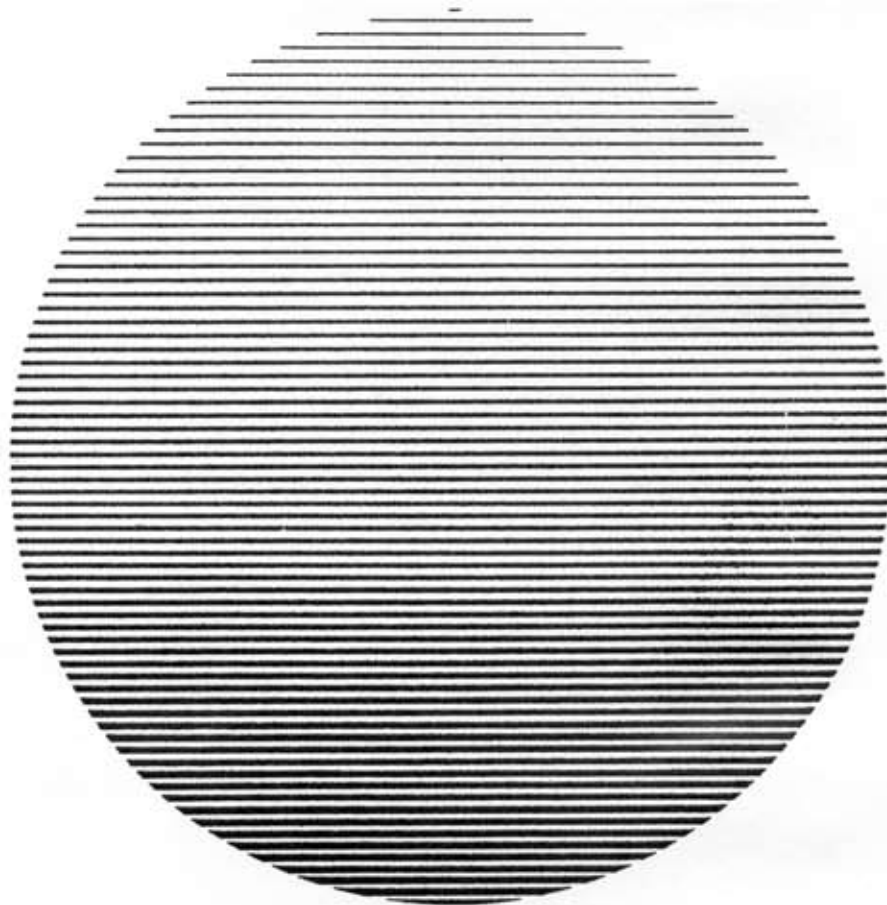


READING LITERATURE: SOME CHRISTIAN APPROACHES



Edited by David Barratt and Roger Pooley

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Introduction

A friend of one of us was warned by her minister not to read English at university, as it was dangerous; she ought to read some 'safer' subject like History. Leaving to one side the supposed safety of reading History, such a reaction is representative of one Christian view of literature since the earliest days of the church. Other Christians, like St Paul preaching at Athens, have regarded literature as a quarry of examples to use in preaching, especially evangelism and apologetics; others still, most recently Professor Rookmaaker, have insisted that art is its own justification and is fatally diminished within the confines of propaganda or the requirements of organised worship. Of course the status and function of literature in our culture has undergone modification since the early church debates. In this century the study of English has become pivotal in the Humanities in schools, colleges and universities, even in the face of rising demands for utility value in education. It has replaced Classics as the standard 'liberal education'; and, partly because of that predecessor, teaching English has become bound up with the teaching of values, however tentatively. Teachers of literature and graduates of literature departments in the media, as well as the writers of literature itself, influence the way we think, feel and act in a mass society more than ever before.

In view of this, it is our conviction that Christians should not only understand but participate in the creative and critical tasks of literature. God is both creative and truthful; we are called to be fruitful and discerning. Literature is not a substitute for life but a part of life, not just at the high cultural level (which is largely what we consider in these pages), but for the simplest storyteller or TV watcher, and we do well to encourage and understand it. The really dangerous position, to refer to our opening remarks, is not enthusiastic participation, but ignorance and inaction.

This collection's editors and contributors, all members of the **Literary Studies Group** of UCCF, here attempt to work out the beginnings of a biblical Christian approach to the study of literature. We address ourselves first to those undergraduates reading literary subjects who wish to see how a firm commitment to Christian truth might work out in their academic study of literature, as well as to teachers and others engaged with literature.

We begin with Roger Kojeky's essay, a defence of literary criticism against Christians and others unsure of its value, and an attempt to see how a specifically Christian criticism might work out. David Greenwood's essay shows how the Bible might itself be read as literature, not just as a source book for Christian principles, and yet without compromising its normative status. This task has become doubly urgent for Christian students, as critics, Christian, Jewish and agnostic alike, attempt to bring reading the Bible back into the mainstream of literary study. The next two pieces both, in different ways, chart a way through twentieth century critical issues.

Roger Pooley describes the state of play in the increasingly complex debates in criticism and critical theory; while David Barratt investigates the concept of a unified, Christian culture, situated in the past, which is part of the explicitly Christian criticism of T S Eliot, C S Lewis and A E Dyson, but not, he argues, a necessary part of the Christian critic's armoury. The second half of the collection shows how a Christian viewpoint might generate particular readings of individual texts or groups of texts. Rosemary Nixon deals with that most popular, and explicitly anti-Christian novelist, Thomas Hardy; Tony Phelan writes about Brecht's *Good Person of Szechuan*, a particularly provoking text for Christians; and Roger Pooley develops a theological response to a poem of Ted Hughes. There is also a list of suggestions for further reading.

This is an informal publication designed to stimulate thought; we don't want to spell out a party line, or suggest there is only one way to go about the Christian reading of literature. But we do want to suggest that it's an important task for the Christian student; if it's neglected, or done badly, another area of our culture is liable to be appropriated by views at best indifferent to Christ; and for the Christian individual, the dangers of leaving an area of life not properly submitted to the Lordship of Christ ought not to need emphasising. But on the other hand, we want to suggest that there is a positive gain, an excitement, in approaching imaginative literature with the full alertness of the Christian. Fullness, rather than reductiveness, should be our aim, as it was for St Paul - 'fill your minds with everything that is true, everything that is noble, everything that is good and pure, everything that we love and honour, and everything that can be thought virtuous or worthy of praise' (Philippians 4:8).

David Barratt
Roger Pooley

THE FUNCTION OF LITERATURE

Roger Kojecky

Since it has language for its medium, and is in mesh with some of the most characteristically human activities, literature can claim to occupy a key place in the cultural spectrum. Not only literature but the whole of culture is sometimes viewed, within the perspectives afforded by anthropological and linguistic studies, as a semiotic system, a self-contained language of signs. But useful as this perception may be, it should not distract us from seeing that literature and culture have boundaries, and that beyond them are visible areas. One of the ways we can see these boundaries is by examining the specific functions of literature, and the status of these.

Does literature's heavy dependence on fiction in any way affect its status? Philip Sidney, the sixteenth century apologist for literature, took issue on this point using as one of his examples the story told by the prophet Nathan to King David on the occasion of his combined murder and adultery.¹ 'The application,' commented Sidney, is 'most divinely true, but the discourse itself feigned; which made David (I speak of the second and instrumental cause) as in a glass see his own filthiness, as that heavenly psalm of mercy well testifieth.'² Nathan's parable did considerably more than entertain David. It caught his imagination and activated his sense of justice. In a fictive world the issues were starkly discerned, uncomplicated by ego and the cloudiness that comes from guilt. David made an orientation, a judgement, that he had found impossible under the pressure of the real situation. If he did escape while he listened, he did so in order to engage more responsibly with his problems, spiritual and human. The immediate effect of the story, as Sidney points out, is to change his perception, and that indeed is one of the most interesting of the functions of literature.

If language is a primary distinguishing feature of man, its primacy is due partly to its power to facilitate thought. The power of thought, expression, memory and communication opens an infinity of acts and possibilities. Among them is the perception and creation of meaning, a faculty which Sidney, like Coleridge and others, justly derives from God's creation of man. 'The poet doth grow in effect another nature, making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew forms such as were never in nature ... so he goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit... (God) having made man to his own likeness, set him beyond and over all the work of that second nature.'³ The corollary is that man is as responsible to God for his creations in imaginative works as for his stewardship of the natural environment.

Imagination and invention are a departure from matter-of-fact reality, yet civilization even at the material level would be nowhere without them. Imagination and innovation are two sides of the same coin: today's fantasy

engenders tomorrow's reality. Yet we should take warning from generations of philosophers and acknowledge the complexity of the relation between the mental and the real worlds. Karl Marx, who saw social consciousness as determined by material forces, nevertheless thought philosophy should not content itself with interpreting the world but should change it.⁴ Is reality predominant over idea, confirming, holding in check or perhaps conditioning the flight of the imagination; or do ideas rule the world from before perception to ultimate judgement? Such questions can lead quickly to sterile polemic, but it is worth observing the two-way relation: idea draws upon the raw material of fact, but at the same time facts are perceived and even in a sense created by ideas.⁵ In Sidney's terminology the poet is 'hand in hand' with nature.

Social uses of literature

But it is not of course only the poet. We all dream sometimes or look for ways to escape or change circumstances. In Genesis, man's authority over the natural environment is associated with his linguistic creativity. Language allows us to represent both facts and ideas so that we can manipulate them to achieve our individual or collective ends. (Or you can remove the teleology and say we manipulate them, sometimes, just for the fun of the thing, but either way we deal with reality symbolically.) So Freud saw literature as providing both a substitute for the real world and a means of acquiring power in it. Others have noticed a fundamental appetite in the human psyche for fantasy. People experimentally deprived of dreams, though not of sleep, suffer from serious mental disturbance. It may be that literature in some form is as functionally beneficial as food or physical exercise.

By means of language, our primary medium of thought, we engage with reality, using language to interrogate and order the environment. To be human is to be engaged in an unceasing quest for significances, for such formulations as we make are provisional and soon in need of modification or replacement: in the Hegelian model thesis is followed by antithesis and synthesis. Some of the mental constructs acquire a rich life of their own with a status as high or higher than mere matters of fact. Thus we speak of goods or lives being sacrificed for a cause. I will not try to define how the legitimacy of such causes is arrived at, preferring instead to notice how those ideas we class as fantasy may be partly explained as functioning to place ourselves in relation to circumstance. In this light fantasy (not necessarily all fantasy all of the time) is a processing of experience, both our own and others'. Literature enlarges our range, taking us, as C S Lewis has said, beyond the limits of self. It 'admits us to experiences other than our own,' and 'heals the wound, without undermining the privilege of individuality.... In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself.'⁶

Because it models and remodels the social world, literature may be, among other things, a conveyor of information about it. (This is true of some other language-

related activities, but literature is our concern at this moment.) Novels can be quarried for nuggets of *savoir-faire* by those who wish to participate in the social world they depict, or they can be used as evidence for broad social movements such as the industrial revolution, reflected in the work of writers like Dickens, Disraeli and Elizabeth Gaskell. Simulating experience, literature can play a part in an individual's development, and in his socialization, his gaining familiarity with manners and procedures. Each of us has an extended experience that is as unique as our fingerprints, gained from our unique position in and interaction with the social world. And each of us has a unique pattern of imaginative and literary experience. The uniqueness makes us who we are, and this is yet another function of literature, the definition of its experiencing individual. Reading is an activity of perception requiring collaboration from ourselves. It is not a mere registering of data, but a kind of processing which at once draws upon and resupplies that aspect of our mental life we call imagination.

