to pray to Heaven for consolation and support! With what dread force the conviction would grasp me that Fate was my permanent foe, never to be conciliated. I did not, in my heart, arraign the mercy or justice of God for this; I concluded it to be a part of his great plan that some must deeply suffer while they live, and I thrilled in the certainty that of this number, I was one.[150] *When I tried to pray I could only utter these words:- 'From my youth up Thy terrors have I suffered with a troubled mind.' Most true was it.*[151] *If life be a war, it seemed my destiny to conduct it single-handed. I pondered now how to break up my winter quarters – to leave an encampment where food and forage failed. Perhaps, to effect this change, another pitched battle must be fought with fortune; if so, I had a mind to the encounter: too poor to lose, God might destine me to gain.*[152] *Is there nothing more for me in life – no true home...?... I suppose, Lucy Snowe, the orb of your life is not to be so rounded... I find no reason why I should be of the few favoured... I believe that this life is not all; neither the beginning nor the end. I believe while I tremble; I trust while I weep.*[153]

Most of this is written simply, without the somewhat overblown diction that sometimes vitiates Caroline's outpourings in *Shirley*; and, set in the context of a realistic narrative of Lucy's everyday activities, it is moving and powerful.

A contrast is provided by Lucy's friends Graham and Paulina. Lucy looks at the joy of their love and asks herself, '*Is there indeed such happiness on earth?... Yes; it is so... But it is not so for all.*'[154] '*In all that mutually concerns you and Graham*', Lucy tells Paulina, '*there seems to me promise, plan, harmony... Some lives are thus blessed: it is God's will... Other travellers... are belated and overtaken by the early closing winter night... I know that, amidst His boundless works, is somewhere stored the secret of this last fate's justice.*'[155] Lucy knows her own story may involve exploring what it means to be one of those placed by providence in the second category. '*As to what lies below*', the inner struggles, she says in a (long and perhaps overwritten) chapter opening:

leave that with God... Take it to your Maker – show Him the secrets of the spirit He gave – ask Him how you are to bear the pains He has appointed – kneel, in His presence, and pray in faith for light in darkness, for strength in piteous weakness, for patience in extreme need. Certainly, at some hour, though perhaps not your *hour, the waiting waters will stir; in some shape, though perhaps not the shape you dreamed, which your heart loved, and for which it bled, the healing herald will descend.*

And then the pain breaks out – realistically, and powerfully, if again in somewhat literary tongue:

Herald, come quickly! Thousands lie around the pool, weeping and despairing, to see it, through slow years, stagnant. Long are the 'times' of

heaven: the orbits of angel messengers seem wide to mortal vision; they may en-ring ages... and dust, kindling to brief suffering life, and, through pain, passing back to dust, may meanwhile perish out of memory again, and yet again.[156]

It is realistic enough. Perhaps these reflections are a trifle verbose and highly-coloured; but *Villette,* unlike *Shirley*, is a first-person narrative, and reading Lucy's words we sense that this is the kind of thing a woman in such a situation might indeed have recorded in her journal: and, as such, it is poignantly meaningful. We may, indeed, feel that very little is shown us of Lucy's own spirituality that could serve as a source for her strength and endurance – unless indeed we see her recurrent use of biblical allusion as implying that the shape she derives for her experience from her Bible reading is her ultimate anchor.[157] Perhaps, therefore, it is not surprising that alongside her Christian faith we find emphasised a Romantic cult of the imagination – something compatible enough with her Christianity, yet nonetheless a little surprising in the vehemence with which it is stated: '*When I bend the knee to other than God, it shall be at thy white and winged feet, beautiful on mountain or on plain.*'[158] But, once again, this may seem realistic enough, given the emotional deprivation Lucy is portrayed enduring.

Yet towards the end of the book it seems that for Lucy, as for Caroline Helstone, the joyous turn is coming. In a movingly-written passage, Lucy finds real friendship (and '*such a pleasure as, certainly, I had never felt*') with Paul Emanuel.[159] The friendship develops, then falls into an apparent hiatus which, it transpires, M. Paul has used to acquire for Lucy the thing she has dreamed of: a school of her own. Nor does it stop there: M. Paul leaves for three years in the West Indies, but before he does so it is arranged that they are to be married. It is all Lucy has longed for. Over three years his letters arrive, '*real food that nourished, living water that refreshed.*'[160] And then, on the closing page, comes the journey home. Storm clouds gather ('*God, watch that sail!*'); '*The atlantic was strewn with wrecks... Not till the destroying angel of tempest had achieved his perfect work, would he fold the wings whose waft was thunder*' (a metaphor reminding us that, if there is a God, He has permitted all this); and M. Paul is drowned. So, in short, blank, comfortless sentences, the story ends.

