



## Fictional Absence - Conclusion: Learning to Go Blind

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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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### CONCLUSION: LEARNING TO GO BLIND

The tragedy of the modern world, said Solzhenitsyn in his Templeton Address, is that man has forgotten God.

Or perhaps one should say white European man. Some of the material related to this study was compiled in Lagos; and among the Nigerian university community the writer was struck by the prevalence of a supernaturalistic worldview that seemed universally acceptable, and that often made the average British student – even the average British Christian student – seem a humanist by comparison. One encounters a similar situation in many other cultural contexts: in the Middle East, for example, and among African-Americans. Or, indeed, almost anywhere in the ‘two-thirds world’, amongst the majority of the world’s population.

A worldview dominated by an exclusively

naturalistic causality, that does not ‘see or hear’ God or the supernatural at work in its world, is thus a fairly ‘local’ phenomenon of the contemporary West. That it should be the view of a minority (a highly influential minority) does not *per se* prove it to be false, of course; many things believed only by a minority have later turned out to be true. But it certainly makes it worth asking what effect the dominance of this particular ‘party line’ is having, in terms of shaping our consciousnesses, and the ways in which we are capable of seeing the world.

Of course the Christian will concede that the specific direction of providence in the everyday is frequently highly obscure to the human observer. Hence, a narrative of events including no clear expression of providential causality is acceptable as a model of reality as it frequently *appears*, even to the most hardened supernaturalist: on the small scale, that is. But not as the panorama widens. When a whole lifetime or a whole society or a set of crucial events (a marriage or a bankruptcy or a war) come into the picture – as they tend to do in most novels – the Christian will feel it imperative to ask, “*Where is the presence of God in what’s happening here? What is God’s will here, and how do I act upon it?*” For if there is a God at all, He is the prime factor in any situation.

The Christian’s complaint about the naturalistic convention is therefore that it amounts to a repetitive imaginative training in thinking about events without reference to God’s purposes, and dealing with them entirely independently of His power. Hence a logically preposterous situation is fostered where the average Englishman apparently believes vaguely (so the pollsters tell us) in some sort of almighty God, but pays no practical attention to Him whatsoever! Logically, there could be nothing more disastrous – or absurd – than attempting to put together the jigsaw puzzle of our lives with the central piece left out. Yet our culture is a post-Enlightenment culture, and trains us in many subtle ways to do just this; training us, perhaps, to be deaf or blind.[1] And the causality presented in the most vivid and imaginatively striking novels we read plays a part in this, helping to shape the value-systems and frameworks through which we look out at the world.

Harry Blamires has written at some length on this topic:

*It is a commonplace that the mind of modern man has been secularized. For instance, it has been deprived of any orientation towards the supernatural... Secularism is so rooted in this world that it does not allow for the existence of any other. Therefore whenever secularism encounters the Christian mind, either the Christian mind will momentarily shake that rootedness, or secularism will seduce the Christian mind to a temporary mode of converse which overlooks the supernatural... Turn to the glossy magazines, to the sensational press, cinema, T.V., and the like. Ask yourself what kind of a world is pictured there. Is it the world known vividly to the Christian mind? A world in which angel and demon are locked in conflict? A world packed full of sinners desperately dependent on the mercy of God?... A world fashioned by God, sustained by God, worried over by God, died for by God?... No. The world... present to current popular thinking is very different. It is a self-sufficient world... It is a world run by men, possessed by men, dominated by men, its course determined by men... The Christian mind looks at the propaganda of modern secularism and is astonished to learn that under man's management the world is supposed to be on the whole in a tolerable shape...*

*What price are we paying, in terms of intellectual clarity and integrity, for the continuance of easy co-existence of the Christian mind with the secular mind? Ponder the violence of the concealed collision. On the one hand is the assumption that all is over when you die; that...eating, sleeping, growing, learning, breeding, and the rest, constitute the total sum of things... On the other hand is the almost crushing awareness of a spiritual war tearing at the heart of the universe, pushing its ruthless way into the lives of men - stabbing at you now, now, now, in the impulses and choices of every waking moment; the belief that the thoughts and actions of every hour are moulding a soul which is on its way to eternity; that we are choosing every moment of our lives in obedience or disobedience to the God who created and sustains all that is; that we are always responsible, always at war, always involved in what is spiritual and deathless; that we are committing ourselves with every breath to salvation or damnation.[2]*

The evidential basis for these two frameworks is a separate issue, which cannot be dealt with here. But these issues, to the Christian, are what is at stake in the English novel's naturalistic convention.