The two kinds of experience, social-contingent and literary, interact, so that we judge literary products by our experience of life, and read life experiences by our literary sense. The latter is so deeply part of the structure of thought that we tend to be unconscious of it. When we say of some incident, How dramatic! or, What an anticlimax!, we may be aware that a reference to forms of literary experience is being made. But often, I suspect, our perception of an individual through the grid of a role we think he or she plays (and there may be few other 'handles' on that person) is literary-conditioned. Or in seeking to attach significance to an incident or experience our perceiving may include snatches of trial narrative, an imaginative selection and ordering of features, and pointing the thing up towards a fitting end, all basic literary manoeuvres.

Conscience and the interpretation of experience

The imagination which literature engages is an element, a roughly identifiable area, in a complex that includes memory, association, logic, sense-perception and others. The mental functions can be assembled in different ways for different purposes, but one I would wish to link with imagination is conscience. Conscience is traditionally located in the individual, though its reference transcends individuality. It has been viewed as a moral sense, a retrospective judgement on one's acts, a kind of divine implant, a pure intuition of the value of one's acts and possible acts. It can be seen more relativistically as educated, and working by rational process from an interior map. Emil Durkheim's expression *conscience collective* introduces an emphasis on the social dimension, and contains a useful ambiguity in that *conscience* means awareness. Adapted and broadened, the traditional concept of conscience can, I suggest, be used to denote a faculty at once innate and condition, its sources and reference divine and human, its operation judging and subject to judgement, ideal and experiential, constant and in dynamic evolution, its sphere that of all behaviour and experience.

Since literary experience is one of the inputs to the conscience by which we perceive, create and judge, the function of literature is of particular interest to the Christian. For, to take one example, although we have as believers the light of revelation, actual experience is for the time being largely a world of shadows and partial illumination. Bunyan's Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress* is shown by Interpreter a fire that is doused yet unquenched because of a hidden supply of fuel oil. The allegory is explained as representing Christ's work of grace which sustains the believer through spirit-damping experiences. Our life, our circumstances, do frequently puzzle us, so that we may sometimes see in them no evidence of God's activity; and this text offers in allegorical form an alternative reading in which discernment of a secret inward process of grace displaces a *prima facie* and merely common sense interpretative response.

The tension between raw experience and interpretation may be related to other tensions found at various levels. In a story or poem, for example, between on the one hand the familiar and expected, and on the other the unusual, surprising and strange. Linguistic style may show the same sort of polarization, and of course it may occur between interpretations themselves. As Ruth Etchells has pointed out, 'Inevitably there is a tension between our involvement in our common humanity and our involvement in our new humanity, that "new creation" which is Christ's; between our continuing awareness of human failure and despair, and our consciousness of divine victory on humanity's behalf. But we cannot run away from this tension. It will be with us as long as we live, and is part of our growing.'⁷ Contemporary literature provides ample evidence of constant reorientations of outlook in an era of secularization and social change. As a body of literature it can be regarded as in tension with antecedent traditional expressions, defining itself fairly consciously by this very tension, by characteristically modern differences.

T S Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* is often regarded as an epitome of modernism in literature.

'My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart
Under my feet. After the event
He wept. He promised "a new start."
I made no comment. What should I resent?'

'On Margate Sands.
I can connect
Nothing with nothing
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
My people humble people who expect
Nothing.'

la la
To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning
O Lord Thou pluckest me out
O Lord thou pluckest

burning⁸

The reader, impelled by mental habit, resists the hint and attempts some connections. The images of the dirty hands and kingly voice recall references earlier in the poem which, however, were equally fragmented, their meaning equally elusive. Whether it is exclusively a property of twentieth century life or not, fragmentary consciousness is a common urban experience, making Eliot's fractured form a representation of experience and to that extent yielding to interpretation, albeit negative. But while the poem is in this way mimetic, it also draws extensively on literary and religious tradition. There is no propagandist design upon the reader, and no narrative, since the narrative form operates only contrapuntally in expectation, yet there is moral awareness and, mingled with the glimpses of contemporary London life, a strong awareness of the past. The passage concludes the section called 'The Fire Sermon', the original of which Eliot compares in a note with the Sermon on the Mount. The Buddha's message was that sensual indulgence burns destruction to the spiritual life, a conclusion not dissimilar to that reached by Saint Augustine, whose spiritual awakening, to which the poem here gestures, occurred in fourth century Carthage. Thither Augustine went as an adolescent, looking for love through lust and beginning to realize he needed something else, namely salvation through Christ.⁹

Five years elapsed between the publication of *The Waste Land* and Eliot's decision for Christianity. To what extent it is a Christian poem remains for some an open question,¹⁰ though there is a crucial distinction between a poem whose significance accords with central tenets of the Christian faith, and one which uses Christian elements among others for purposes of its own. Certainly it is a poem of experience, and Eliot drew, as a writer must, on his own (he stayed at Margate, getting over a nervous breakdown, and there wrote part of the poem). But although he juggles with the tension between experience and its meanings it is not so much a personal as a collective significance that emerges from the dense multiplicity of reference and perspective, analogous to Cubism in painting.

In a later talk on 'The Social Function of Poetry' he argues in a way consonant with his 'impersonality' principle, which fits *The Waste Land* so well, that the poet forms part of a vanguard of consciousness, 'making people more aware of what they feel already, and therefore teaching them something about themselves. But he is not merely a more conscious person than the others; he is also individually different from other people, and from other poets too, and can make his readers share consciously in new feelings which they had not experienced before.'¹¹ Elsewhere he sets out a role for educated Christians to maintain and transmit the Christian tradition, functioning as the 'conscious mind and conscience of the nation.'¹²

Literature and the individual

At some conceptual distance from this there are other functions which literature may fulfil, some of them not particularly literary, such as making money.

Shakespeare, like a great many writers, wrote for commercial profit, and to the various effects his work achieved, intended or not, should be added the financial returns enjoyed by him and by a whole progeny of theatre people, editors and publishers. This opens up a perspective on literature that is surprisingly often overlooked. The hope of gain is a fundamental term in the equation, and financial and economic factors play a large part, though not easy to pinpoint with accuracy, in determining the kind of literary product that is created, and indeed whether a genre or oeuvre exists at all. It is easy to see literature as an effect of such forces, and one does not have to look far for examples of literary products whose economic and market function is considerably more significant than any literary character they may, as it were accidentally, possess.

Another contrast with the impersonal and collective aspect of literature is its sometimes openly personal role. If it nourishes the individual's consciousness and conscience it is socially orienting; yet it may provide a peculiarly private experience in which individual distinctiveness is the thing most sought.

Literature can be used (*pace* C S Lewis, and John Donne for that matter) to isolate. With its help a man may set up as an island. Reading, say, *Robinson Crusoe* we may discover not merely a new experience, but some unknown aspect of ourselves. The pleasure of reading will usually be undimmed despite its not being shared with someone else.

In the James Bond stories Ian Fleming strikes a working balance between fantasy and reality. Robin Hood-like, Bond takes on major powers of the contemporary world and virtually single-handed survives against impossible odds, achieves successes. This and the give and take of violence is not very different from the folk-tale, nor from Homer. What is different is the ethos, the set of moral assumptions that underlies the stories. Although a lot of traditional values are preserved intact, the romantic aspect assumes a twentieth century explicitness, and achievements by the smart, beautiful, lucky or powerful are too often accorded quasi-absolute status.

People read or watch Bond in order to escape, yet at the same time it seems they engage through another mode of imaginative cognition with their own world. As with Homer or Shakespeare, though less richly, there is a displacement as conflicts and problems are processed at two or three removes. The imaginative construct is not a representation, the plight of Bond or Hamlet is not a model of my difference with my boss or my father, but the tension both generate is comparable, as the muffled echo with the sharp sound of the woodman's axe, or a confused but vivid dream with the life incidents it so strangely draws upon.

Life and literature feed back to each other, from each other. The dream is known for what it is in a waking context, and literary works, however far out they go on

a limb of their own devising, are ultimately subject to the constraints of consensus. And of intelligibility, which proceeds from the experience shared, confirmed and modified in all those exchanges in which language, culture and literature are determinative. In his last work, *Finnegan's Wake*, James Joyce sacrificed such intelligibility for an autonomic development of the novel form, where the signifying property of the words gives fragments, or perhaps illusions, of mimesis:

Jams jarred. He had walked towards the middle of an ornamental lillypond when inebriated up to the point where braced shirts meet knickerbockers, as wangfish daring the buoyant waters, when rodmen's firstaiding hands had rescued us from several feel of demifrish water. Mush spread. On Umbrella Street where he did drinks from a pumps a kind workman, Mr Whitlock, gave him a piece of wood. What words of power were made fas between them, ekenames and auchnomes, *acnomina ecnumina*?¹³

What words indeed. The work posits its own norms which are only approximately those of familiar coherence, the differences from normality asserting a distinctiveness that ranks this with *Tristram Shandy* as a quintessentially novel novel. Yet Joyce's rebellion is at once achieved with language and checked by it. An island may appear isolated, but under the encircling element it is continuous with all dry land and with the entire planet.

