THE LOSS OF GOD IN THE NOVEL

Pete Lowman

English literary history is a curious thing. And one especially curious thing about it is that it contains very little of importance which might be termed a Christian novel.

The novel, as a form, offers to tell its reader a story, which it implies (by recording it) is of significance, and to include in its account the aspects necessary for a proper grasp of what it depicts. And yet, although it arose in a period when Britain considered herself the champion (or printing-house!) of Christianity – the worldview that, above all others, emphasises the work of God in events – the `aspect' of God is conspicuously excluded from the novel, throughout almost the entire corpus of the English tradition.

Indeed, we may say that the convention that came to dominate the English novel was exclusively non-supernaturalistic - the fictional counterpart of deism, or, latterly, agnosticism. We do not find in the great English novels a depiction of the action of God in guiding, or answering prayer, or orchestrating events for the advancement of his kingdom. He is simply left out. The 'formal realism' that Ian Watt has seen as characterising the novel form is thus one that, to the Christian, is not so much realistic as myopic with reference to the most significant fact in the universe.

The Enlightenment birthplace

There are probably three main reasons for this.

The first is that the novel, far from being the objective embodiment of unsullied realism, bore very clearly the marks of its birth in the Enlightenment. Enlightenment philosophy, following Descartes, stressed the empirically perceived at the expense of the divinely revealed: it tended to restrict faith and the supernatural. ('The Divine', says Paul Hazard in his classic work on the period, 'was relegated to a vague and impenetrable heaven, somewhere up in the skies.') Faith became set against reason: the unified field of knowledge of the Reformation, combining both natural and supernatural, disappeared. The growth of capitalism and of modern science combined to accentuate the centrality of what was material, what could be measured, what was empirically there and instantly observable by sense-perception.

It is not surprising, then, that in the first novels we should find the supernatural similarly banished to the perimeter. *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is an exception, with a strong streak of residual Puritanism struggling with the emergent materialism: but when Defoe moved on to *Moll Flanders* (1722) he wrote a novel with a notorious and almost total preoccupation with the material, cash-value aspects of existence. What grips his imagination is the cataloguing of possessions of market-value, and the accumulation of material stock.

Richardson's *Pamela* (1740-1) is likewise concerned with laying up treasure on earth as morality's reward. Admittedly the subtitle 'Virtue Rewarded' is a glance at an organising principle behind events, but as there is not much real sense of divine involvement this merely gives us a fictional expression of deism. In his *Clarissa* (1747-48) the moral issue of chastity is at the centre of the stage, but the result is merely to show the decadence of Puritanism in one of its worst aspects: relationship with God seems to have little value until after death, and the entire spiritual pilgrimage on this side of the grave seems to turn on a single act of rape. *Clarissa* can hardly be said to offer an exploration of divine grace permeating every area of life.

In Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), certainly, we find 'Fortune' shaping the events to a productive end: coincidence plays an important role, and this Fielding's favourite divines would have attributed to

the activities of a benevolent Providence. But Fielding's concern, as a good neo-classicist, was with drawing a moral for `human nature' in general, not as something visible in particular instances. Thus he attacked Richardson's notion that virtue was rewarded in this world as 'a very wholesome and comfortable doctrine, to which we have but one objection, namely, that it is not true.' *Tom Jones,* then, seems only to express Fielding's faith in the benign ordering of the universe in general: similar claims for the individual he regards as a falsification of reality. In these three authors, then, supernaturalism receives little expression in particular, existential terms.

We may see in these authors a second reason for the secularisation of the novel, namely the reaction against the romancers. Richardson objected to romances because 'they dealt so much in the marvellous and improbable'; Fielding too stressed the need to keep 'within the rules of probability'. And at the end of the century Sir Walter Scott characterised the novel as 'differing from the Romance, because the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events and the modern state of society', as against 'what is obviously miraculous and impossible'. But the 'religious supernatural' tended thereby to be bundled up and rejected along with the purely 'fantastic'; and, to be fair, that was an amalgam the saints' legends had provided in plenty. Hence the young novel tradition's need to mark out a territory distinct from that of the romancers, combined with the Enlightenment's sense of an ordinary, regular universe, established a consensus as to what was 'probable' that stayed firmly within a closed naturalistic system. The novel form, Leslie Fiedler has complained, was 'invented precisely....to drive the "marvellous" and "wonderful" from the realm of prose fiction'; and the actions of providence, which tend to be "wonderful' in one way or another, were a casualty.

