



Fictional Absence - Introduction: the Practice of the Absence of God

Pete Lowman

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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Introduction: the Practice of the Absence of God

English literature is an odd thing. And one of its oddities is it contains very few novels of importance that take seriously the idea of a God who is real and who acts; a God who actually 'does things'.

Why should this be?

After all, if we look at the English poetic tradition, we can see the Christian worldview clearly visible in explicitly Christian writers like Langland, Donne, Herbert, Milton, Coleridge, Browning, Hopkins, Auden and Eliot. But the novel is different. Here we find a general absence of God; the world that's depicted is, when we stop and think, one strangely at variance with the Christian worldview.

And that's despite the fact that the novel as an art form seems fairly wideranging; it doesn't seem – at first glance anyway – to have the kind of formal conventions that must narrow its vision of life. It offers simply to tell its reader a story, which it implies is of significance; and (at least until recently) to include in its account everything we need for an adequate understanding of what it depicts. And yet, no matter how important and far-reaching the events it tells us, it seems these events can be adequately described and understood on an entirely 'horizontal' level, without any reference to the presence and activity of God.

And it isn't as if the novel avoids the big questions. If we think of questions like, 'How do people behave? What effect do forces in society have on individuals? What is it like when someone falls in love? What happens when someone is myopically selfish? How does the consciousness of an artist become awakened?', we can find answers of a kind somewhere in the novel tradition. They aren't the general, 'scientific' answers that would be given by the sociologist or psychologist; but they are answers nonetheless. But if we ask, 'What is it like to know God? What happens when someone prays? What difference does God's presence make in daily life?' – the English novel tradition does not have much to say. These areas of life are seldom explored; they are disregarded.

And yet the novel's history extends back well beyond the nineteenth-century 'loss of faith', into a period when Britain could be regarded as the champion – and, certainly, the printing-house – of Protestant Christianity. Until the nineteenth, or indeed early twentieth, century, belief in a God who 'does things', belief in answered prayer and a loving divine providence, would have been part of the generally-held worldview for the majority of the British population: for some people much more vaguely than for others, of course. Yet this fundamental concept of the Protestant worldview – that God Himself is interested and involved in the life of each individual human being He has created – has largely failed to leave its mark on the novels they wrote and read.

Of course, many Christian *themes* are present in the great English novels. Concepts of 'love' that

correspond more or less to Christian ideas crop up fairly regularly, for example. Indeed, an issue as central to Christianity as atonement appears prominently even in a book like Conrad's *Lord Jim*, although in humanistic, 'horizontal' terms: there isn't really a 'Godward' dimension to Jim's atonement, of course. But it's possible to argue that Christianity of one kind or another is visible in the content of, say, *Joseph Andrews*, *Mansfield Park*, or much of Dickens. However, the specifically *theistic* content of Christianity, the notion of a God who is lovingly *active* in the lives of peoples and individuals, who actually 'does things', is not really presented. The writers themselves may have been orthodox believers; but they did not break out of the attitude to what goes on in the world that became dominant in prose fiction; they did not present the world as a place where God was at work. So, for example, it is possible for a writer like Laurence Lerner to remark regarding Jane Austen:

I say that Jane Austen the novelist did not believe in God because God is totally absent from her work. A person may remain silent about a deeply held and genuine belief, but not a writer: all that exists in a writer's work is what he creates.[1]

Whatever Jane Austen the person may have believed, he is saying, Jane Austen the novelist expresses no belief in God.

One reason why we don't notice this is the imprecise way that the term 'Christian' often gets used in literary criticism. Q.D. Leavis' caustic comment about writers who claim Jane Austen as a 'Christian novelist' merely '*because they know she was a clergyman's daughter*' [2] has some justice. It is not helpful when a critic like Buckley classifies the poet Dylan Thomas as a Christian merely on the grounds that he '*resorts so eagerly to Christian references, images, and significances*'[3]; nor, to give another example, when R.W.B. Lewis labels Silone a primitive Christian. He resembles most of all some member of the earliest Christian community – during the earliest years, indeed during the earliest days of Christianity, before the shock of the Crucifixion had worn off, or the meaning of the Resurrection had sunk in [4] – as if we can speak of Christianity without the 'meaning of the Resurrection' being central. This sort of talk may have some value in demonstrating the pervasiveness of Christian ideas; but it does so at the price of blurring the meaning of basic terms.