Literature and responsibility

The social consciousness that language necessarily invokes is not however the primary cause of literature. Ranking is a tricky business, but a certain primacy belongs to the play of the imagination, free and unpredictable within its limits, which engages with the available elements in the process of creation. Literature then is not primarily and of its nature an institution in the service of fact, or common sense, or ideology, or government control. Such censorship as there is should be personal. The imagination is licensed to fly, not compelled to conform. Hence C S Lewis's warning against subjecting works of art to inapt purposes of our own. 'A work of art can be either "received" or "used". When we "receive" it we exert our senses and imagination and various other powers according to a pattern invented by the artist.'¹⁴

Since the response we make to literature is often largely emotional, and rarely purely intellectual, the question is sometimes raised of what, if any, intellectual use literature may have. In the course of a wide-ranging discussion Leland Ryken of Wheaton College places literature squarely within a Christian framework, and his answer is that literature 'is useful because it organizes *with clarity* the world views by which people have lived and continue to live.'¹⁵ But although much that Professor Ryken has to say in his book is illuminating, this particular statement seems to me misleading. It may be true that certain methods of study are clear-headed, but literary works themselves are not

necessarily clear about world views at all. On the contrary, as we have noticed, a disordering or re-ordering at many levels, including that of implied world views, may occur. Erich Auerbach remarked in his diachronic study of realism, *Mimesis*: 'At the time of the first World War and after - in a Europe unsure of itself, overflowing with unsettled ideologies and ways of life, and pregnant with disaster - certain writers distinguished by instinct and insight find a method which dissolves reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness.'¹⁶ Here literature is convincingly regarded as a confused effect of confused social causes. Or as Eliot suggests in the passage already quoted from 'The Social Function of Poetry', the subject of poetry is as much feeling as clear-cut paraphrasable ideas. In any case, literature's medium is a deceptive one. For although language may give an impression of solidity, the construct may be paper-thin. Language can fail us, fail to render experience, the world and even logical relation as we would wish, a problem that occupied Ludwig Wittgenstein for much of his life,¹⁷ and makes its appearance in Eliot's *Four Quartets*.¹⁸

Nevertheless, because it is so intimately linked with the comprehensive faculties of language, imagination and conscience, literature may be pressed into the service of a variety of purposes and causes. Matthew Arnold campaigned for a realignment in which literature would complete divorce proceedings with religion and make an alliance with science. His essay on 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' idealizes critical activity as forming a 'current of true and fresh ideas' promoting 'the best that is known and thought'.¹⁹ Arnold's intellectual climate presupposed progress and the need for change: criticism would order the welter of ideas in an international collaborative process of adjustment. Convulsions such as the French Revolution were to be set behind prior movements in ideas. In the emerging world the functions of religion were to be reallocated: 'more and more, mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us.'²⁰ In our day, when poetry, like opera and polo, interests but a few, such claims must seem exaggerated. As it happens Eliot, in many ways Arnold's successor as unofficial critic laureate, turned the tables on Arnold, asserting in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* that religion and culture, including literature, are aspects of the same process and that religion is the subterranean root to culture's flower.

A criticism in vogue today, Structuralism, and the Deconstruction it has engendered, tends to regard all such issues as non-problems, which amounts to saying that its proponents prefer to write their own agenda within the confines of principles they derive from one or two of the human sciences. In their turn, some Christians have sought to subject literature to the Christian faith whether institutionally, as with the Roman Catholic *imprimatur*, or ideologically. But this can, unless the processes of conscience and the free imagination find their own inward balance, too easily quench creativity and so do violence to that in our humanity which is in the image of the Creator.

The view of literature I have been trying to advance is an inclusive one which holds in tension a variety of elements, some of which have been mentioned, others not. I have omitted an introductory section on the functionalist perspective I have adopted, and I have not looked at literature as an interpretation of history, at how literary response requires literary experience and a sense of genre, or at what separates literary and other applications of conscience. My outline stresses the role of the accountable human will and imagination, and the ineffectiveness of institutional constraint apart from that working through consensus, language and the forms of literature itself. In a cultural climate that avoids questions of ultimate truth or moral principle, the value of the Christian perspective is integrative of all this multiplicity, and the question of whether it is justified to be involved with literature is in practice overtaken by questions of the degree and kind of literary activity. Literature has in Christ as Logos a paradigm of multiple process, transcendence and unity. Included here are the two truths, creation and revelation, that save us from the sins of solipsism and free floating relativity. They secure the gearing of literature to a world beyond the text and beyond the imagination, and its indebtedness to truth and justice as well as to those laws it proposes to itself.

NOTES

- 1 II Samuel 12:1ff.
- 2 *Defence of Poetry*, 1595. The first cause of Sidney's parenthesis is God, and the psalm he refers to is Ps 51.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 XIth Treatise of Feuerbach.
- 5 C.f. Nietzsche's statement in 'The use and Abuse of History' that for a fact to exist we must first introduce a meaning.
- 6 *Experiment in Criticism*, 1961 pp. 88, 140.
- 7 *Unafraid to Be*, IVP, 1969, p.19.
- 8 *The Waste Land*, 1922, 11. 300-311.
- 9 See Aurelius Augustine's autobiographical *Confessions*.
- 10 Marion Montgomery in *Eliot's Reflective Journey to the Garden*, New York, 1979, would have it that the poem is the 'document of... a conversion.'
- 11 *On Poetry & Poets*, 1957, p.20.
- 12 *The Idea of a Christian Society*, 1939. (New edition 1982).
- 13 *Finnegan's Wake* [1939], 1964, p.98.
- 14 *Experiment in Criticism*, p.88.
- 15 *Triumphs of the Imagination*, IVP, 1979 (my emphasis).
- 16 *Mimesis* [1946], Princeton, 1968, p.551.
- 17 1889-1951. C.F. *Tractatus* [1921], sects.4.12, 5.1361, *Philosophical Investigations*, 1953, sects.114, 122.
- 18 Burnt Norton V, East Coker II, V, Little Gidding II.
- 19 1894.
- 20 'The Study of Poetry', 1880.

READING THE BIBLE LITERARILY

David Greenwood

Introduction

I am persuaded that without knowledge of literature, pure theology cannot at all endure, just as heretofore, when letters have declined and lain prostrate, theology too has wretchedly fallen and lain prostrate; nay, I see that there has never been a great revelation of the Word of God unless He first prepared the way by the rise and prosperity of languages and letters, as though they were John the Baptists ... Certainly, it is my desire that there shall be as many poets and rhetoricians as possible, because I see that by these studies, as by no other means, people are wonderfully fitted for the grasping of sacred truth and for handling it skillfully and happily.

Martin Luther¹

Whenever they hear it suggested that 'the Church can properly hear its Bible as Scripture only when it reads it as literature',² some of those committed to considering the Bible as God's Word can sometimes be found raising questioning eyebrows. It can seem to some of them at first irreverent and indeed inconsistent with any meaningful theory of Inspiration to suppose that a literary approach to the Bible is indispensable - to imagine that the Bible contains drama, poetry and even fiction, in other words, belles lettres, as well as, say, History and Law! To draw up a list like the following - with the aim of noting as many different kinds of literature as possible (as is done regularly by compilers of Old Testament Introductions, for example) really can appear to be a pedantically Polonian exercise -

narrative - epic - satire - lyric poetry - epithalamion - elegy - encomium - proverb - acrostic - riddle - pastoral - prophecy - gospel - parable - epistle - apocalypse.

Any additional notion that the average Bible-reader can legitimately seek aesthetic pleasure as he 'engages' with the Scriptural text may meet with similarly stern disapproval. After all, those, 'I will- not-let-you-go-until-you-bless-me' grapplers with the Hebrew Bible whom we meet in the New Testament do not exactly trouble themselves over matters of literary form or style. The Ethiopian Eunuch did not ask Philip to share with him his delight in the delicate poetic structure of Isaiah 53. He wanted a faithful interpreter to bring him to a knowledge of the truth about Jesus, to a swift 'closure of meaning'. We can be quite certain that Jesus did not in any way feel it necessary to give his Emmaus Road companions a preliminary lecture on, 'Leitwortstil in the Pentateuch' before, 'beginning with Moses' he 'explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself'! (Luke 24:27 - RSV)

One of the most frequently quoted statements on our subject is this one from C S Lewis:

(The Bible is) not merely a sacred book but a book so remorselessly and continuously sacred that it does not invite, it excludes or repels, the merely aesthetic approach. You can read it as literature only by a tour de force. You are cutting the wood against the grain, using a tool for a purpose it was not intended to serve.³

To get down to business. How should the Christian student taking a course in literature respond to Lewis's basic contention? If he gives the matter any serious thought, he may end up feeling baffled and confused, left halting between two opinions. He may conclude that he dare not relate that part of his life which he spends reverently reading his Bible to those other parts which he devotes to his (hopefully enjoyable) appreciation of classic and not-so-classic literary texts. But does his devotional quiet time reading of, say, a portion from I Samuel or a Psalm have to differ completely in kind from his reading of a Flaubert short-story or a Shakespeare sonnet? In some ways, it clearly must. In others, it manifestly should not. In this essay I argue that to read the Bible literarily is or ought to be the duty and delight of every Christian student of literature - and that because of and not in spite of his high view of the Bible's nature as God-breathed Scripture, as God's Word made script to be read by us. I take it that Lewis was in fact issuing a warning against reading the Bible merely as literature and without a due respect for its doctrinal content. That he was extremely sensitive to the necessity for a literary approach is clear from a passage in his introduction to *Some Reflections on the Psalms*:

There is a ... sense in which the Bible, since it is after all literature, cannot properly be read except as literature, and the different sorts of literature they are.⁴

After highlighting some of the dangers involved with a purely aesthetic approach to it, I consider two ways of reading the Bible that seem to me to be deficient precisely because they do not take its 'literariness' seriously enough. I then try to provide some brief theological justifications for reading the Bible literarily, before concluding with the suggestion that much can be learned through a recovery of our Renaissance and Reformation 'literary- Biblical' heritage. In this final section I therefore seek to demonstrate that a great cloud of witnesses surrounds today's Christian student of literature as he confronts the issue of how to read his Bible - to return to my opening quotation, Martin Luther was not crying in the wilderness when he wrote that by literary studies, 'people are wonderfully fitted for the grasping of sacred truth and for handling it skilfully and happily.'

1 THE DANGERS OF ONLY READING THE BIBLE LITERARILY

It should go without saying that many sorts of aesthetically-minded people antagonistic to the Christian Faith do respond positively to the literary merits of the Bible, without acknowledging its authority to 'read' them. For example, the eroticist may seek to be titillated by the frank and wonderfully explicit sexual imagery of the Song of Solomon, and yet will probably remain deaf to its 'Wisdom-book' message that free and promiscuous love is a deceptive horror. As he enthuses over this 'pastoral drama',⁵ the eroticist will try to evade its clever strategies to wean and win him from studied and debilitating lust to an appreciation of chaste and joyful 'covenanted' love - a love which is 'strong as death', one which 'many waters cannot quench' nor 'floods drown' (Song of Solomon 8:7). Again, a pantheist may deliberately misread Psalm 104 as a kind of Wordsworthian paean to Nature⁶ (capital N), without ever paying attention to the Psalm's own repeated insistence that all Creation in all its infinite variety, both animate and inanimate, is wholly dependent for its very existence upon the sustaining, go-between Spirit of God:

When thou hidest thy face, they are
dismayed;
when thou takest away their breath,
they die
and return to their dust.
When thou sendest forth thy Spirit,
they are created;
And thou renewest the face of the
ground. (Psalm 104:29-30)

To give one more example, the devotee of Jorge Luis Borges' enigmatic, teasing postmodern short-stories may characterise Jesus' parables as 'word events', that have a similar power to shake the foundations of every metaphysical system, and yet he will choose to ignore or write off as a gloss any ethical thrust a given parable may have in reserve as a sting in its tail for the unsuspecting reader.⁷

Many who enjoy commenting on the literary qualities of the Bible can therefore use their often highly-developed sensitivity to its language to shield themselves from ever having to respond practically to its life-altering claims and demands. To repeat my point, with the help this time of George Herbert, a modern reader may well discover and exult in the truth that the Bible is 'a mass of strange delights', and yet never confess that it is

.....the thankfull glasse,
that mends the lookers eyes; ... the well
That washes what it shows.⁸

It need not be stressed that Herbert's position is the historic Christian position. Christians believe that the Bible 'reads' them, or rather that the Bible must

become the pair of spectacles they don to read the world! Both Old and New Testaments proclaim that the Bible has a life of its own. The Prophet Jeremiah is only too painfully aware of this reality when he writes of the Word of the Lord which he has to deliver:

There is in my heart as it were a
burning fire
shut up in my bones,
And I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot (Jeremiah 20:9)

and the Writer to the Hebrews remarks on the reception of God's word:

the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword,
piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow (Hebrews 4:12).