## (i) Possibilities

One of the greatest problems with this blotting out of the consciousness of God is that it is not something willingly chosen and undergone by those affected. It is, in a sense, a brainwashing; except that it is not usually intended so to function by the practitioners concerned. Without any exploration of the facts and evidence regarding what is involved, the 'consumer' of British culture today is continually being schooled in a particular way of regarding 'life, the universe and everything'. For a good part of the postwar period in Britain the beliefs and values of North Atlantic liberal humanism were ubiquitously presented as the 'obvious', 'normal', 'only sensible' way of looking at things. The more recent challenges of various varieties of Marxist and post-structuralist thought have at least shown this 'normality' up for what it is. But so much the worse for anyone transgressing the consensus on which Marxists and liberal humanists are agreed; that is going to mean working directly against the worldview enforced by the increasingly secularised productions of two centuries of post-Enlightenment culture, and now reinforced by the shared assumptions of most forms of contemporary Western media, arguably the most powerful (if unconscious) form of self-manipulation humanity has yet devised. (Christians have much to learn from thinkers such as Gramsci – or Barthes – concerning the ways in which the assumptions of a dominant consensus are reinforced in the substructures of a culture.)

What then is to be done? Christians engaged in literary criticism can profitably give attention to one specific aspect of the overall critical task; that is, the delineation of the latent presuppositions and the fictional hypotheses that underlie and are articulated by the novels of the tradition. This is not an evaluative enterprise; it is descriptive. It is not a way of assessing the merit of literary works according to their conformity to Christian orthodoxy; the Christian critic is a fool if he does not recognise that the existence of many aesthetic qualities in literature bears no

proportional relationship (either direct or inverse!) to the presence of Christian belief. The task – or a task – is rather to identify the presuppositions or value-systems that are being presented with imaginative power. 'The fiction we read', said T.S.Eliot, 'affects our behaviour... The author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings, whether he knows it or not; and we are affected by it, as human beings, whether we intend to be or not'[3] -particularly since many of us enter into our experience of a novel 'for relaxation', that is, when we are at our most uncritical and receptive.

For such a task, the critic – and, indeed, the general novel-reader – will need a prayerful, Bible-saturated 'Christian mind' – Bible-saturated because, if the Bible is indeed where God uniquely speaks, then it is only systematic Bible study in significant quantity that will enable us to maintain a distinctive theistic consciousness amidst all the voices surrounding us. Among all the words and images of power, there is no neutral ground. But if the latent presuppositions in our reading can be overtly identified, the 'consumer' has at least the choice of whether to accept what they are seeing or to regard it as false. A similar exploration of value-systems is carried on by Marxists, of course; and the Christian, like the Marxist, will run the danger of confusing this exercise with the whole business of criticism. But it needs to be done.

And then there is the creative task. Hopefully this study has shown that there is no reason why a worldview marked by Christian supernaturalism should not be embodied, or modelled, or paralleled, in the underlying hypothesis of prose fiction; just like any other way of looking at the world. What can be seen can be modelled. On the other hand, this study will also have shown that the novel, having arisen and developed under the influence of particular sociocultural forces, is at present a form that is not easily hospitable to such content; and the task grows harder as the implications of post-Enlightenment culture, are worked out in our society, and become reflected in increasingly widespread and powerful expressions that condition the expectations and responses of the novel-reader.

But that is not the whole story. It could also be argued that we are living at a time of