There is a need, then, for definition. So let this writer put his own cards on the table: this study will focus on the Christian belief that God is a God who is *active*, who gets lovingly involved in people's lives. Obviously there is much more to Christian faith than that. But if we want to consider the relationship of the novel and Christianity, this is a very basic area; because novels too are concerned with what 'goes on' in the events of people's lives. And this 'article of faith' is most certainly basic to the Bible (as it is, indeed, to the creeds and confessions of all the main branches of the Christian church). As Daniel Fuller says:

Christianity distinguishes itself from many other religions and from all speculative philosophy in that its message concerns a God who has acted in history... He exercises his providential rule over the events of history to such an extent that even a bird's falling to the ground is a part of this rule (Matthew 10:29). But in addition to initiating and supervising history, this God enters into it from time to time to bring about a sequence of events that will climax in the redemption of the people of God in the new heaven and earth. These redemptive events are considered as completely historical, but they distinguish themselves from the rest of history in that their occurrence cannot be explained by a prior cause within history but only by the direct intervention of God.[5]

In this respect Christianity contrasts very clearly with any variety of deism, any belief which, in Colin Brown's words, believes in a God but which treats him as an absentee landlord. In the beginning God made the world and set it in motion. But he has now left it to its own devices, running of its own accord rather like a clockwork toy. God exists. But he is too remote to be personally involved in the day-to-day events of his creation.[6]

In contrast, the God of Christian faith is forever getting 'personally involved', throughout the biblical narrative[7]; from the point where man is created and given a special mandate over God's creation in the first chapter of Genesis; through the Fall, where man becomes a willing casualty of the cosmic struggle between supernatural good and evil; and on through God's choice of Abraham and His activity in the lives of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Then come God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt, His self-revelation in the

Mosaic law, and His leading them into the (literally) 'promised' land. The 'historical books' of the Old Testament portray Israel's history, social, military and political, as directly dependent upon their relationship with their God; the Psalms likewise present the life of both the individual and the community as perpetually affected by God's involvement; and this is also a major theme throughout the writings of the prophets. The New Testament continues this story with the ultimate 'invasion' of history by God in the person of Christ: the Incarnation is the definitive proof of God's loving involvement in our world. But the Acts of the Apostles portray that involvement continuing in the work of the Holy Spirit through Christians collectively and as individuals; and the Epistles instruct Christians to live with their faith grounded in God's acts in the past[8], His providence, companionship and activity in the present[9], and His deliverance in the future.[10] Finally, the Revelation carries the story on to the God-ordained consummation of history, with the return of Christ, the last judgement, and the advent of the New Jerusalem.

It is plain, therefore, that the biblical-Christian message is not a collection of hellenistic abstractions. Rather, it is an account of God at work in the world of human history, and of humans responding. The message of the early Church centred on the Crucifixion and Resurrection as real, *historical* acts of God; in 1 Corinthians 15, for example, the apostle Paul emphasised these events (and the availability of verifiable evidence for them) as that which he 'passed on to you as of first importance'. [11] The Christian life is based on the belief that 'in *everything* God works for good with those who love Him'[12], on a faith in divine orchestration and intervention operating throughout the whole of human activity. Intercessory prayer – which has always been a fundamental feature of Christianity – would be a meaningless absurdity if God were not present in the everyday.

So C.S. Lewis is able to declare of Christianity, '*There must be no pretence that you can have it with the Supernatural left out. So far as I can see Christianity is precisely the one religion from which the miraculous cannot be separated.*'[13] Unlike, say, Hinduism, authentically biblical Christianity is emphatically about what God is doing in the real world of space-time. To the

biblical Christian, therefore, an approach to events of importance that omits the 'vertical dimension' of God 'working His purpose out' must seem not so much realistic as myopic.