Called upon to defend himself in 1555 against charges of heresy, John Rogers, a former disciple of William Tyndale, spoke up rather bluntly for this belief. John Foxe records the following interchange between Rogers and Bishop Stephen Gardiner, Queen Mary's Lord Chancellor:

L. CHANCELLOR: No, no, thou canst prove nothing by the Scripture, the Scripture is dead: it must have a lively expositor.
ROGERS: No, the Scripture is alive.⁹

It is of course the Holy Spirit who is required to bring the written word to life. But if the Christian accepts that the Holy Spirit inspired the original writers, then he must also acknowledge that the Holy Spirit endowed these same men with the appropriate literary gifts and abilities - these poets, narrators, biographers, prophets, scribes, letter-writers, apocalypticists. The Holy Spirit is not only the Spirit of Revelation and Inspiration. He is the Creator-Spirit, the source of all creativity and artistry. It is a regrettable state of affairs that while on the one hand, many aesthetically sensitive people opposed to Christian doctrine will write and speak in praise of the literary qualities of the Bible (although, as we have seen, they will often lay this emphasis on the form of the Scriptures with the aim of denying their power); on the other hand, many Christians who live by the power of the Bible remain unappreciatively and ungratefully oblivious to the beauty of its forms. But I will reserve my further comments and positive recommendations on this subject for section III.

If 'only reading the Bible literarily' can mean a rejection of its moral demands, it can also involve a dismissal of the historical accuracy of events recorded in the Bible. Some literary critics will argue that the artificial, fictive, literary nature of a given Biblical book automatically disqualifies it from consideration as a reliable account of what 'actually happened'. The text is said to come between the reader and the world of events and historical happenings like a sheet of wavy and hence

inevitably distorting glass. To cite just one recent example, Frank Kermode sets out to demonstrate that a certain passage from John's Gospel - one which stridently proclaims its own reliability as a factual, narrative account - was in fact written up by an imaginative author who used many an appropriate midrashic borrowing or colouring from the Old Testament.¹⁰ The passage Kermode has in mind is John 19:31-37:

Since it was the day of Preparation, in order to prevent the bodies from remaining on the cross on the sabbath (for that sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first, and of the other who had been crucified with him; but when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness - his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth - that you also may believe. For these things took place that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'Not a bone of him shall be broken.' And again another scripture says, 'They shall look on him whom they have pierced.'

Kermode insists that the Old Testament texts quoted in the passage have 'manifestly generated the new narrative', and concludes that 'the historical record as we have it is constructed in considerable measure from the testimonies.'¹¹ We may initially find these kinds of assertions unsettling, until we realise that in this case, Kermode's sceptical presuppositions about the nature of language itself do not in fact permit him to even admit to the possibility that the Bible may open onto the real world of facts, while at the same time taking literary form!¹² As John Balchin puts it, we must not be 'guilty of making the mental equation: "Literature equals fiction".'¹³

2 TWO WAYS OF READING THE BIBLE OTHER THAN LITERARILY

In this section, I discuss two ways of 'reading' the Bible which have marked deficiencies, since they do not in my view take sufficient account of its 'literariness'.

First is that mode of 'reading' used by the majority of professional Biblical scholars - the historical-critical method.¹⁴ This method is perhaps best known from an Old Testament context for the so-called 'documentary hypothesis' about the composition of the Pentateuch. This is the view, to use a common pejorative description, that the Pentateuch is a kind of patch-work quilt, stitched together rather ineptly by a succession of incompetent compilers from a wildly varying group of written sources, usually assigned the letters J E G D P.¹⁵ Robert Alter has recently taken to task Old Testament scholars espousing this method, whose work he sees as purely 'evocative'. Some of his arguments and strictures are

worth quoting at length, and so I manifestly allow them to 'generate' this part of my essay for me, as Frank Kermode might say! Alter says that literary analysis,

after all those seminars in graduate school of Sumerian law and Ugaritic cult terms, remains for them (the Alttestamentler) a foreign language laboriously learned.¹⁶

It is as if the text as a complex composition does not exist. Alter is convinced that a competent 'literary analysis of the Bible is only in its infancy.' He goes on to spell out just what he means by literary analysis:

By literary analysis I mean the manifold varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else; the kind of disciplined attention, in other words, which through a whole spectrum of critical approaches has illuminated, for example, the poetry of Dante, the plays of Shakespeare, the novels of Tolstoy. The general absence of such critical discourse on the Hebrew Bible is ... perplexing.¹⁷

In his chapter 'Biblical Type-Scenes and the Uses of Convention'¹⁸ Alter very amusingly parodies the abject inability of some historical-critical source-hunters to cope with stories of a similar type which follow hard one upon the other in the Pentateuch. He is thinking of the Patriarchal narratives, in which, for instance, we meet three different Patriarchs who each, at different times,

- (i) Are driven by a famine to a Southern region, where they pretend that their wife is their sister.
- (ii) Narrowly avoid a violation of the marriage-bond by the local ruler.
- (iii) Are sent away with gifts. (Genesis 12:10-20; 20; 26:1-12.)

Alter's parody runs as follows:

Let us suppose that some centuries hence only a dozen films survive from the whole corpus of Hollywood westerns. As students of twentieth century cinema screening the films on an ingeniously reconstructed archaic projector, we note a recurrent peculiarity: in eleven of the films, the sheriff-hero has the same anomalous neurological trait of hyper-reflexivity - no matter what the situation in which his adversaries confront him, he is always able to pull his gun out of his holster and fire before they, with their weapons poised, can pull the trigger. In the twelfth film, the sheriff has a withered arm and, instead of a six-shooter, he uses a rifle that he carried slung over his back. Now, eleven hyper-reflexive sheriffs are utterly improbable by any realistic standards - though one scholar will no doubt propose that in the Old West the function of a sheriff was generally filled by members of a hereditary caste that in fact had this genetic trait, the scholars will then divide between a majority that posits an original source-western

(designated Q) which has been imitated or imperfectly reproduced in a whole series of later versions (Q1, Q2, etc - the films we have been screening) and a more speculative minority that proposes an old California Indian myth concerning a sky-god with arms of lightning, of which all these films are scrambled and diluted secular adaptations. The twelfth film, in the view of both schools, must be ascribed to a different cinematic tradition.

The central point, of course, that these strictly historical hypotheses would fail even to touch upon is the presence of convention ... For (the contemporary twentieth century viewer) the recurrence of the hyperreflexive sheriff is not an enigma to be explained but, on the contrary, a necessary condition for telling a western story in the film medium as it should be told ...¹⁹

Alter wants to make the point that differences in narrative detail can and ought to be sought out and explained positively rather than negatively - as the result of the techniques of a skilful narrator. Thus it is possible to uphold the literary integrity of the text. - To read the Bible 'literarily' is to go beyond the 'excavative' historical-critical way of 'reading'.

The second deficient way of reading the Bible 'other than literarily' that I want to consider can conveniently be labelled the 'proof-texting' method - the use of the Bible as an arsenal in theological warfare. Systematic theologians are the 'readers' who advocate this approach. This is not to suggest that pitched confessional battles do not need to be fought - they do. Doctrines and propositional, theological dogmas and tenets are the legitimate result of a painstaking, analytic x-raying of the body of Scripture; and theological dogmatising, if it has a strong but supple backbone, must be supported. But the Bible is more than an x-rayed skeleton of analytically distilled propositions about God. This method of 'reading', if taken to a scholastic extreme, can turn the Bible into a *Summa Theologica* - a book of dogmatic propositions, with certain other interesting features. As with the historical-critical method, the text as an artful composition tends to vanish from sight. For example, the proof-texting reader may, in his pedagogic zeal, reduce the Book of Proverbs to a compendium of inspired but random sayings and axiomatic statements, 'sanctified common-sense' sentences, that he will find especially useful when exhorting the young to live morally upright lives - particularly if he can quote them, in Sunday-school or wherever, as devastating 'one-liners' in rapid, quick-fire succession! The Book thus becomes on this reading no more than a set of miscellaneous maxims strung together like beads on a string, rather than a cleverly realised work of art, with occasional, highly colourful satirical vignettes, regularly recurring refrains and almost allegorical Vice and Virtue figures who return to the stage from chapter to chapter, such as Wisdom herself, the Fool and the Sluggard. In his fascinating book, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia, 1970), Brevard Childs carries out a very sensitive literary reading of Proverbs 7 - 'Proverbs Chapter 7, and a Biblical Approach to Sex'.²⁰ He calls the description of the prostitute's successful

seduction of the unsuspecting youth a 'literary masterpiece', one with expertly controlled shifts in 'narrative tempo'. He points out that some of the vocabulary used to describe the prostitute is also employed by the writer to delineate the actions of 'Lady Wisdom'. The writer's aim has been to highlight dramatically the 'struggle between the way of wisdom and the way of folly.'²¹ The exquisitely handled montage of 7:6-23, which includes the 'loose' woman's direct-speech appeal, may therefore require a different kind of literary response from the sensitive reader than the one the writer sought when he used a preaching mode in an earlier chapter,

Drink water from your own cistern
flowing water from your own well.
Should your springs be scattered abroad,
streams of water in the streets?
(Proverbs 5:15-16)

but the two types of writing clearly support and set each other off most effectively, if the book is read as a unit.

Those who read the Bible in what F W Farrar called the 'unnatural glare of theological hatred',²² will not be particularly able or willing to respond to the Bible literarily, since their desire is for swift, trouble-free readings productive of polemical sermon headings and partisan, sectarian argumentation. Writing in 1661, the famous scientist Robert Boyle bitterly censured some of the ecclesiastical controversialists of his day. With their 'heated spirits', they seemed to prefer to have the texts of Scripture,

'loose stones, which they may more easily throw at their Adversaries, then Built up into a Structure wherein they must lose that convenience (it being difficult to pluck stones out of a building)'²³

Throughout his very well-written essay, Boyle defends the literary style and the literary appreciation of the Bible. To convey his total commitment to these ideals rhetorically, he uses a number of striking word pictures. I conclude this section by quoting two of his most helpful passages with their images. These quotations serve to propel me to my (more positive) section III:

Although many other books are comparable to Cloath, in which by a small pattern we may safely judge of the Whole piece; Yet the Bible is like a fair suit of Arras, of which though a shread may assure you of the finenesse of the Colours, and Richnesse of the stuff, yet the Hangings never appear to their true Advantage, but when they are display'd to their full Dimension, and seen together.