unprecedented cultural breakdown when the myths of humanism are revealing their weaknesses, and many other life-stances are receiving expression from time to time. The Latin American 'magic realists' have reintroduced the supernatural to the world of Nobel Prize-winning fiction – admittedly from an occultist perspective, but providing a reminder of the threat posed by two-thirds-world input to the north Atlantic humanist consensus. A little while ago the *Guardian's* drama critic reported, without comment, the New York performance of the Yiddish writer Solomon Anski's play *The Dybbuk*, which includes an exorcism of a dybbuk-spirit, and how at one performance the actress playing the 'exorcised' character '*was not performing well immediately after the exorcism*': whereupon a woman called out from the audience: "*The dybbuk hasn't left her; it's still there*". Myers [*the director*] *duly performed the exorcism again, and after the performance asked the woman if she really believed in dybbuks. "Do I believe in them?" she replied with a shrug. "I know!"* Similarly, the *Guardian's* television critic reviewed a film of Bob Marley's life and again ended up reporting, without comment, that '*The singer's life was marked to an extraordinary degree by an intuitive sense of divine guidance communicated through dreams and signs, and no amount of academic rigour will resolve it.*' It may be that the coming years will be a time of more genuine pluralism, and hence openness (for both good and ill), than has sometimes been the case in the past.[4]

Still, the external problem is not the only difficulty in the writing of providentialist fiction. Venturing guesses at the nature of the purposes of God remains a hazardous venture. To falsify in this area has for some writers in the past meant making the workings of providence the means to an end of material or marital prosperity; this is all too visible in Richardson, and the danger is clearly present in Defoe and Charlotte Bronte too. The attempt to express providentialism in terms of everyday reality will be prone to show up mercilessly the inconsistencies in the artist's own vision; any unresolved conflict in their values – shall we call it syncretism? – will become all too plain. This may be illustrated from the difficult fusions between the Christian and the capitalist in Defoe, the Christian and the Romantic in *Jane Eyre*, the Christian and the aesthete in *Brideshead Revisited*.

And the alternative danger is to fall into an ultimately damaging sensationalism. In the eighteenth century it was observed that:

*To deny the exercise of a particular providence in the Deity's government of the world is certainly impious: yet nothing serves the cause of the scorner more than an incautious forward zeal in determining the particular instances of it.[5]*

And, indeed, to misrepresent God is to blaspheme.

All this is to say that neither the church nor the world has any need of a torrent of fourth-rate Christian fiction. A good Christian novelist will be attempting one of the most demanding tasks a writer could set themselves, and will need an unusual combination of qualities: all the abilities and extensive experience that any good writer must have, plus a deep knowledge of God, both in His self-revelation in the Bible and in the novelist's own life. They will need reverence; the awareness that they must tread warily and with awe because, like Moses at the burning bush, they are on holy ground –

*You are not here to verify,  
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
Or carry report. You are here to kneel  
Where prayer has been valid[6]*

– besides the humility that is prayerfully conscious at every moment of the farcical nature of the attempt to encapsulate God and His ways, and of its own biases and perennial tendency to misinterpretation. To appear to claim a final grasp of the divine strategy would be preposterous and impious; a tentative model, shaped by the patterns learned from the biblical revelation, is the best that can be hoped for.

There are other disciplines from which insights may be gained. Parallel difficulties in the presentation of providentialism occur in historiography, biography and autobiography, all of which are in a sense constructing a model (or even a metaphor) of a reality from which they are distinct: and all of which, indeed, involve some element of sub-creation. A useful study of the problems of providentialist historiography is to be found in the last chapter of David Bebbington's

*Patterns in History*, the conclusions of which parallel those advanced here. An important affirmation of the feasibility of providentialist historiography is *Christianity and History* by Herbert Butterfield, Professor of Modern History at Cambridge after the war. As regards autobiography, it is significant that a number of the great modern novelists have turned to this mode as a basis for presenting experience (Joyce and Lawrence, for example): it is significant, too, that, as we noted earlier, several of the exercises in providentialist or quasi-providentialist fiction in the English tradition have roots in autobiography: Bunyan, Defoe, Goldsmith, even Scott in *Heart of Midlothian* or George Eliot in *Adam Bede*. Indeed, a would-be Christian novelist may well have something to learn from the fusion of 'realism' and providentialism in C.S. Lewis' austere narrative of his bereavement, *A Grief Observed*. This powerful and moving account combines an honest record of the turmoil and wild agonies of grief with sudden, momentary perceptions of the presence of God, and a slowly-emerging sense of overall direction. Its mode of first-person narration (in a manner not entirely removed from 'stream of consciousness', despite Lewis' dislike of that mode[7]) in a series of discrete sections would provide an interesting approach for a novel. Finally, it is intriguing to speculate whether a revival of 'spiritual autobiography' as practised in the seventeenth century, such as was called for some time back by Roger Pooley [8], might in time produce anything like a Bunyan or a Defoe.