And yet, although there is a clear historical connection between the Christian worldview and the impulse to portray realistically in literature the events of the everyday[14]; and despite the fact that the Puritan concern for the spiritual development of the individual under the hand of God was an important factor in the rise of the novel[15]; English prose fiction has become marked by an exclusively non-supernaturalistic convention, one that can only be described as the fictional counterpart of agnosticism. (Or, at best, deism.) There may indeed be room in our fictions for 'religious' characters (many novels have them); but there is a general failure to take account of that which, to the Christian, is the most significant fact, the most fundamental cause, and the most important personal character, in the universe. The 'way of seeing' that has become dominant is fundamentally alien, in a vital way, to the God-centred vision which radiates through biblical Christianity.

And this is not merely an aesthetic matter. The result could be described as an imaginative training in practical atheism; a training in the art of looking at important events and processes – love, war, marriage, childhood, adolescence, death – in purely 'horizontal' terms; a training in 'leaving God out'. If our culture has lost its ability to think of the world except in terms of things we can see, hear, taste, touch, smell, possess and spend, then the fictional worlds we have chosen to build, and in which we have chosen to immerse ourselves, may be part of the reason.

In this study, we shall consider how this has happened. We shall not be attempting to 'evaluate' works of fiction solely according to how they match up to the biblical-Christian worldview. The Christian critic must recognise that there are many books that display a dazzling 'technique', in the widest sense; that are powerful and significant aesthetic achievements; that are, in a number of important respects, radically 'realistic'; and yet that are also, at bottom, radically opposed to the biblical worldview.

Similarly, there can be and are numerous books

built on a faith in God which are appallingly bad in numerous other respects. There is more than one criterion of assessment, more than one thing to be said about a work of art. This study is concerned to examine the way in which some of the great novels in English build on or depart from a perception of the world as a place where God is active. This perception is only one part of the biblical worldview. But it is, to the Christian, something on which the whole of human existence is eternally dependent. How the novel handles it, therefore, is of considerable importance.

References:

- [1] Laurence Lerner, *The Truth-tellers* (1967), pp.23-24.
- [2] Q.D. Leavis, 'Charlotte Yonge and "Christian Discrimination"', reprinted in *A Selection from 'Scrutiny'*, ed. F.R. Leavis (1968), Vol.I, pp.155-56.
- [3] Vincent Buckley, *Poetry and the Sacred* (1968), p.62.
- [4] R.W.B. Lewis, *The Picaresque Saint* (1960), p.110.
- [5] Daniel P. Fuller, *Easter Faith and History* (1965), p.13. Pp.13-20 give a fair summary of the biblical concept of history.
- [6] Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (1969), p.74.
- [7] Some more cards need laying on the table at this point! In this study, 'Christian doctrine' will be understood as having specific reference to biblically-based Christianity, in which the Old and New Testaments, taken as a whole, are seen as the ultimate, normative and entirely reliable embodiment of Christian belief. There are other points of view about what is 'normative Christian doctrine', and this is not the place to defend this one: such a task would obviously require (and frequently receives) a book to itself. The statement is made here simply by way of clarification: and with an eye to Roland Barthes' wise and far-reaching remark that the '*major sin in criticism is not to have an ideology but to keep quiet about it!*' ('Criticism as Language', in *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, ed. David Lodge (1972), p.649.)
- [8] E.g. Hebrews 11.
- [9] E.g. Romans 8:28.35-39, 2 Timothy 4:17, Philippians 1:19-20.
- [10] E.g. Hebrews 9:28, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18, 2 Peter 3:8-14.

[11] 1 Corinthians 15:1-8. Cf. also verses 14-19 where he stresses that if the Resurrection is not historical, 'our preaching is useless and so is your faith'. The distinction between history and pious myth is drawn clearly in 2 Peter 1:16.

[12] Romans 8:28.

[13] C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, 1970), p.99.

[14] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Berne, 1946), trans. W.R. Trask (Princeton, 1953), demonstrates the historical association of realism in the wide sense with the Judaeo-Christian tradition rather than the classical one.

[15] Cf. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957; Pelican edition of 1972), pp.82-86; also G.A. Starr. *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography* (Princeton, 1965).

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