(Some Considerations, p.72)

And I use the Scripture, not as an Arsenal, to be resorted to onely for Arms and Weapons to defend this Party, or defeat its Enemies; but as a

Matchlesse Temple, where I delight to be, to contemplate the Beauty, the Symmetry, and the Magnificence of the Structure, and to Encrease my Awe, and Excite my Devotion to the Deity there Preached and ador'd.

(Some Considerations, p.78)

3 SOME (BRIEF) BIBLICAL JUSTIFICATIONS FOR READING THE BIBLE LITERARILY

Having considered some of the dangers involved with only reading the Bible literarily and two 'reading methods' which fall short of a truly literary response to it, I now want to try and provide some brief Biblical-theological justifications for reading the Bible literarily. If the Bible is not to be thought of as being made up of a series of badly-stitched-together patchwork quilts, nor (to bring Boyle's 'loose stones' comparison up to date) as a belt with bullet-like proof-texts to be shot at one's theological opponents, just how is it to be described? As a 'matchless Temple' (Boyle)? As a 'mass of strange delights' (Herbert)?

(i) The incarnational nature of Biblical religion

Reformation apologists for the Bible and their modern successors regularly use an analogy with the nature of Christ himself to defend their view of the nature of the Bible. Just as the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, so too, did the Word become script to be read by us. God has revealed himself to man in time, and his revelations have taken definite forms. Just as Jesus' life as a historical person was assessed by those who knew him and can still be assessed, so also can the Bible's outward form be studied. Like Christ, the Bible is fully divine and fully human.

Balchin is stating an obvious home truth when he writes that 'if we are to understand it properly we must come to terms with both these aspects.'²⁴ John Calvin gave memorable expression to his awed conviction that God's Word had in effect made itself of no reputation - that being 'found in human form' it had undergone a kind of kenosis; he states that 'the sublime mysteries of the kingdom of heaven (were) communicated for the most part, in a humble and contemptible style.'²⁵ This does not mean that he was unappreciative of the literary qualities of many of the Biblical books. He is prepared to grant, for instance,

that the diction of some of the Prophets is neat and elegant, and even splendid; so that they are not inferior in eloquence to the heathen writers. And by such examples the Holy Spirit hath been pleased to show, that He was not deficient in eloquence, though elsewhere He hath used a rude and homely style.²⁶

In Calvin's estimation, God was accommodating himself to human capacities, just as he had done in Christ, so as to 'reconcile to himself all things' (Colossians 1:20).

(ii) The progressive nature of Biblical revelation

It ought constantly to amaze the Christian that the Bible itself claims to be the book where he can hear God talking about what he has actually done and will do in the world. With its cosmic yet historical sweep and with its teleological sense of its own ending, the Bible ought always to move its Christian reader to agree reverently with Paul that, 'these things ... were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come' (1 Corinthians 10:11).

Since God chose to speak 'in many and various ways' (Hebrews 1:1), we are to expect the existence of different literary genres²⁷ which are clearly time-bound and obviously rooted in their own soils. Moses could not have written a gospel. Paul would not have dreamt of composing an acrostic psalm. The Prophet Ezekiel could not have written an epistle full of exhortative and admonitory ethical injunctions. To some extent, then, the kinds of meanings we are to elicit from any given book will be determined by its form. While discussing the genre gospel, Frank Kermode quotes a helpful (if too overtly Marxist) comment on the matter by Frederic Jameson:

The historical moment blocks off a certain number of formal possibilities which had been available in former situations, all the while opening up determinate new ones.²⁸

To repeat - due to the fact that Biblical revelation is progressive we must therefore respect the literary types represented in the canon. Reading speeds and textual strategies will naturally have to vary from book to book - and from genre to genre. Job needs to be read more slowly than Jude - a long dramatic poem demands a different kind of engagement from a short letter. The reader would be best advised to 'burn' his way through Ecclesiastes much as Keats did through *King Lear*, so as to experience the full force of the Preacher's cynicism, before allowing himself to profit from his concluding statement of a robust faith.

(iii) The dynamic tension between Divine sovereignty and human responsibility

Because God respects human freedom, his sovereign, Divine inspiration of the Bible was not mechanical. The Bible

did not drop from heaven on golden plates, nor was it dictated in some sort of heavenly typing-pool. Biblical inspiration means that God took up and involved the full humanity of the Bible authors as well as giving us a great deal more.²⁹

The human skill and creativity of the Biblical writers is therefore to be admired and gratefully celebrated. Whoever wrote Psalm 104, with its profusion of references to God's creatures - from wild goats to the Leviathan - was a brilliant poet. John on Patmos, writing his Apocalypse, had by any standards, a marvellous sense of how to create dramatic suspense. What is comparable to his brilliant piece of heavenly stagecraft at that most dramatic of moments in chapter 5, when his narrator weeps because it seems that no-one is worthy to open the scroll, before one of the elders says to him

'Weep not; the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.'

And between the throne and the four living creatures, and among the elders, I saw a lamb standing, as though it had been slain. (Revelation 5:5-6)

I return to both Psalm 104 and Revelation in Section IV below. To repeat Robert Alter's words, our admiration for the Biblical writers and their art should motivate us to train ourselves to be more alive to the 'shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units and much else.'³⁰

4 RECOVERING OUR RENAISSANCE AND REFORMATION LITERARY-CRITICAL HERITAGE

As I promised in my Introduction, I want to conclude this essay by suggesting that a great cloud of Renaissance and Reformation witnesses surrounds today's Christian student of literature as he puzzles over how to read his Bible literarily.

Modern writers of standard Old Testament Introductions frequently display what can only be called a chronological snobbery towards the Continental Reformers and their English counterparts on this very issue of their evaluation of the Bible as a book that required rigorous philological and imaginative analysis. Otto Kaiser therefore sees the Renaissance and Reformation 'philological period' as one in which, sad to say, 'intensified orthodoxy ... could not be favourable to critical work.'³¹ Having noted that Jerome had long ago dared to compare David, the author of many of the Psalms, to such secular poets as Pindar, Alcaeus, Horace and Catullus, Robert Pfeiffer continues,

From Jerome we must come down to the Romantic Awakening before discovering a truly literary appreciation of Hebrew poetry. Only then was it discovered that the writings of the Old Testament are the remnants of a national literature and that the poems contained therein were to read as such.³²

Brevard Childs, whose analysis of Proverbs 7 I have already quoted, is one of only a limited number of Alttestamentler who seem to want to enter into serious dialogue with so-called 'pre-critical' interpreters and commentators from the Reformation period. In his preface to this commentary on Exodus, Childs

remarks that the widespread use of the term 'pre-critical' is both 'naive and arrogant.'³³ Throughout the commentary, Childs makes good use of all kinds of insights to be found in books by Reformation commentators - names like Calvin, Clericus, Grotius, a Lapide, Rivetus and Junius keep appearing. In his treatment of Exodus 15, one of the Songs of Moses, Childs accordingly points out that a certain modern scholarly argument in favour of a 2'2' metre had been anticipated in the Seventeenth-century.³⁴ In his own massive and controversial *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979), Childs often praises the Humanist Sixteenth-century, which saw 'new life infused into the study of the Old Testament.'³⁵ As Childs proceeds through the Old Testament, he is careful to include a detailed bibliography for the history of the exegesis and the literary appreciation of each book in turn. Those in Biblical studies together with Renaissance literary schools³⁶ do therefore seem to be beginning to grasp the essential point that reading the Bible literarily is not an activity that the modern reader has invented. The truth is that he stands as a dwarf on the shoulders of Giants.

As well as displaying an instinctive alertness to the poetic text of Scripture, the Continental Reformers made full use of their humanist literary trainings when undertaking their work of Biblical commentary. In addition, they often produced poetic Biblical Paraphrases of some merit and sophistication. Philip Melanchthon, besides being an educational reformer, published both an exegetical prose commentary on the Book of Proverbs and a verse Paraphrase - this latter being his *Proverbia Salamonis iuxta Hebraicam veritatem* (Nurenburg, 1534). Ulrich Zwingli's recent biographer G R Potter writes that

Zwingli had, what Erasmus lacked, an appreciation of poetry, which enabled him to apply his knowledge of Pindar to an appreciation of the Psalms.³⁷

Many Reformation comments on particular Biblical literary forms and books antedate and even uncannily anticipate equivalent modern pronouncements. The following comparisons are offered by way of further countering the chronological snobbery I alluded to earlier. In his famous book *Mimesis*³⁸ Erich Auerbach introduced his notion of Biblical narrative as a deliberately spare text 'fraught with background.' He analyses the story of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) in these terms, contrasting the arresting starkness of foreground with what he sees as an enormous freight of background.³⁹ But Martin Luther had repeatedly celebrated the apt terseness of Moses' style. Commenting on the fact that he did not use a single word to describe the sorrow of Adam and Eve in the account of Cain's murder of his brother Abel, in Genesis 4, Luther wrote:

Moses did not deal with all these matters; he merely suggested them to stimulate the reader to reflect on this noteworthy story, which Moses presented in the smallest possible number of words, like a view through a lattice-work.⁴⁰

Modern commentators on the Psalms like Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel have expended a great amount of energy in trying to classify the Psalms according to 'Gattung' or type.⁴¹ As Lewalski demonstrates, Reformation interpreters proposed many a classification system according to their own lights. Archbishop Matthew Parker penned some lines setting forth eight Psalm-settings, distinguishing between them in line with the dominant emotion conveyed:

The first is meeke: devout to see,
The second sad: in majesty.
The third doth rage: and roughly brayth.
The fourth doth fawne: and flattry playth.
The fyfth delighteth: and laugheth the more,
The sixth bewayleth: it weepeth full sore,
The seventh tredeth stoute: in froward race,
The eyghte goeth milde: in modest pace.⁴²

To return to the cornucopian 104th Psalm. Artur Weiser calls it 'certainly one of the most beautiful in the Psalter', and adds, rather poetically, that, 'the relation of this nature hymn to the story of Creation in the first chapters of Genesis is like that of a coloured picture to the clear lines of a woodcut.'⁴³ If pressed, however, my preference would be for these enthusiastic words from Beza:

In this (Psalm) God's general benefits toward al mankind are rehearsed: namelie, the creation of the world, and of every part thereof for man's sake: both the which things he so amplifieth, with such an excellencie of words, and gravitie of sentences, that nothing can be thought to be spoken either more elegantlie, or more learnedlie, than this heavenlie poetical invention.⁴⁴

I move to a single example from the New Testament. In the introduction to his commentary on Revelation, Michael Wilcock announces his intention to treat it 'as a drama in eight Scenes.'⁴⁵ Jacques Ellul similarly terms the book, 'a masterful construction', one that is not 'an immobile and definitive architectural whole,' but one that is 'in itself movement.'⁴⁶ We can now compare Milton's characterisation of the book from the treatise already quoted above:

... the Apocalyps of Saint John is the majestick image of a high and stately Tragedy, shutting up and intermingling her solemn Scenes and Acts with a sevenfold Chorus of halleluja's and harping symphonies.⁴⁷

I conclude that our Renaissance and Reformation ancestors set us an example in how we students of literature ought to be responding to that 'mass of strange delights' which is our Bible. In place of a concluding, summarising palinode and in imitation of John Fowles' novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, I sign off with two endings - two pertinent quotations:

The distinction between the Bible as literature and the Bible as Scripture is largely artificial. The Church can properly hear its Bible as Scripture only when it reads it as literature.