It is a hard ending to comment on. Aesthetically, it is powerful, and moving: experientially, it is true – providence or not, such things occur. Yet there is, perhaps, a sense of something incomplete. The narration of the death of Miss Marchmont (the old lady whom Lucy had nursed) portrays a certain completion being achieved in her learning to accept, on the night of her death, the loss of her lover thirty years previously. Lucy's pattern is not brought to that completion: we learn of the loss, but not whether it has a 'meaning'. Is this a point where Charlotte Brontë's Romanticism has taken over, as in *Jane Eyre*; with the Romantic susceptibility for disaster dictating the close, rather than working it out fully in terms of the providential pattern? In contrast, we might note the number of modern Christian novelists who have made powerful fiction out of precisely this theme of the loss of the beloved: C.S. Lewis in *Till We Have Faces*, Graham Greene in *The End of the Affair*, Rudy Wiebe in F*irst and Vital Candle*. Charlotte Brontë has not used up all her potential here: there is something huge left to be said – how will Lucy handle this now?

And yet, perhaps, she has told us enough. We know already, from Lucy's own experience and Miss Marchmont's, how such events can be confronted in faith. The 'implied narrator' of the book, with her unflinching trust in God, has been looking back from beyond the book's close. It is not inappropriate to present a final evocation of the dark night of the soul as conclusion to this powerful narrative of a woman alone, living out a faith in providence when providence seems most froward.

And perhaps by leaving her reader with the very blankness of the ending, Charlotte Brontë poses the question: given what has happened throughout, in such a situation of catastrophe can you still live by faith?

(viii) George Eliot

Charlotte Brontë's uniqueness is not quite absolute. And it is intriguing that the other major

example of providentialism in the Victorian novel [161] should be the professed agnostic George Eliot. But George Eliot had had an extensive experience of evangelicalism, including leading prayer meetings during her youth.[162] Although she rejected these beliefs, she retained considerable sympathy for those who held them – in marked contrast to the scorn almost invariably manifested by Dickens.

Hence, when *Adam Bede* was published, the *Nonconformist* hailed it as having done '*ample justice to evangelical piety, which no novelist known to us (at least, no novelist of the same mark) had ever done before.*'[163] Modern critics of the interaction between nineteenth-century evangelicalism and the novel have reached similar conclusions: Cunningham's study of dissenters and the novel declares that '*No great English novelist has ever got closer than George Eliot to the heart of the Dissenting matter*', and speaks of her '*very unique compassion for and insight into the Nonconformist spirit, the enthusiastic character, the Puritan temper.*'[164] Elizabeth Jay, whose concern is with specifically Anglican evangelicalism, describes George Eliot as '*paramount among major novelists in the accuracy and subtlety with which she used her experience of Evangelicalism... perhaps the one major novelist to portray Evangelicalism with detailed fidelity and imaginative sympathy.*'[165]

If George Eliot shows an accurate and sympathetic knowledge of the attitudes and lifestyles of the evangelicals she depicts, it is not entirely surprising that the providence in which they believed should also find some place in her novels. The characters in *Silas Marner*, for example, are all people who see the world in providential terms. Silas himself has had his faith in God shattered after his wretched experience of condemnation by casting lots in the sect in Lantern Yard: but the appearance of the foundling Eppie brings back to him '*old impressions of awe at the presentiment of some Power presiding over his life*'.[166]

His advisor Dolly Winthrop is quite explicit on the subject: '*There's Them as took care of it, and brought it to your door*', she tells Silas.[167]

Other characters speak in these terms with equal naturalness. Godfrey Cass confesses his guilt to his wife because, he says, '*When God Almighty wills it, our secrets are found out.*'[168] When he attempts to take Eppie (who is actually his daughter) from Silas, Silas objects that '*God gave her to me because you turned your back upon her, and He looks upon her as mine*'[169], an argument Godfrey accepts entirely after a while.[170] Godfrey's wife is used by George Eliot to point out the weaknesses of a particular attitude to providence: '*She would have given up making a purchase at a particular place if on three successive times, rain or some other cause of Heaven's sending, had formed an obstacle.*'[171] But this does not become part of a sustained assault on the whole doctrine of providence. It could have done; and the Lantern Yard incident could (and in Dickens' hands undoubtedly would) have been used as a basis for a stinging denunciation of dissenting supernaturalism. Instead, Dolly Winthrop leads Silas to understand that, while his suffering caused by that affair cannot be neatly explained away, yet what he knows of God's love and of human love should lead him to faith in the reality of God's involvement in those things he cannot see:

But what come to me as clear as the daylight, it was when I was troubling over poor Bessy Fawkes, and it allays comes into my head when I'm sorry for folks... as Them above has got a deal tenderer heart nor what I've got – for I can't be anyways better nor Them as made me, and if anything looks hard to me, it's because there's things I don't know on ... and it all come pouring in – if I felt i' my inside what was the right and just thing by you, and them as prayed and drawed the lots, all but that wicked un, if they'd ha' done the right thing by you if they could, isn't there Them as was at the making on us, and knows better and has a better will? And that's all as ever I can be sure on, and everything else is a big puzzle to me when I think on it... And if you could but ha' gone on trustening, Master Marner, you wouldn't ha' run away from your fellow-creaturs and been so lone.[172]