Thirdly, there was in some of these authors the influence of neo-classical aesthetics, which stressed the general, the temporally static and the typical, and was uninterested in causality, and was therefore not very suited to a depiction of divine providence and its historical development of the lives of particular individuals. There was also the classical doctrine of the separation of styles. This was an aesthetic which divided subject-matter between the tragic (with noble characters, lofty sentiments, elevated language), and the comic ('low' or rustic characters, everyday actions). There was little room for God on either side of that dichotomy. Christianity and the tragic vision were not very compatible; and God could certainly not be depicted in the low/comic tradition in which, say, Fielding and Smollett saw themselves. (Fielding, indeed, apologises for the introduction of a clergyman into his fiction.) As Auerbach remarks, this was an aesthetic to which the implications of the Gospels, with their union of the realistic, the everyday, and the sublime, were totally opposed. So it is not surprising that the dominance of the hellenistic aesthetic left no scope for expression of the content of the rival Judaeo-Christian worldview. (The main exceptions to this, Bunyan's work and *Robinson Crusoe,* were both derived from popular culture, and so less within the reach of the ruling aesthetic.)

These three factors combined, then, to create a kind of 'lowest common denominator' convention, stressing the empirically-perceived world, and the generally-agreed virtues. It should be noted too that the dominant theological outlook in the years of the novel's rise in England was Latitudinarian, and this stressed charity and ethics to the exclusion of any radical revolution of grace. Its tendencies towards salvation by works inevitably made divine activity less significant. So the novel's birthplace was not one at all favourable to the presentation of God in action.

The reign of naturalism

This exclusively anti-supernaturalistic convention was to reign almost unchallenged right up to our own century. Thus, although Scott and Jane Austen, for example, were apparently strongly influenced by Christianity, the causality in their novels remains naturalistic. Scott does raise the issue of providence in *Heart of Midlothian,* but it is hard to tell whether it has objective existence or whether it is merely the attitude of the main figures in the story, the extreme Presbyterian Deans family. Besides, it appears to be more a matter of the mechanical and inexorable distribution of rewards and punishments than of the personal challenge of grace. The overall tone is more one of

deism, or Stoicism, than of Calvinistic Presbyterianism; the latter seems to be little more than local colour.

Jane Austen was strongly influenced by Evangelicalism, particularly in *Mansfield Park*; but she too accepted the convention that had arisen. As Peter Faulkner points out, the ladies in her novels `never seek for guidance or consolation from any source beyond themselves'; again, a vaguely Christian stoicism seems the order of the day. Her clergymen - even Edmund Bertram - regard religion as a social institution rather than a personal experience: manners, not the knowledge of God, is determinative. Nor, indeed, did the high tide of Victorian Evangelicalism challenge the convention to very much effect. It was, perhaps, a movement not always noted for the stringency of its intellectual aspect: certainly it was uneasy about fiction in principle, seeing it as 'mere entertainment' of a dubious kind, rather than a serious exploration of reality.

Hence the religion of Dickens, Thackeray and Trollope tends to be vague in content and primarily ethical in orientation. The spirits of Dickens' *Christmas Carol* are blatantly not those the Gospels associate with the incarnation, as C. S. Lewis pointed out. Jane's flight from Rochester in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre,* on the basis of faith in God's guidance and overruling, seems the only case of a supernaturalistic approach in the major Victorian novels: apart, bizarrely, from the fiction of the agnostic George Eliot, whose strong identification with the Methodist Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede* and with Maggie Tulliver in *Mill on the Floss* carries an unexpected providential reference right across into the narration itself.

But as the nineteenth century wore on the move towards 'realism' gathered strength: the novel began to be turned into a sterilised character laboratory from which coincidences and irregularities were to be rigorously excluded. 'Fiction is bound as fact is not', proclaimed Mrs. Oliphant, 'and must consider *vraisemblance'* - ie the popular consensus view of reality - 'as well as absolute truth'. This selectivity was based on a worldview that had begun to feel the 'loss of faith'. Meredith boasts that 'our people...move themselves - are not moved by any outside impulsion' – providence included. Religion thus came to be seen as a biographical item, rather than the point of contact with the supernatural universe. And the naturalistic convention received its purest formulation in Zola and his school, and there of course revealed itself clearly as part and parcel of the worldview of deterministic materialism. 'Realism' in the French nineteenth century novelists is not so much a matter of objective record as the projection of a particular ideology.