D J A Clines, 1980 ⁴⁸

As the Load-stone not only Draws what the sparkling'st Jewels can not move, but draws stronglier, where Arm'd with iron than Crown'd with Silver: so the Scripture, not only is Movinger than the Glittering'st Human Styles, but hath often-times a Potenter Influence on Men in those passages that seem quite Destitute of Ornaments, than in those where Rhetorick is Conspicuous...

R Boyle, 1661 ⁴⁹

NOTES

1. From P Smith and C M Jacobs, eds., *Luther's Correspondence* (Philadelphia, 1918), Vol II, p 176.
2. See D J A Clines, 'The Old Testament as Literature and as Scripture', *Interpretation* 34, (April, 1980), pp 115-127.
3. C S Lewis, *The Literary Impact of the Authorized Version* (London, 1950), p 25.
4. C S Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London, 1958), p 3.
5. This is John Milton's generic classification of the book from his treatise, 'The Reason of Church Government', in D M Wolfe, ed., *Complete Prose Works*, Vol I, 1624-1642 (New Haven, 1953), pp 812-816.
I here follow Calvin Seerveld's 'reading' of the Song. See his *The Greatest Song: in critique of Solomon* (Palos Heights; Illinois, 1963), pp 80-83.
6. In his *Old Testament Commentary for English Readers* (London, 1884), Bishop Elliot noted that another commentator had 'aptly called the author of Psalm 104 'the Wordsworth of the ancients.'
7. This is the attitude adopted by J D Crossan in his book, *Raid on the Articulate: Comic Eschatology in Jesus and Borges* (London, 1976). Crossan also states that the Book of Jonah must be seen as a 'parabolic lampoon', and thus as a 'distant ancestor of the contemporary parabolic genre'! (p 96). R W Funk also relates Jesus' Parables to modernist and postmodernist writings in his, *Jesus as Precursor* (Missoula; Montana, 1975) (Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Supplements 2).
8. George Herbert, 'The H. Scriptures.I' in *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F E Hutchinson (Oxford, 1941), p 58.
9. From John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, ed. Rev J Pratt, (London, 1887), vol VI, p 596. Quoted in, J R Knott, Jr., *The Sword of the Spirit: Puritan Responses to the Bible* (Chicago and London, 1980), p 13.
10. See Kermode's disturbing book, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Harvard, 1979, Ch V, 'What Precisely Are The Facts?', p 101ff.
11. Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy*, pp 105,111.

12. For a short discussion of the implications of some of these sceptical presuppositions, see my own review article, 'Post- structuralism and Biblical Studies: Frank Kermode's *The Genesis of Secrecy*', in R T France and D Wenham, eds., *Gospel Perspectives III*, (Sheffield; JSCT Press, 1983).
13. J F Balchin, *Let the Bible Speak* (IVP, 1981), p 30.
14. For a readable introduction see E Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method*, (SPCK, 1975).
15. For the relevant details consult F D Kidner, *Genesis: an Introduction and Commentary* (London, 1967), (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries), Introduction, p 16ff.
16. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (London, 1982), p 15. Alter's book is an excellent literary study of some of the features of Old Testament narrative. He is suspicious of fashionable Structuralist and Poststructuralist procedures, believing fervently that 'narrativity' cannot be discussed and considered as a concept in isolation from moral and spiritual issues. In contrast to Kermode, Alter holds that Biblical narratives are an intricate inter-weaving of fiction and history.
17. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, pp 12-13.
18. Chapter 3, pp 47-62.
19. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p.48.
20. B Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, C.11, pp 184-200.
21. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, pp 186, 189.
22. F W Farrar, *The History of Interpretation* (London, 1886), p 347 - quoted by Balchin, *Let the Bible Speak*, p 19.
23. Robert Boyle, *Some Considerations Touching the Style of the Holy Scriptures* (London, 1661), p 72.
24. Balchin, *Let the Bible Speak*, p 29.
25. Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, trans., J Allen (Philadelphia, 1936), I viii i, p 93.
26. *Institutes*, trans. Allen, I viii ii, p 94.
27. For a short introduction to the history of the study of Biblical genres, see M J Buss, 'The Study of Forms' in *Old Testament Form Criticism*, ed. J H Hayes (San Antonio, 1974), pp 1-31.
28. See Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy*, pp.162-163, quoting, F Jameson, 'Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre', *New Literary History*, 7, (1975?6), pp 135-163.
29. Balchin, *Let the Bible Speak*, p 29.
30. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, pp 12,13.
31. O Kaiser, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, trans. J Sturdy, (Oxford, 1975), p 9.
32. R H Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Harvard, 1941), p 12.
33. B Childs, *Exodus: a Commentary* (London, 1974), Preface, p.x.
34. Childs, *Exodus: a Commentary*, C.X, p 242.
35. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, p 31.

36. I am greatly indebted for some of my assertions and references in this section to Barbara Lewalski's brilliant study, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton, 1979), with its crucial thesis that 'the spectacular flowering of English religious lyric poetry in the Seventeenth-century occurred in response to a new and powerful stimulus to the imagination - the pervasive Protestant emphasis upon the Bible as a book, as God's Word encapsulated in human words and in the linguistic features of a variety of texts.' (Foreword, p ix)
37. See G R Potter, *Zwingli*, (Cambridge, 1976), p 43. Zwingli published his edition of Pindar's Odes in 1526 - *Pindarus Olympia, Pythia, Nemea, Isthmia*, (Basileae, 1526). His comments on the Psalms are included in his *Annotationes* (Tiguri, 1581).
38. Trans. W.Trask (Princeton, 1953).
39. *Mimesis* Ch.I, 'Odysseus' Scar.'
40. From Luther's, *Lectures on Genesis*, 1536, repr., in the American Edition of *Luther's Works*, gen. eds. J Pelikan and H T Lehmann (Philadelphia and St Louis, 1955-), Vol.I, p 282. Quoted in, *Luther and the Old Testament*, by H Hornkamm, trans. E W and R C Gritsch, ed. V I Grutin (Philadelphia, 1969), p 37.
41. In their classic studies, *Die Psalmen* (Gottinger Handkommentar zum Alten Testament), 4th edn. (1926), and *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, Eng. tr. by D R Ap-Thomas (1962), 2 Vols.
42. Matthew Parker, *The Whole Psalter translated into English Metre* (London, 1567), sig. (VV iv), quoted in Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics*, pp 44-45.
43. A Weiser, *The Psalms: a Commentary* (London, 1962), p 666.
44. T Beza, *The Psalmes of David Truly Opened and Explained by Parapharsis*, A Gilby, trans. (London, 1581), p 243.
45. M Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened: The Message of Revelation* (Bible Speaks Today Series) (IVP, 1975), p 20.
46. J Ellul, *Apocalypse: the Book Of Revelation*, trans. G W Schreiner, (New York, 1977), pp 12-13. Ellul's suggestive (original French) title was, *L'Apocalypse: architecture en mouvement*.
47. See note 5 for details.
48. From Clines' article, 'The Old Testament as Literature and as Scripture'. Full details at note 2 above.
49. R Boyle, *Some Considerations*, p 246.

DEBATES AND PRESSURE POINTS IN MODERN CRITICAL THEORY

Roger Pooley

1. Introduction

The English Tongue being composed out of many Languages, enjoys indeed a Variety of their Beauties; but by this means it becomes also so exceedingly irregular, that no perfect Account of it can be given in Rules.

Isaac Watts: *The Art of Reading and Writing English*, 1721

Almost two hundred years later, university English was born out of a similar almost chauvinistic sense of 'Englishness', that pride in eclecticism and distrust of 'rules' (usually drawn up by some foreign academy). Now, while intuitive sensibility may not be regarded as the first patriotic virtue nowadays, those who sought to characterise the method of 'English' as a discipline fit to be ranked with Classics and Mathematics often used the idea of a trained sensibility wary of rules as its most important aspect. So F R Leavis, at the end of forty years of great influence if often marginal institutional recognition in English:

As for 'discipline', I am sure that is the right word, though the training that justifies it in the given use is a training in delicacy of perception, in supple responsiveness, in the wariness of conceptual rigidity that goes with a Blakean addiction to the concrete and particular, and in readiness to take unforeseen significances and what is so unprecedented as to be new.

(*The Living Principle* 1975 p.13)

Leavis' own history as the Geoffrey Boycott of English literary criticism points to an ambivalence in the political sense of that position; on the one hand the claim that English is the 'central' discipline for a university backed to a certain extent by large student numbers in recent years, but on the other hand the need to be an almost lost cause, preserving culture against the tides of mass culture and the Sunday paper literary establishment.

This can be seen, too, in arguments about teaching 'the canon' (Christians will note the fake religiosity of the term) as against more ephemeral, or 'minor', or unserious works. The half-submerged language of religion in criticism is a curious phenomenon. David Barrett examines another aspect of this elsewhere in the collection. It's a phenomenon in English literature itself - D H Lawrence, one of Leavis' great heroes, often annexes the language of Christianity to discuss sex, in an interesting reversal of what most commentators on the Song of Songs do. Now, literary criticism may seem an odd substitute for religion. But its appeal, and for a self-confessed elite, can be seen to originate as a reaction to the pressures on Christian belief many educated people felt from the mid-19th century. Lyell's geology, Darwin's biology, German form-criticism of the Bible,

all seemed to make belief for a thinking person difficult. But there was a strong sense (and a theory to go with it) that man was still a religious being in some sense; so, for some, literature became a kind of agnostics' faith, an arena where morality, profundity and seriousness could still find imaginative expression and exploration. Thus 'religious' needs could be met without intellectual dereliction. So, most influentially, Matthew Arnold, even though he still thought of himself as a Christian. These, we might say, are the religious roots of English studies, and may help to explain something of the suspicion which some Christian people have had about the claims of English.

Not everyone found this high seriousness, or this kind of high seriousness, congenial. Indeed, if English can be said to have an orthodoxy, it can best be described as opportunist eclecticism, a mixture of close reading (the 'Practical Criticism' inaugurated by I A Richards in the 1920s) and literary and other kinds of history, particularly the history of ideas. Its aims are to interpret and, to a lesser extent, evaluate, works of literature. Many who found the intensities of the Leavis style distasteful for political reasons nevertheless found themselves echoing his rhetoric - the socialist critic Raymond Williams certainly does in his earlier work. But not any more. Instead of the secularised nonconformity of the Leavisites versus the urbane blandness of the establishment, we have a whole new set of oppositional techniques and theories which have come to the fore in the last ten years or so. Not that these are any more popular than the Leavis' magazine *Scrutiny* was; but a student may now come to university from a school where the A/S level virtues of close reading, a little historical background and reasoned evaluation are the desiderata, only to find that all three are battlegrounds. What is at stake?