The rural accent ('allays', 'creaturs'), and the theologically abnormal 'Them', help the reader with this passage. Silas responds:

There's good i' this world – I've a feeling o' that now; and it makes a man feel as there's a good more nor he can see, i' spite o' the trouble and the

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wickedness. That drawing o' the lots is dark; but the child was sent to me: there's dealings with us – there's dealings.[173]

The importance of this lesson of the reality of providence is brought home in the last chapter before the book's 'Conclusion', where the story comes full circle as Silas and Eppie go in search of Lantern Yard. But the chapel has gone; Silas recognises he can learn nothing more either about his betrayal, or from the chapel's teaching. '*It's the will o' Them above as a many things should be dark to us*', Dolly reminds him on his return; and Silas replies that, since Eppie's advent, '*I've had light enough to trusten by; and, now she says she'll never leave me, I think I shall trusten till I die.*'[174] And so the chapter ends.

The sense of overall patterning in *Silas Marner* accords very well with what F.R. Leavis has called its 'fairy tale' mode.[175] But it is matched in George Eliot's other books. She chooses to write about humble, religious people, and in doing so she enters into their thinking to such a marked degree that providence becomes not merely something professed by a trustworthy character (like Dolly Winthrop), but is at times asserted within the narration itself. Near the end of *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie is wrestling with the feelings aroused by her lover Stephen's letter, and her own commitment to '*bear the Cross*'.[176] Her life stretches ahead of her as a renunciation lasting till death:

'How shall I have patience and strength?'... With that cry of self-despair, Maggie fell on her knees against the table, and buried her sorrow-stricken face. Her soul went out to the Unseen Pity that would be with her to the end. Surely, there was something being taught her by this experience of great need; and she must be learning a secret of human tenderness and long-suffering, that the less erring could hardly know? 'O God, if my life is to be long, let me live to bless and comfort –'[177]

At that point her prayer is interrupted by the coming of the flood. And just as Maggie's spiritual pilgrimage has throughout the book been founded on her perceptions of the spiritual world as the ground of her actions, so the action that resolves and concludes the book takes place in a theistic context. Maggie is swept away in her boat, and the narrative (not Maggie herself) describes her as '*alone in the darkness with God.*'[178] To her, the flood is an '*awful visitation of God*', and her automatic reaction is to pray: '*O God, where am I? Which is the way home?*' The consequence is her rescue of Tom, her estranged brother: this the narrative describes as '*a story of almost miraculous divinely-protected effort.*'[179] '*God has taken care of me, to bring me to you*', is what Maggie herself tells Tom. Thus the reconciliation scene that is the novel's climax takes place – according to both Maggie and the narrator – under the hand of providence.

It is the same in the critical scene between Dinah and Hetty in the prison in *Adam Bede*. Dinah goes in to see Hetty with '*a deep concentrated calmness, as if, even when she was speaking, her soul was in prayer reposing on an unseen support.*'[180] And the whole encounter takes place, as Dinah insists repeatedly, in the context of '*the presence of God*'[181]:

But it was borne in upon her, as she afterwards said, that she must not hurry God's work: we are over-hasty to speak – as if God did not manifest himself by our silent feeling, and make his love felt through ours... But she felt the Divine presence more and more, – nay, as if she herself were a part of it, and it was the Divine pity that was beating in her heart, and was willing the rescue of this helpless one.[182]

Here again, when George Eliot wants to penetrate to 'the heart of the matter', she sets up an overtly theistic context. No doubt it has much to do with the narrative's origins: George Eliot based this episode on a story her aunt, a Methodist preacher, told her, of how she spent a night with a girl condemned of child-murder and brought her to confess what she had done: '*The story, told by my aunt with great feeling, affected me deeply, and I never lost the impression of that afternoon and our talk together.*'[183] As with *Robinson Crusoe* and (to some extent) *The Heart of Midlothian*, a powerful depiction of a Godward dimension to experience is achieved by a work that builds upon a direct autobiographical source.

To quote these passages from *The Mill on the Floss* and *Adam Bede* in isolation is of course to falsify somewhat. George Eliot wrote as an author who no longer believed in the basic tenets of

Christianity; human goodness, not the workings of providence, was what really mattered to her. But when as a realistic novelist she set about describing characters that displayed that goodness, she included the religious framework and life-stance through which it often expressed itself[184]; and in these last two novels, her identification with her heroine has gone so far that the heroine's providentialism is carried across into the narration itself. This can be seen either as an inconsistency, or as a tribute to her ability as a realistic novelist to enter wholeheartedly into the imaginative experience of a viewpoint with which she disagreed in real life. At any rate, these casual references, slipped in undramatically as part of the novels' climax scenes, demonstrate again that natural, unforced narration from a providentialist standpoint was by no means an impossibility.