There are plenty of possibilities. Perhaps there is such a thing as being too tentative. There is a school of Christian criticism which seems preoccupied by the scarcely perceptible nature of grace. But to see that as the whole story amounts almost to a failure of nerve. There is a time for celebration, for giving tongue to the sheer joy of the presence of God and of participating in His everyday purposes of proclaiming salvation and justice: the twin sides of discipleship, the worshipper and the activist.

And beyond that, providentialist fiction, if it can be done properly, ought surely to be a form of huge potential. Waugh once remarked that '*You can only leave God out by making your characters pure abstractions*'[9]; that may or may not be true, but it is noticeable that the outworkings of the 'death of God' in literature can include the

destruction or reduction of characters to the figures that inhabit the world of *Waiting for Godot* or Ionesco's *The Chairs*, figures without stature or heroism. The vision of the presence of God can underpin the reality of man in the image of God. It offers the restoration of meaningfulness to all the particulars of an everyday world that can otherwise seem drably trivial. It offers a celebration that stands in continuity with the historic connection Auerbach described in *Mimesis* between the Judaeo-Christian worldview and the serious literary depiction of reality. It was D.H. Lawrence who – in an essay by no means pro-Christian – referred to '*The Bible – but all the Bible*' as comprising, along with Homer and Shakespeare, '*the supreme old novels*'.<sup>[10]</sup> The biblical-Christian vision offers a rich framework for story-telling even today.

And there is still the greater issue at stake. One does not have to accept everything in Leavis to agree that a significant goal of the major novelist is to promote an '*awareness of the possibilities of life*'.<sup>[11]</sup> And if there really were a God, the novel that '*widened the world*' for its readers so that they were able, in defiance of their culture, to conceive that possibility, would be promoting '*awareness of the possibilities of life*' to the last degree. There could be few things more important. And what, then, of the *absence* of God in the novel? What if it were the accidental propagation of a falsely myopic and disastrously shrunken vision, ignoring and training its readers to ignore the very purposes on which their existence depended? What, in short, if it were an entirely *fictional* absence?

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## References:

[1] Sociologist Alan Gilbert, in *The Making of Post-Christian Britain* (1980) cites Weber's remark '*I am a-musical as far as religion is concerned, and have neither the desire nor the capacity to build religious architectures in myself*.' '*It is a salient fact*', comments Gilbert, '*that the crisis of contemporary Christianity lies not in challenges to the truth of its dogmas, but in the fact that ...*

*people in a secular culture have become increasingly "tone-deaf" to the orchestration of those dogmas*' (p.14).

[2] Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (1963), pp.3, 68, 73-76.

[3] T.S. Eliot, 'Religion and Literature', in *Selected Essays* (enlarged edition of 1951), pp.393, 394. In this essay Eliot emphasises the duty incumbent upon Christians of '*maintaining consciously certain standards and criteria of criticism over and above those applied by the rest of the world*', because '*the greater part of our current reading matter is written for us by people who have no belief in a supernatural order*' (p.399).

[4] Cf. Eliot: '*We find in practice that what is "objectionable" in literature is merely what the present generation is not used to. It is a commonplace that what shocks one generation is accepted quite calmly by the next.*' (ibid, p.389). We are already at a phase where popular science-fiction paperbacks can present supernaturalism as an attraction: '*... tops off a catastrophe of necromancy and ruin with a divine intervention*', proclaims one recent blurb.

[5] Dr. Abernethy's Life in *Biographia Britannica*, quoted in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, and cited in turn by David Bebbington, *Patterns in History* (1979), p.66.

[6] T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding'.

[7] Cf. Walter Hooper's introduction to C.S. Lewis' *The Dark Tower* (1977), p.11.

[8] Roger Pooley, *Spiritual Autobiography: A DIY Guide* (1983).

[9] Quoted Kurt Reinhardt, *The Theological Novel of Modern Europe* (New York. 1969), p.209.

[10] D.H. Lawrence. 'Why the novel matters', in *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*. ed. David Lodge (1972), p.134.

[11] F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1948; new edition of 1960), p.2. And cf. Marshall McLuhan, in *McLuhan Hot and Cool*, ed. G.E. Stearn (1968), p.329: '*The job of art is not to store moments of experience but to explore environments that are otherwise invisible....*'

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