2 Structuralism and Post-structuralism

The vogue for Structuralism and its successors has spawned a number of instant guides of which this is about to be one of the most instantaneous.

Structuralism came from France. That may be one reason English academics are suspicious of it, and why those who are not often write a kind of scientific Franglais, deliberately flouting the English preference for a plain, commonsensical critical style which eschews the technical term. The central claim of structuralism is that the structure of language, properly understood, provides a master-key for every system of signs, be it narrative, myth or fashion in clothes. The influence of Structuralism derives from Levi-Strauss' work on myth. His researches were an attempt to uncover the language of myth, its unconscious system - 'myths think in men, unknown to them', he wrote. The analyses were often brilliant, and provided structuralists with the hope that they might be uncovering the secret system behind all culture. In his important criticism of the movement, *The Prison-house of Language*, Fredric Jameson described it as 'an explicit search for the categories of the mind itself'.

The linguistics which provided the basis of this code is by no means universally accepted by linguists. But it remains vastly influential. Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, based in lectures given during the First World War, makes a series of distinctions, sets of opposites, which have become the main intellectual equipment of the Structuralists. One of them involves breaking down the 'sign' (whether word, image or gesture) into 'signifier' and 'signified'. This contrasts with the old empirical view, that the sign is the signifier and the object it represents is the signified. Rather, the spoken word, for example, contains both signifier (the sound it makes) and signified (more like 'concept' than 'object'). The relationship between the two is arbitrary rather than natural, and the exposure of the arbitrary nature of this link is held to display the process of signification most clearly. Another suggestive concept in the *Course* is that language is a system of difference. 'In language there are only differences...a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences *without positive terms*.' The meaning of a sign, then, is not pre-existent; it only exists within a particular system of differences.

Again, note the exhilaration this concept produces. If this is the system underlying all culture, it doesn't seem God-given. The apparent solidity of rules and laws are dissolved. It's like coming off the gold standard; words no longer relate to a Fort Knox of immutable meaning, but become like paper money, only significant within the system of agreed 'differences'. A piece of blue paper is not *inherently* worth five pieces of green paper.

Structuralists and their successors have generally been quite gleeful about their expose of the apparently God-given in language and culture. So should a bid for the apparently banished 'Divine signified' (or 'logos', as we used to call him) be entered? Let us be careful. Roland Barthes *Mythologies* (now available as a Paladin) exposes a number of metaphysical presumptions in French bourgeois culture. His central aim is to expose the contradiction of bourgeois culture, that a class based on progress and the subjugation of nature should generate myths which attempt to erase history from the surface of events, relationships and products, and make them seem natural and eternal. One easy example was the (then) new Citroen DS, pronounced like the French for 'Goddess'. Less convincing was an analysis of Billy Graham (omitted from the English translation) which saw his appeal to Christianity as an appeal to the Cold War. Well, he doesn't sound like that any more, even if some American Christians do; but what that brings out is that Barthes has no 'real' sense of eternity to set against these pretensions, and it's difficult to see how his method might accommodate it. Instead of absolutes we have differences; eternity is seen as a cover-up for the interests of a particular class at a particular moment in history. But I don't think a Christian model of language or culture should retreat into the eighteenth century with its grammatical absolutism as a result. It's what we ought to expect of language after Babel, that it should be a pretence of eternity rather than an evidence for it. It is Jesus (not his words) that are described as the

word of God; the word of God in words is often elusive, metaphorical, that mixture of revelation and hiddenness which Pascal identifies as the mark of Christian teaching. Or, to put it more plainly, Structuralism and its successors offer a critique of metaphysics which Christians need not reject in its entirety.

The anti-metaphysical tendency - it's not precisely an argument - is not directed solely against Christianity or liberal humanism; it is a seed within Structuralism grown to be an attack on Structuralism itself. So Jacques Derrida uses the Saussure model of the sign to 'deconstruct' Saussure's theory. Philosophically, Derrida has his roots in Nietzsche, and seems to be exploring the consequences of the 'death of God' first announced by Nietzsche's madman in *The Gay Science*. He is not particularly interested in Christianity, except as a reinforcement of humanism, which he sees as perpetuating 'the metaphysics of presence' in the study of texts. The phrase means that the postulate of a single, human voice in the text (for example) as a first principle, is a claim for transcendence. That the self is an inter-subjective structure formed by various, mostly uncontrollable cultural systems - class, gender, education, etc. - is the preferred analysis. Although Derrida is not a literary critic, his assertion that 'text' and 'author' do not have independent status above and beyond the social codes that produce them has caused tremendous reverberations in the literary world. As Frank Lentricchia points out in his brilliant history of the debate in America, *After the New Criticism*, it controverts two essential props of the traditional literary criticism - first, that an individual at a higher pitch of consciousness can transcend cultural determination, and second, that the text itself has a secure status independent of our reading it. We may note that these were the assumptions of Protestant Christianity, before the Modernist religion of art, and, echoing the approach, the New Criticism came along and secularised them. When the individual reads his Bible, both are secure in their ontological status, reader and text alike. The structuralists and their successors have not sought to undermine that second approach (though they could). What they are pointing out to the Christian and the humanist alike, is that both halves of the transaction, reader and text, need God to be ontologically secure.

There used to be a catch in this kind of argument; everyone who wants to deny metaphysics has to use metaphysical argument, because there are no other terms. 'I am an atheist' is a credal statement. Derrida has a novel device for getting round this, by using the word under erasure. Here's an example: 'The sign is that ill-named ~~thing~~, the only one, that escapes the instituting question of philosophy.' You will note that it is the simple words, 'is' and 'thing', that are under erasure, because they might suggest independent status for the sign. (Compare the Old Testament naming of God as 'I am').

I have made this brief philosophical excursus because it is important to recognise that Post-structuralist criticism is more radically and explicitly anti-metaphysical, in the tradition of French rationalism and Nietzsche, than previous approaches have been.

The central critical strategy of Post-structuralism is deconstruction, and it is in deconstruction that Derrida's motto 'il n'y a pas de hors-texte' (there is nothing that is not text, there is no master-text) is put into practice. In Structuralism and Formalism (a Russian theory of the '20s & '30s which stressed the 'literariness' of literary devices) there is a tendency to ascribe to literature a virtually non-referential self-sufficiency. So Realism is recognised as a phenomenon which functions wholly within literature rather than a technique for rendering language transparent onto some unproblematic 'reality'. But in doing so both Structuralists and Formalists used a highly scientific vocabulary, a critical metalanguage (language about language), which lays claim to objective, referential status. Deconstruction recognises no such hierarchy; there is no master text, only texts traversing each other, generating further texts. What is valued is not so much 'unity', whether Aristotelian, or the single most valid interpretation, but multiplicity, an untying of the text.

To take an example; Roland Barthes' *S/Z*, a commentary on a story by Balzac, identifies three quite separate 'entries' into the text, none of which is the preferred or privileged interpretation. And he identifies five 'codes' in the story, eg the 'semic' which introduces the themes, and the 'cultural', which supplies social and other background information. He hasn't used the method since. The point is not that five is the definitive number of 'codes' in a novel, even in this one, but that literary texts are themselves multiple, yielding different readings which are never final. Indeed, such fertility is joy to the Post-structuralist reader. Free play replaces seriousness.

The Christian reader used to looking for rock to stand on might be more than a little unnerved by this, even if possessed of the kind of linguistic and intellectual virtuosity the method requires. But, not only deconstruction might argue, is that rock not a trope? Well, yes; but in making that identification the rock does not evaporate; it is substituted. Christians may want to argue against the partial, hermetic act of substitution that characterises most Post-structuralist reading, as does Valentine Cunningham:

Again and again what Modernism and its successors opt for - and in consequence of the straight rejection of Christian and/or Judaic beliefs and theology - is spurning of the dual-facing notion of language that Judaeo-Christianity helped build and has strongly propped up through the ages, and a settling lopsidedly (and in a completely or partially secularised spirit) into what is left of the mysticohermetic, Cabbalistic side of that one-time duality, the formerly more balanced Christian (and Greek) and Jewish position. The bi-focussed Logos and the multivalent Scripture are thrown out in favour only of the imploding self-centred word and text... a very specific exchanging of an old plenary sense of Scripture for a new but limitedly and limitingly partial sense of *écriture*.

('Removing That Bible', in *The Theory of Reading*,
ed. Frank Gloversmith, Harvester 1984)

Cunningham's argument is that the Christian theory of reading involves history as well as textuality. The divine Logos (=word) is expressed in history.

Cunningham's argument is extremely valuable as a Christian analysis of the way that *Finnegan's Wake* has become a kind of Post-structuralist, Modernist Bible. But I think he underestimates the extent to which strategies of deconstruction have been able to take on history. In particular, the work of Michel Foucault, while occasionally intoxicated with its own textuality, has more often emphasised that structures of reading, of discourse, are related to power structures. And indeed it might be said that while American followers of the Post-structuralist enterprise have been more intoxicated by Derrida and happily slipped his praise of multiplicity into an existent pattern of academic productivity, in England, with its stronger Marxist tradition, Foucault's analysis of the traces of history and power struggle in texts has found a readier response.

3 Marxism and the appeal to history

You don't have to be a Marxist to believe in the value of 'history'; but it is a distinctively Marxist emphasis, very often, that stresses the relations between history and literature. Many courses in universities and polytechnics which attempt this marriage do so at any rate partly in response to the Marxist sense of literature being implicated in history rather than raised to some ahistorical level of 'eternal value'; and as I've argued, Christian readers may want to share some of the scepticism here. But not all history/literature courses are Marxist - one of the earliest pleas for correlation between the study of English and History was by L C Knights, an editor of *Scrutiny*. But what kind of history? Kings and prime ministers and battles? Social history? History of ideas? The Marxist answer has generally been two-fold. The first part is that real history begins in the relations of social production prevalent at any time, and that artistic production has a relation, albeit complicated, to that:

The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

(Marx, Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859)

Christians who balk at such a determinism may rightly respond that Ephesians 1 suggests another model; but Marxism is in many respects a Christian heresy, and Matthew 6:19-21, 24 may suggest an alternative perspective. However, it is beyond my scope to offer a Christian critique of Marxism. (David Lyon's biography of Marx may be suggested as a starting-point).

From this idea springs a distinctive analysis of the process of change in society, which leads in turn to a sense of literature's response to such changes being one of its most valuable (or, depending on the response, most pernicious) functions. At its crudest, this becomes a censor's tick or cross according to the 'progressive'

nature of the text. Eastern European joke definition: 'Socialist Realism' is praise of the Party so even they understand it'. But that is no more an argument against Marxist readings of literature than the book-burning activities of the Inquisition would be against a Christian criticism. There have been subtler approaches.