(viii) The Triumph of Naturalism

But providentialism was not the norm, either in George Eliot or anywhere else. And here it is necessary to draw attention to a problem in our discussion of these novels; by examining those few works in which some sort of reference to providence is made, it is possible to give a false impression of the extent to which the classic novel became an almost entirely non-supernaturalistic form. The expression of providence even in some of the novels we have discussed consists only of minor asides: and in many of the most impressive works it is virtually – or entirely – ignored. And as the nineteenth-century wore on, it became less and less necessary for a writer to make polite concessions to the putative popular religion of his readership. It is obvious that such a background is not assumed by the time of Hardy, James or Conrad in the way it is in Dickens or Thackeray.

Meanwhile, the growth of concern for 'realism' had had a tendency to turn the novel into something of a sterilised character laboratory, from which irregularities or coincidences were (theoretically at least) to be rigorously excluded; even though they might frequently be the means by which a character was revealed in real life. In 1869, for example, Mrs. Oliphant criticised the novels of Charles Reade on the grounds that '*Such a thing might happen in fact; but fiction is bound as fact is not... Fiction is bound by harder laws than fact is, and must consider vraisemblance as well as absolute truth.*'[185] Fiction, in other words, must conform to the popular consensus view of reality, whether or not this corresponds with 'fact' or 'absolute truth'. Another writer remarks that '*The domain of the novelist is nature under its ordinary rules; not fact, which is often irreconciliable with life.*'[186] Kenneth Graham notes that some of these critics '*suggest that this* vraisemblance *is achieved neither by the devices of artistic form, nor by plain mimesis, but by* selective *representation of the familiar. The more common the event in real life, the more acceptable does it seem when transposed into an artistic world*'[187] – a 'lowest common denominator' reality again, in fact.

This selectivity was based on a consensus that was becoming less and less influenced by the biblical-Christian worldview. We have already noted Leslie Fiedler's complaint about the deliberate exclusion of the 'marvellous' and 'wonderful' from prose fiction; Ian Watt likewise has commented on the novel's '*tendency to restrict the field in which its psychological and intellectual discriminations operate to a small and arbitrary selection of human situations.*'[188] Nineteenth-century realism accentuated these tendencies. In a rather different way from that originally meant by James, it was notably true that '*universally relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily* appear *to do so.*'[189] The 'circle' which was drawn, and the selection of the 'more common' events, tended towards the exclusion from the 'realistic laboratory' of any major causes whose existence might need to be inferred or deduced from sources other than the immediately empirical; and the intervention of God in human affairs would come into that category.

In such a convention, religion becomes no more than a biographical social phenomenon, to be recorded in the same way as any other; or at best, a matter of personal experience. (This was a danger we noted above, in our discussion of *The Heart of Midlothian*.) It is seldom regarded as the point at which humans are in direct contact with the eternal powers of the universe. Laurence Lerner cites George Eliot as an example of this trend:

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In her impartial regard for human experience, she included the religious: not rejecting Christianity, but treating it as a human phenomenon... What matters about the "recognition of something to be lived for beyond the mere satisfaction of self" is not its truth but its function... Prayer, on such a view, is a form of magic; its true purpose is not to invoke supernatural aid, but to arouse emotion.[190]

Here religion has no objective supernatural reference; it is of interest entirely for the light it throws, and the effect it has, on the characters and societies espousing it. There are contemporary parallels to this in other arts: Robert Langbaum noted that much of the poetry of the period is '*a literature which returns upon itself, making its own values only to dissolve them before the possibility of judgement, turning them into biographical phenomena.*'[191] And Rookmaaker notes of a typical picture of the period, 'Women Praying at a Crucifix near St. James in Antwerp', by the Belgian painter Leys, that we see:

People from a past period, full of faith, reverent, praying – but we do not see the object of faith, the crucified Christ. This is typical... The focus is on the faithful men and women, not on the content of their faith. The crucifix, Christ Himself, has been left outside the picture-frame. This was done again and again by nineteenth century painters.[192]

The dominant naturalistic convention received its purest theoretical formulations on the Continent, in the Realist movement, and its more doctrinaire successor, Naturalism. These movements, especially Naturalism, were very strongly oriented towards a deterministic materialism, and strove for the reproduction of scientific objectivity within literature. Realism, says Becker, '*denied that there was a reality of essences and forms which was not accessible to ordinary sense-perceptions, insisting instead that reality be viewed as something immediately at hand, common to ordinary human experience and open to observation.*'[193] As a result, it was not open to anything that might need to be apprehended by faith. Its exponents failed to notice that in making demands as to how '*reality be* viewed', their opinions lost objectivity and became themselves a matter of faith and dogma; so that their realism was not a matter of objective record, but rather a projection of a particular ideology.