And finally we come to the modern era, whose fiction has been described by Josipovici and others as characterised by the 'death of God' and an exploration of what this must entail. Here there can be little sense of a providence guiding events, and few authors are prepared to venture anything more hopeful than Conrad's description of destiny in *Heart of Darkness* as a 'mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose'.

All in all, then, we find ourselves faced today with a conception of the novel that has preserved the limitations of post-Enlightenment naturalism almost inviolate. The absence or inactivity of God is the norm, is a certainty, a fact of life; the novel has become an imaginative training in atheism. And the main reactions against the straitjacket of naturalism have tended to dissipate themselves in sentimentalism. Is a Christian alternative possible?

Realism and world views

Dorothy Van Ghent has argued that any novel takes as its starting-point, its 'given', certain assumptions about the nature and contents of reality: 'Like a science, or like mathematics, but, unlike history, the novel proceeds by hypothesis. It says, implicitly, "Given such and such conditions, then such and such would take place." The hypothesis on which the novel is built is the abstract aspect of its form.' This hypothesis, these assumptions as to what the world is like, determine what events can happen in the novel, and control the inevitable selective process that takes place. For the novelist does not present unmediated reality; even if the intention is `realistic', what is depicted is merely a hypothetical model of reality, based upon a worldview, whether implicit or explicit. Art, as Rookmaaker says, 'always gives an interpretation of reality.'

Hence even 'naive realism' is a technique based on a particular set of attitudes, a fictional hypothesis grounded in a particular metaphysic. It is most certainly not an objective record, because it begins, as Van Ghent observes, with an assumption, the assumption that 'spatiotemporal facts are the only "real" '. Its claim to be `realism' will be accepted only at cultural moments when it matches with the popular consensus of a conventional humanistic view of reality.

But this means that a novel may with as good justification be written with Christian supernaturalism as its underlying hypothesis as anything else. This is not a question of didacticism; it is merely a matter of the Christian writer depicting the world as (s)he believes it is - exactly as the agnostic writer uses a naturalistic hypothesis. To do otherwise, to omit the concept of the God-who-acts that is the fiery centre of the Christian's worldview and lifestyle, is in some measure to capitulate to the dominant agnostic consensus. The issue is one of honesty to, and faithful and consistent recording and working out of, the artist's own vision.

The fantasy option

This raises some interesting questions about the achievement of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien; for in their work we do find a strong element of supernaturalism (even though Tolkien at any rate denied any didactic purpose in his work). Tolkien's whole aesthetic of 'sub-creation' is grounded in his belief in a Creator of the primary world. In addition there is a definite providential pattern in these two writers; and it is in the nature of fantasy to draw out such a pattern in the events depicted.

It is, in fact, notoriously difficult for a fantasist to create something entirely new, a true 'heterocosm'. The fantasist's building-blocks are elements of the real cosmos that (s)he selects to emphasise or to rearrange. In Tolkien or Pullman as much as in Kafka, therefore, the fantasy will tend to reflect the author's view of reality. Auden claimed that *Lord of the Rings* 'holds up the mirror to the only world we know, our own'; and Tolkien himself insisted that his pattern of the *eucatastrophe,* the happy ending, is no mere legend because, as he argues in *On Fairy Stories,* it has entered into history by the incarnation and resurrection. In Lewis likewise, the hymn of praise to divine providence at the end of *Voyage to Venus* is clearly to the Christ whom Lewis worshipped in reality, and not to some imaginary deity.

The pattern that these writers seek to give us in events, then, clarified in the manner permitted by the fantasy world, is in fact the vital element in our own reality, that we might otherwise lose in the welter of detail we live with. Such a fictional strategy is not a question of siding with 'ought to be' against 'is'; rather it serves to reveal an 'is' that tends normally to be obscured. The Christian is motivated by a vision of a state of affairs that is already normative everywhere but in our fallen world, and is destined to transfigure the remainder: 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' The `possible other case' that Henry James saw as underlying irony exists elsewhere, and is now erupting into terrestrial history as the kingdom of God. The fantasists seek to highlight for us a pattern that is real but not yet completely 'manifested'.

Thus it is not just that fantasy evokes a sense of wonder, extending our sense of the possibilities of reality; nor that, as C. S. Lewis argues, fantasy can ennoble our mundane realities by presenting them in a grander context and by restoring their interrelationships and their analogous relation to the Creator. It is also much easier for Lewis and Tolkien to present the workings of supernaturalistic causality in a fantasy, because the picture becomes clearer where the scope is broader; and because, by its fantasy setting and its use of absolutised evil, the form can avoid dogmatism as to the exact nature of God's working in our present, mundane world.