'*The basic ideal of the movement was and is rigorous objectivity*', says Becker. '*In spite of this it was almost impossible not to take a position, at least implicitly, about man and his fate, particularly since the whole climate of thought in which realism flourished was one of scientism.*'[194] The movement had, in short, its own creeds; and these were in many respects diametrically opposed to Christian beliefs. The view of man was radically different: instead of being a little lower than the angels, he was a little higher than the apes. The law of the jungle and the struggle for the survival of the fittest had replaced the law of God and the providential plan. Here the philosophy of evolutionism was of great significance: '*In the development of Naturalism Darwin's theory is without doubt the most important single shaping factor*', comment Furst and Skrine.[195] Zola saw '*l'homme metaphysique*' as being replaced by '*l'homme physiologique*'.[196] As a whole, says Becker:

the Realists were sceptical of that whole cluster of things which are associated with traditional theistic belief, such as the soul, telic motion, the power of divine grace, and the whole world of miracle, that is, the events which escape the otherwise ineluctable laws of causality. It is this last term which is the key to the realist position: the universe is observably subject to physical causality... and anything which asserts otherwise is wishful thinking... If [realism] makes allowance for random and fortuitous events in an otherwise causally constituted universe, it generally denies them purpose and is likely to see them as agents of misfortune and destruction rather than of well-being.[197]

F.W.J. Hemmings, one of the foremost British critics of these novelists, adds that:

If there was one metaphysical principle on which all the French realists worked, it was scientific determinism. The supernatural, or, simply, the inexplicable, never intervened in their stories: once given the postulates of initial temperament and subsequent upbringing, the characters behaved in strict accordance. Thus realism left out of account any independent moral agent; metaphysically, it was atheism.[198]

The fictional consequences are evident in a novel such as Zola's *L'Assommoir*. Right from the beginning of the novel, to the end where the heroine Gervaise is found dead and '*turning green already*', there is a logical, deterministic progression. There is no question of grace and little of hope; humans are trapped in a

naturalistic box. But this is more a consequence of Zola's original presuppositions than of rigorous objectivity. In demanding that writers abandon the unknown for the known [199], Zola had left himself open to the criticism that what was unknown to him might not be unknown to others; and in his determined exclusion of the non-empirical, he could himself be charged with unreality. To the Christian, the world of *L'Assommoir*, totally devoid as it is of any possibility of grace offering to interrupt the characters' degradation, or of any sign whatever of the presence of God, lacks verisimilitude and completeness; this is not the world as the Christian (experimentally!) knows it to be.

But on both sides of the Channel, the future lay with Zola's side of this particular argument. *L'Assommoir* was written in 1877; by that time, in Britain, the 'loss of faith' was an established feature of the intellectual landscape. Since then there have been very few major novels with much reference to providential causality: in the fictional worlds of the great English novels, God has died.

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[1] Peter Faulkner, *Humanism in the English Novel* (1975), p.33.
[2] Footnote to *Essay on Romance* (1824), quoted Miriam Allott, *Novelists on the Novel* (1959), p.49.
[3] Sir Walter Scott, *Chronicles of the Canonsgate*, First Series (collected edition of 1829-33), p.306; quoted Mary Lascelles, 'Scott and the Art of Revision', in Mack and Gregor, *op.cit.,* p.156.
[4] An instructive comparison may be made between Scott and the much clearer Christian commitment of James Hogg's 'The Cameronian Preacher's Tale' (conveniently available in *Christian Short Stories: an Anthology*, ed. Mark Booth (1984)). Hogg is writing in a folktale mode, but what he narrates is clearly shaped by a Christian attitude to the supernatural.
[5] Sir Walter Scott, *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818; Everyman edition of 1956), p.219.
[6] *Ibid*, p.218.
[7] *Ibid*, p.290.
[8] *Ibid*, p.160.
[9] *Ibid*, p.197.
[10] So, in a different sense, does Scott's introduction telling the story of Helen Walker, Jeanie's real-life original. But the inclusion of a preface asserting that such a thing happened in real life is not a *fictional* strategy.
[11] *Ibid*, pp.121, 130-131.
[12] *Ibid*, pp.211-212.
[13] Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York, 1953; Harper edition of 1961), pp.122-23.
[14] Philippians 2:12-13.
[15] *The Heart of Midlothian*, p.219.
[16] *Ibid*, p.160.
[17] *Ibid*, p.314. Cf. C.S. Lewis' comments on Glenallan's forgiveness of Elspeth in *The Antiquary*: '*Glenallan has been painted by Scott as a lifelong penitent and ascetic, a man whose every thought has been for years fixed on the supernatural. But when he has to forgive, no motive of a Christian kind is brought into play: the battle is won by "the generosity of his nature". It does not occur to Scott that his fasts, his solitudes, his beads, and his confessor, however useful as romantic "properties", could be effectively connected with a serious action which concerns the plot of the book....In his work, as in that of most of his contemporaries, only secular and natural values are taken seriously.*' (C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, 1970), p.219.)
[18] *The Heart of Midlothian*, p.7.
[19] *Ibid* p.540.
[20] *Ibid* p.483.
[21] *Ibid*, p.508.
[22] *Ibid*, p.483.
[23] *Ibid*, p.540.
[24] Van Ghent, *op.cit.*, p.121.
[25] Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate* (1971), p.8.
[26] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813; Penguin edition of 1972), pp.224-226.
[27] Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811; Penguin edition of 1969), p.158.
[28] Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1814; Penguin edition of 1966), pp.120-121, 115-116.
[29] *Ibid*, p.430; my emphasis.
[30] *Ibid*.
[31] *Ibid*, p.442.
[32] *Ibid*, p.271. There are rare indications of a supernaturalistic context elsewhere in Jane