So it is that Lewis presents in *Voyage to Venus* a brilliant drama of the Christian in combat with supernatural evil, with prayer, guidance, conscience his means of contact with Christ himself, and fear and mental confusion the weapons of the enemy. In *Lord of the Rings,* Frodo's quest is played out on a background of a controlling providence that overrules such events as Bilbo's finding the Ring, Frodo's inheriting it, or Gandalf's meeting with Thorin - 'a chance meeting, as we say in Middle-Earth'. There is a sense, too, of a supernatural power that comes to the aid of those seeking

to carry out their providentially-ordained task but coming to the end of their own strength: this is particularly visible in the last stages of Frodo's journey, followed by the vital intervention of Gollum who had been prophesied to have 'something to do before the end'. The 'West', away `over-sea', is a source of value and meaning, of supernatural aid, and of eventual healing for the wounded of Middle-Earth. And the absolutised evil is, of course, the 'dark lord' who 'came from outside'; the evil is in part defined by its extra-mundane, supernatural origin.

Fantasy, then, is capable of portraying in fiction the activity of the 'other.world', and may be seen as a practicable fictional strategy that evades the problem posed by the current cultural consensus, where a depiction of providence in a contemporary setting may perhaps be greeted by total disbelief. However, there are major problems associated with the fantasy form. There is the medievalising tendency, to begin with (attributable in Tolkien, maybe, to a combination of his philological interests and the influences of Thomism and William Morris). More seriously, there is the danger of repeating the error of the Renaissance romancers by lumping together the 'Christian supernatural' and the fantastic; so that providence may appear to be something belonging only in `fairy-tales' - a specialised taste, despite the apologias of the Inklings. The need today, it could well be argued, is to make Christian supernaturalism appear more real, not more fantastic; not on the level of ToIkien's hobbits and Lewis's talking beasts, attractive though these undoubtedly may be.

Is there also, perhaps, a danger of suggesting that providence is only to be seen in great apocalyptic events, and is irrelevant to everyday life, which stays within a closed naturalistic framework? For it is not the goal of fantasy to present us with a Christianity of the weekday epiphany; fantasy has its own goals, which are not those of realism. But if the meaning of providence is never worked out in close detail in ordinary life, we may be slipping into a form of the dichotomy that preoccupies Schaeffer's cultural criticism, where the credal formulation (in this case regarding providence) exists only as a general doctrinal statement or in terms of a myth (the literary fantasy), but cannot be envisaged in particular, existential terms. We say that God is at work within history, but it grows uncertain what we mean.

'Supernaturalistic realism'?

Erich Auerbach has demonstrated conclusively in *Mimesis* that the Judaeo-Christian tradition is thoroughly compatible with literary realism: and both C. S. Lewis and T. S. Eliot have criticised the notion of 'Christian subject-matter'. The entire length and breadth of the created universe is 'Christian subject-matter' - in *everything* God works for good with those who love him, says St Paul. The goal of a Christian writer choosing realism as his mode might be, in Wayne Booth's formulation, 'complexity with clarity' - the clarity of the divine strategy, earthed in all the complexity of life in our world.

This has proved difficult for the novelists of the past. It is there in Bunyan, as the automatic shape of his thought. But from the Enlightenment onwards there is a perceptible drift towards fantasy in all who attempt it. Another regular problem seems to be the adulteration of the Christian worldview in fiction with powerful but heterogenous material (for example from emergent capitalism (in Defoe) or Romanticism (*Jane Eyre*)).

Graham Greene was seen at one stage as a religious, realistic novelist; and some of his books are not as free from the idea of providence as might appear from the enervatingly depressing world he presents. The voice of God that pleads with Scobie before his suicide in *The Heart of the Matter,* for example, seems to be presented more or less at face value. In a sense, however, this adds to the depressing nature of Greene's vision, because in his work grace is an alien force that 'tempts to virtue like a sin' and offers a love that 'might even look like hate'. Generally speaking in Greene, grace intervenes only when it is too late to be of any use. One notices that at the critical point in *The Heart of the Matter,* when Scobie seals his fate by slipping casually but permanently into adultery, God is conspicuously absent, unmentioned. The keynote in Greene is of an 'abandoned star', a 'vast abandonment': 'Heaven remained rigidly in its proper place on the other side of death, and on this side, flourished the injustices, the cruelties, the meanness...' There is a virtually complete disjunction between grace and nature, and as this world seems placed firmly in the latter

sphere, the scene is one of ubiquitous defeat. Holiness is impossible, prayer formal and pointless, and religion in general a part of the futile whole. Greene's vision of the world is one in which grace could be there but, usually, isn't. It is this sense of abandonment that determines the gloominess of Greene's vision, and leaves it so far from the buoyant exuberance of the New Testament.