Austen: Marianne towards the end of *Sense and Sensibility*, severely ill, is anxious to recover and '*have time for atonement to my God, and to you all*' (*Sense and Sensibility*, p.337). Anne Elliot doesn't go any further than '*meditation, serious and grateful*', again late in the story *(Persuasion* (1818; Penguin edition of 1965), p.247), but her eventual husband, Wentworth, tries to calm his feelings by '*prayer and reflection*' after Louisa's injury (*ibid*, p.132). But the placing of these references indicates the peripheral nature of their concerns.

[33] Faulkner, *op.cit.*, p.36.

[34] *Mansfield Park*, pp.120-121.

[35] Laurence Lerner, *The Truthtellers* (1967), pp.23-25, 28.

[36] C.N. Manlove, *Modern Fantasy* (1975), p.6.

[37] *Ibid*, p.9.

[38] Dorothy Scarborough, *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* (1917), pp.2, 7.

[39] Hoxie N. Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry* (New York, 1939-57), Vol I, p.567, quoted in Vincent Buckley, *Poetry and the Sacred* (1968), p.44. Buckley qualifies Fairchild's remarks by pointing out the experiences of the 'sacred' in Wordsworth, but concludes, '*Admittedly, one does not get from his great poetry any but ambiguous and momentary apprehensions of a personal God in the traditional Christian sense.*'

[40] C.S. Lewis, *op.cit.*, p.219.

[41] *The Letters and Private Papers of W.M. Thackeray*. ed. G.N. Ray (1945-46), Vol.IV, pp.128-129; quoted in Elizabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart* (1979), p.98.

[42] There were differences of opinion on the question of prayer during this period. Mrs Trollope denounced evangelical-style extempore prayer – the kind that would be likely to be concerned with everyday issues – in her novel *The Vicar of Wrexhill*, as '*an abomination to those who have preserved their right to sit within the sacred pale of our established church; and ... it is among such that I wish to find my readers*' (quoted Valentine Cunningham, *Everywhere Spoken Against* (1975), p.22).

[43] Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854; Penguin edition of 1969), p.277.

[44] Charles Dickens. *Little Dorrit* (1857; edition of 1967), p.74.

[45] Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844; Everyman edition of 1907), p.317. Needless to say, Dickens' sallies against the *misuse* of the notion of providence would be endorsed by the most ardent Christian supernaturalist.

[46] Cf. Cunningham, *op.cit.,* pp.215-225.

[47] John 3:3.

[48] The point is Cunningham's, *ibid*, pp.193-94,190.

[49] T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods* (1934), pp.53-54. A.O.J. Cockshut notes that '*Thackeray and Dickens ... are always contrasting the religion of their evangelical characters with some vague undefined ideal of "true ... or ... real" Christianity. But what this may be we are never told. By implication we are allowed to guess that it lays great stress on one or two moral precepts of the gospels, such as the duty of forgiveness and of generosity, to the exclusion of others. It concentrates, in fact, on those moral qualities which the ordinary good-natured man of the world usually imagines himself to possess.*' (A.O.J. Cockshut, *Anthony Trollope* (1955), p.71, quoted Faulkner, *op.cit.*, p.41). Faulkner adds, '*Mr Cockshut is surely right to see something vague about the religious commitment of the mid-Victorian novelists. They all tend towards the position which he ascribes to Trollope: "Though impatient of much dogma and suspicious of churches, he always considered himself a Christian..." For this reason, there is no major Victorian novel.*' (Faulkner, *ibid*).

[50] It is not entirely clear whether these are anything more than dreams; but the accuracy of the knowledge that Affery Flintwinch acquires through them, and particularly her sense of the presence of the dead girl who had been tormented in the house by Mrs Clennam (*Little Dorrit*, p.854), certainly appear to extend beyond the natural. After the explosion, Dickens offers the suggestion that the noises can be explained naturally (p.863), but this seems rather halfhearted.

[51] Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841; Penguin edition of 1972), p.659.

[52] Jay, *op.cit.*, p.164.

[53] Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (1838; Everyman edition of 1907), p.384.

[54] *Ibid*, p.423.

[55] *Ibid*, p.51.

[56] *Ibid*, p.375.

[57] *Ibid*, p.356.

[58] *Ibid*, p.280.

[59] *Ibid*, pp.263-265.

[60] Cf. 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, 2 Corinthians 4:7-10, 12:9-10.

[61] 1 Corinthians 14:25.

[62] Graham Greene, *Collected Essays* (1969;

Penguin edition of 1970), pp.85-86.
[63] *Ibid*, p.86.
[64] *Little Dorrit*, p.886.
[65] Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (1846-48; Everyman edition of 1907), p.810.
[66] *Hard Times*, p.289.
[67] Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (1853; Penguin edition of 1971), p.932.
[68] Cf. J. Hillis Miller's comments on this topic in his introduction to the Penguin edition of *Bleak House*, p.33.
[69] *Ibid*, p.326.
[70] *Ibid*, p.272.
[71] *Little Dorrit*, p.221.
[72] This term is used here to include all those, both Anglicans and dissenters, who held what would today be described as an 'evangelical' position, including a full-blooded supernaturalism. In the mid-nineteenth century, however, the term would usually be used of Anglicans in particular; and by no means all of them would have favoured collaboration with dissenters.
[73] Cf. Jay. *op.cit*., pp.213,195-202.
[74] Quoted *ibid*, p.15.
[75] E.C. Gaskell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. T. Scott and B.W. Willett (1924), p.115, quoted Jay, *ibid*, p.181.
[76] *The George Eliot Letters*. ed. L.S. Haight (1954-56), Vol.I, p.24, quoted Jay, *ibid*, p.215.
[77] Quoted Cunningham, *op.cit*., pp.50-51.
[78] Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son* (1907), quoted Cunningham, *ibid*., p.51.
[79] Cf. Cunningham, *ibid*, pp.58-61.
[80] Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction' (1884), in his *Selected Literary Criticism,* ed. Morris Shapira (1963), p.50.
[81] Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (1969), p.166.
[82] H.R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (1970), p.67.
[83] E. Hodder, *The Life and Work of the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury* (1686), Vol.III, p.19, quoted Jay, *op.cit*., p.40.
[84] Richard Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England 1850-1870* (1959), p.ix, quotes Walter Allen, *The English Novel: a Short Critical History* (New York, 1955), p.xxi: '*The notion of the novel as a literary form having something to do with art in the sense of being consciously made and shaped to an aesthetic end is quite new...*' Stang criticises the suggestion that this notion appeared '*not earlier than the last two decades of the nineteenth century*': but his work merely pushes the genesis of the change back to around 1850.
[85] Kenneth Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel 1865-1900* (1965), p.74.
[86] John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera* (1877), letter 83, quoted Graham, *ibid*, p.84.
[87] R.H. Hutton, in the *Spectator,* LIV, 1881, pp.185-186, quoted Graham, *ibid*, p.85.
[88] David Lodge, *The Language of Fiction* (1966), p.114.
[89] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847; Penguin edition of 1966), p.157.
[90] *Ibid*, p.179.
[91] *Ibid*, p.304.
[92] Lodge, *op.cit*., p.127.
[93] *Jane Eyre, ibid*.
[94] *Ibid*, pp.309-10.
[95] Eg. *ibid*, pp.297-98, 465-68.
[96]*Ibid*, p.101.
[97] *Ibid*, p.154.
[98] *Ibid*, pp.179-80.
[99] *Ibid*, p.308.
[100] *Ibid*, p.284.
[101] *Ibid*, p.302.
[102] *Ibid*, p.319.
[103] *Ibid*, p.324.
[104] *Ibid*, p.325.
[105] *Ibid*, p.330.
[106] *Ibid*, p.332.
[107] *Ibid*, p.343.
[108] *Ibid*, p.346.
[109] *Ibid*, p.348.
[110] *Ibid*.
[111] *Ibid*, p.351.
[112] *Ibid*, p.361.
[113] *Ibid*, p.441.
[114] *Ibid*, pp.428, 434.
[115] *Ibid*, p.442.
[116] *Ibid*, p.439. This is not to be read as over-fearful; the mortality rate among missionaries was still enormous several decades after *Jane Eyre*'s publication. The cause even of malaria was not discovered till 1895, let alone its cure (Oliver R. Barclay, *Whatever Happened to the Jesus Lane Lot?* (1977), p.56). St. John Rivers is approaching an early grave when the book closes.
[117] *Jane Eyre*, p.442.
[118] *Ibid*, pp.443-44.
[119] *Ibid*, p.444.
[120] As it certainly is nine pages later (*ibid*, p.453).
[121] *Ibid*, p.438.
[122] *Ibid*, p.386.
[123] *Ibid*, p.446.