But even where the writer is committed to a more biblical view of God's strategy, the realistic approach has its problems. Who are we to venture guesses at the manner in which God is working in contemporary life? To falsify in this area has for the writers of the past often meant making the workings of providence merely a means to material or marital prosperity. The alternative danger is to fall into an ultimately damaging sensationalism. More to the point, to misrepresent God is to blaspheme. And to appear to have a total and definitive grasp of his strategies would be both ludicrous and impious: a tentative model is the best we can hope for.

Of course the overt miracle is not what is at issue here. The question is rather, perhaps, of the presentation of answered prayer; of guidance; of the gamble on a divine promise, the venture that is unwise in human terms but followed through in a trusting response to a divine initiative; of the specific orchestration of events and the 'practice of the presence of God' that is part of truly knowing him. It may be that this orchestration is visible principally to the eye of faith. But what can be seen can be depicted.

To exclude this area from a narrative of broad scope is to enact the absence of God's working. The partial successes of the past, however, suggest that depicting the effects of grace is not impossible. There is also the model of Christian biography; and the fragmentary perceptions combined with a sense of overall direction that marks C. S. Lewis' *A Grief Observed.* We may like to ponder, too, the presentation of God's strategy in a secular society in, say, the book of Esther. And there is at least one major fictional success in the postwar period: Jack Clemo's striking novel, *Wilding Graft* (now, unfortunately, out of print, but worth getting from a library); which succeeds admirably in portraying a pattern of grace that is neither facile nor sentimental, and the contrasting interpretations of the believer and the atheist. It can be done. However, it seldom has been.

Playground or battleground

The English novel tradition, then, seems dominated by a convention which, far from being hospitably neutral, is the fictional expression of agnosticism. This calls for a thoroughgoing critical awareness on the part of the Christian reader, and a consciousness of the worldviews that underlie and are articulated by novels (s)he reads.

T. S. Eliot wrote that: 'The fiction we read affects our behaviour ...The author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly, whether he knows it or not; and we are affected by it, as human beings, whether we intend to be or not' *(Religion and Literature).* And indeed the novel, with its rich and powerful presentations of experience, has a real ability to create and condition the norms through which we perceive reality: particularly given that many of us enter into our experience of a novel 'for relaxation', ie when we are at our most uncritical and receptive. When a novel implies that life can be summarised without any reference to the providential, it becomes part of a cultural brainwashing making it more and more difficult for us as individuals to be conscious of the presence and activity of God in our own situation.

Now it may seem that all this is to emphasise the realistic aspect of art at the expense of its creative uniqueness and autonomy. And we can perhaps accept that the work of art is primarily, under God, an autonomous aesthetic construct. But it does seem that nearly all fiction contains a realistic implication, particularly given its power to cause the reader to project themselves into the experience of the novel as if it were an extension of their own experience. At some level - even in non-realistic writers such as Tolkien, Vonnegut, Kafka or Beckett - a worldview is articulated, which will be accurate or erroneous.

And so we praise God for the glorious aesthetic capability that he has put within humankind, and we venture into novel-reading, and writing perhaps, with joy as the servants of the Lord of all. But a novel can be a magnificent aesthetic achievement, and yet be powerfully, latently anti-Christian:

supplying the building-blocks of an agnostic consciousness – or an agnostic blindness. It isn't, therefore, a mere playground for uncritical relaxation. Instead the novel-reader must have a prayerful, Bible-saturated, critical 'Christian mind'; Bible-saturated because it is only systematic Bible study in significant quantity that can help us maintain an alternative mindset amid the torrents of media humanism, and recover and foster a consciousness alert to God. Spiritual warfare extends into the arts and media too; and we need to see what the form is saying as well as what is written on the page.

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(The argument above is developed in detail in two extended studies titled Fictional Absence and Chronicles of Heaven Unshackled, available on this site and free from peterlowman@lineone.net. For a survey of the worldviews in literature more generally and how they have reflected the various phases of British cultural/spiritual development, see ch.6 of my *A Long Way East of Eden* (Authentic, 2002).)