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[124] *Ibid*, p.249.
[125] *Ibid*, p.462.
[126] *Ibid*, p.470.
[127] *Ibid*, pp.471-72.
[128] *Ibid*, p.472.
[129] *Ibid*, p.475.
[130] *Ibid*, p.434.
[131] Andrew and Judith Hook, for example, praise its 'extraordinarily accurate' presentation of its social setting in their introduction to the 1974 Penguin edition.
[132] Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (1849; 1974 Penguin edition), p.144.
[133] *Ibid*, p.260.
[134] *Ibid*, p.594. Cf also pp.330-31, 542.
[135] *Ibid*, p.159.
[136] *Ibid*, p.298.
[137] *Ibid*, p.590.
[138] *Ibid*, p.191.
[139] *Ibid*, p.202.
[140] *Ibid*, p.362.
[141] *Ibid*, pp.411-12; cf p.367.
[142] *Ibid*, p.404.
[143] *Ibid*, p.417.
[144] Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (1853; Penguin edition of 1979), p.97.
[145] *Ibid*, p.126.
[146] *Ibid*, p.131.
[147] *Ibid*, p.251.
[148] *Ibid*, p.318.
[149] *Ibid*, p.99.
[150] *Ibid*, p.229.
[151] *Ibid*, p.232.
[152] *Ibid*, p.381
[153] *Ibid*, pp.450-51.
[154] *Ibid*, pp.532-34.
[155] *Ibid*, pp.467-68.
[156] *Ibid*, p.252.
[157] Cf. p.514: '*I had a book up-stairs, under my pillow, whereof certain chapters satisfied my needs in the article of spiritual lore*'; and the striking reference to worship as '*lifting the secret vision to Him whose home is Infinity*' (p.516). But these references occur when Lucy is defending her own faith against Catholicism; we do not experience these things actually taking place.
[158] *Ibid*, p.308.
[159] *Ibid*, p.501.
[160] *Ibid*, p.594.
[161] Anne Brontë should also be mentioned at this point. The characterisation in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is perhaps a trifle too wooden for the book to be considered on a level with *Villette* or with the work of George Eliot. Nonetheless, as a study of a woman surviving by faith and prayer through the torments and darkness of an outrageously difficult marriage, the novel has moments of real power – particularly, perhaps, as the heroine is forced to watch helplessly the corrupting and alienation of her young son.
[162] *George Eliot's Life As Related in Her Letters and Journals*, ed. J.E. Cross (Edinburgh, 1885), Vol.I, p.27, quoted Cunningham, *op.cit.*, p.146.
[163] *Nonconformist*, 6 April 1859, p.277, quoted Cunningham, *ibid*, p.147.
[164] Cunningham, *ibid*, p.189.
[165] Jay, *op.cit.*, pp.208-209.
[166] George Eliot, *Silas Marner* (1861; Everyman edition of 1977), p.132.
[167] *Ibid*, p.144.
[168] *Ibid*, p.191.
[169] *Ibid*, p.200.
[170] *Ibid*, p.205.
[171] *Ibid*, p.184.
[172] *Ibid*, p.170.
[173] *Ibid*, p.171.
[174] *Ibid*, p.211.
[175] F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1948; new edition of 1960), p.46.
[176] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860; Penguin edition of 1979), p.648.
[177] *Ibid*, p.649.
[178] *Ibid*, p.651.
[179] *Ibid*, p.654.
[180] George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1859; Everyman edition of 1960), p.428.
[181] *Ibid*, pp.431, 432.
[182] *Ibid*, p.430.
[183] *The George Eliot Letters*, Vol.II, pp.502, quoted Cunningham, *op.cit.*, pp.154. Pp.153-57 of Cunningham's book contain a useful discussion of George Eliot's subsequent (and rather dubious) denial of the connection between Dinah and her aunt. There is also a helpful examination on pp.169-71 of how, having established a powerful theistic atmosphere, George Eliot is forced to wrench the narrative in order to achieve a humanistic ending.
[184] She was, however, also very aware that belief in providence could serve to give complacency to vice, as the portrayal of Bulstrode in *Middlemarch* demonstrates.
[185] Mrs. Oliphant, 'Charles Reade's Novels', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, CVI, 1869, p.510, quoted Graham, *op.cit.*, p.45.
[186] 'Recent Novels', unsigned article, *Frasers*

Magazine, XX, 1879, p.560, quoted Graham.
[187] Graham, *ibid*.
[188] Dickens, of course, is something of an exception to much of this. Similarly the romancers – Haggard, Lang, Hall Caine – sought out the unusual. But theirs was an escapist tradition and little of their work was of high quality.
[189] Henry James, Preface to *Roderick Hudson* (1875).
[190] Lerner, *op.cit*., pp.42-44. This is, incidentally, an unusual definition of 'magic'! Of course, the isolated instances of theistic narration by George Eliot that we noted earlier do not affect the truth of Lerner's comments as regards the tenor of her work as a whole; she was, let us repeat, an agnostic.
[191] Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience* (1957), quoted by John Killham in his introduction to *Critical Essays on the Poetry of Tennyson*, ed. Killham (1960), p.19.
[192] Rookmaaker, *op.cit*., pp.69-70.
[193] George J. Becker, *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, Princeton,1963), p.6.
[194] Becker, *ibid*, p.35.
[195] Lilian R. Furst and Peter N. Skrine, *Naturalism* (1971), p.16.
[196] Emile Zola, *Une Campagne*, quoted Furst and Skrine, *ibid*.
[197] Becker, *ibid*, pp.35-36.
[198] F.W.J. Hemmings, *The Russian Novel in France, 1884-1914* (1950), pp.31-32. Hemmings notes that this opposition was clearly recognised by the French Catholic opponents of Naturalism, such as de Vogue.
[199] Emile Zola, 'Le Roman Experimental' (1880); see Damian Grant, *Realism* (1970), p.40.

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