One recent strand has been the nature of the writer as 'producer' in the economic sense (and since post-structuralism that has included the 'reader', too). The main source for this is Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Writer as Producer' in his book *Understanding Brecht*. Pierre Macherey *A Theory of literary production* (Paris 1966, English trans. 1978) is also influential, and chapter 4 of Terry Eagleton's *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976) is a clear introduction. The virtue of this approach is that it moves away from the idea of writing as 'superstructure' reflecting the underlying structure towards seeing it as part of 'structure' and thus work, production, enacting a relationship of power with reader, critic, publisher and so on - a more complex relationship.

The second main thrust of Marxist criticism which arises from its strong historical sense has been to analyse, or expose the ideology of a particular work. This might have two historical moments; the ideology of Shakespeare's histories in the 1590s might be compared with particular productions of them in our own day. It is an alternative to the 'eternal value' theory of great literature and one which still manages to address the fact of Shakespeare's continuing interest.

There are at least two concepts of ideology about, and they produce different critical strategies. First is that ideology is an explicit, conscious set of ideas which may belong to a person, class, or the dominant culture at a particular time. Its partiality may be characterised as 'false consciousness' from a Marxist point of view (eg. 'religion is false consciousness'). Second is that ideology is the unconscious ideas of an individual, the ideology which 'thinks him' unawares, or which are half-concealed and need to be exposed in a diagnostic faction. (The medical metaphor is particularly associated with the French thinker Louis Althusser). This is an ambition very close to that of the Structuralists and their successors, and there is a great deal of cross-over between Marxism and Post-structuralism in this area. Pierre Macherey, in the book mentioned above, argues:

We should question the work as to what it does not and cannot say, in those silences for which it has been made... The order which it professes is merely an imagined order, projected onto disorder, the fictive resolution of ideological conflicts, a resolution so precarious that it is obvious in the very letter of the text where incoherence and incompleteness burst forth.

This is not such a recondite approach as it may appear; though at times it seems like the political equivalent of looking for Freudian slips. Take for example one of the strategies of Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* - what happens

if you search poems or novels about rural order and ask where is the labour that produced such order? Is the work silent?

Now all this is tremendously interesting for the Christian critic. (I ought to come clean; I was taught as an undergraduate by Marxists, and found it far easier to develop a Christian criticism in that context than in the critical mainstream.) Both Christians and Marxists have a linear view of history, as opposed to the cyclical view popular with pagan writers from Marlowe to Joyce and Yeats. And both of them have a concern with the poor and oppressed - those who are often invisible, patronised or misleadingly idealised in literature and criticism. Even Christians who are politically conservative must recognise that. However, the real challenge of an intransigent Marxism to Christians in literary criticism is at the conflict of history and transcendence. Take a recent publisher's announcement of a new book on Shakespeare: 'cultural materialism...disallows the idea of Shakespeare as a universal genius whose work is great precisely to the extent that it transcends politics and history'. As I argued in the first section, such a claim to transcendence may reflect a falsely religious view of literature. But what if the argument transfers to a Christian author of the period such as George Herbert? Or to a claim that there is something called 'human nature' which is the same in all periods? We might caricature the difference as follows. Marxists see only the differences between periods and their picture of 'human nature'; Christians are rather too quick to evacuate God from historical change and see their task as proclaiming the unchanging. (Though see two recent books by Christian historians, David Bebbington, *Patterns in History* and Eric Ives, *God in History*, which offer more promising starting-points).

History, then, doesn't explain literature away; but the merit of recent Marxist and Post-structuralists approaches has been to show how much the activities of reading and writing are historically conditioned, and that that perception produces a richer sense of literature's importance than a vague transcendental or moral model might.

4. Feminism

Feminist criticism has taken over many insights from Marxism, Post-structuralism and the recent psychoanalytical theory of Jacques Lacan; though sometimes with an eclecticism which produces a very different effect. But just as important has been an archaeological work, rescuing from obscurity those women writers who have been excluded from the canon. This is most obviously seen in the new presses such as Virago and the Women's Press who specialise in the printing and reprinting of literature by women.

One of the great tests of a new approach to criticism is to ask of it; what does it make us see that was previously invisible? It is a test that feminist criticism passes twice; making us see aspects of canonical texts that were previously passed over, and bringing new texts to light. It is the first achievement that I

wish to concentrate on, though readers will note, what would have seemed unnecessary to say even a few years ago, that I am writing as a man, and share many a male critic's nervousness in addressing the subject at all.

The most obvious contribution feminist criticism makes is in its attention to women characters in the drama and novels. In Susan Gubar's essay 'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity' (collected in Elizabeth Abel ed. *Writing and Sexual Difference*, 1982) the Pygmalion myth about creativity is seen from a new angle:

the woman who cannot become an artist can nevertheless turn herself into an artistic object. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the novels of George Eliot, in which many female characters squander their creativity on efforts to reconstruct their own images. From Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede* (1859), who peers at her earrings and ribbons in a blotched mirror as she sits at a dressing table where the brass handles hurt her knees, to Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda* (1876), who poses as Saint Cecilia in a glass exquisitely framed in black and gold. Eliot analyzes the ways in which women's creativity has been deformed by being channelled into self-destructive narcissism.

(p.79)

Here a sensitivity to the repression of women draws out an aspect of the text which is half-hidden; and the perception is moral. The picture of a woman looking at herself in a mirror, the emblem of the vice of luxury in the Middle Ages, should excite pity rather than censure. It's one example of the way that feminism has reintroduced an unashamedly moral tone into criticism just at the moment when the morality of liberal humanism is under attack, and any moral tone tarred by association with the outmoded Arnold/Leavis approach to criticism. At the same time, we must not ignore the strain of what Annette Kolodny has called 'playful pluralism' in feminist criticism, sitting lightly on theoretical solemnity and tightness. This fits with the playfulness associates with much Post-structuralist writing, as well as the numerous strategies and theories contained in the umbrella term 'feminism'.

A mixture of playfulness and moralising in talk of creativity ought not to be too unnerving for Christians with a knowledge of Job chapter 40 (and cf. Ps.104) where the sport of the Leviathan and the wild beasts of God's creation is a serious rebuke to Job's presumption. But the feminist critique of Christianity as a patriarchal religion is less easy to deal with. At the beginning of the Susan Gubar essay cited earlier, she argues:

Our culture is steeped in such myths of male primacy in theological, artistic, and scientific creativity. Christianity, as feminist theologians have shown us is based on the power of God the Father, who creates the natural world of generation out of nothing. (p.74)

And feminism itself has many of the features of a religion, appealing to a transcendent value of femininity, properly understood (eg. as a solution to the arms race); and transforming its (converts) view of their social and personal identity, good and evil, and so on. It is not surprising that many Christians have retreated behind a barrier of Pauline proof-texts in the face of such a challenge; while others have created new shibboleths (God our Mother), (women and men), in their prayers, to accommodate the new perceptions they have gained.

Once again, it becomes clear that the Christian in literary criticism has to work out an attitude to an ideology as much as the pragmatic test, does it help me to understand the literature better? Personally, I don't think that Christian feminism is a contradiction in terms, though you will find as many feminists as Christians who will say as much.

5. Conclusion: a Christian Criticism?

It will be seen that many of the recent approaches to criticism combine a strong ideological commitment with a desire to uncover what is hidden (not least, the ideology of the work or of the supposedly commonsense critic of it). That combination, and the general habit of coming clean about presuppositions, might also provide a space for an explicitly Christian criticism, as opposed to a denunciatory analysis of modern culture followed by a burst of John 3:16 which is not quite the thing I have in mind.

Christian criticism has quite a long history; book IV of St Augustine's *Christian Doctrine* and Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* are two documents which bear re-reading and situating in current arguments. In our own century the work of T S Eliot and of C S Lewis are prominent examples of an explicitly Christian attention to literature. And the Christian authors who dominated the seventeenth century - Herbert, Milton, Bunyan, to take some of the major examples - were all concerned to work out a biblically Christian poetics (see, eg. Barbara Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth Century Religious Lyric*). It's also become clear from recent work that the Judaeo-Christian attention to the text of the Bible is the ancestor of much critical and hermeneutic work on other literature, just as much as the work of Aristotle and Horace which Sidney attempts to synthesize with Christianity. (For further discussion of Sidney, see the excellent introduction and bibliography by Geoffrey Shepherd in his edition of the *Apologie for Poetry*, and the chapter in Leland Ryken, *Triumphs of the Imagination*.) It may be true that, since the death of William Cowper, Christian interest in literature has been more prominent among liberal, High Church and Catholic Christians, but the residual philistinism in evangelical churches should not blind us to the fact that we, too, have a literary tradition.

But how might a Christian criticism present itself today? Much of my argument has been that we understand contemporary criticism best by understanding it as a struggle of ideologies across a literature which itself is full of attempts to see

and understand the world from a point of view which cannot be ideologically innocent. If the Christian understanding of God, humanity and the world has more force and coherence than the Marxist, or the feminist, or the liberal humanist, or the pagan, then it will come out in our criticism. I'm not suggesting that we be merely partisan or proselytizing, simply explicit. If the virtue of other ideologies is that they render visible what was once invisible, is not Christianity the ultimate revealed religion?

It's not inevitably seen as such. At the end of his recent collection, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, Edward Said argues 'religious discourse... serves as an agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the other-worldly.' Christianity does not necessarily induce such a supine attitude, but it's often been hijacked in order to do so. And there is a sense in which the only way to gain the world is to lose it; such a denial can be a transformation in a precisely poetic way:

Death, thou wast once an uncouth hideous thing...
But since our Saviours death did put some bloud
 Into thy face;
 Thou art grown fair and full of grace,
Much in request, much sought for as a good.

For we do now behold thee gay and glad,
 As at dooms-day;
 When souls shall wear their new array,
And all thy bones with beautie shall be clad.

(George Herbert, 'Death')

Said also has some interesting insights into the way he sees religion returning in criticism, admitting that God does not simply evaporate under pressure from secularism. He sees the new mood as the result of exhaustion and the need for consolation in the security of sacred texts and hermetic, magical ways of reading which will be safe from the exigencies of human history. I'm sure he's right; the tone of disappointment at the end of Frank Kermode's *Genesis of Secrecy*, even in its ingenuity, is both typical and tragic. Like Barthes in *Mythologies*, Said is suspicious of any attempt to insert mythology in the place of history. It would be cheap to offer an instant answer, another magic want. But Christian criticism not only gives full weight to such yearning, it also gives it direction and locates it in history. In his fascinating new book, *Towards a Christian Poetics*, Michael Edwards explores the Christian dialectic of fall and re-creation in comedy, tragedy and story. 'The specific of story', he says, 'is that it appeals to the desire for a new beginning'. And, further on:

In a biblical perspective, the world with which story engages is at one and the same time 'this so marvellous book of all the universe' (Luis de

Granada), where 'the heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handy-work' (Psalm 19:1), a place of exile and death and a labouring towards renewal. To read it correctly is to see the *grandeur* and the *misere*, and also the possibility - to decypher in it the story of a process, from world through fallen world to re-created world. (p.97)

Like us, the universe groans towards resurrection (Romans 8:19-23; and it is in that recognition that a Christian criticism may start.

WHEN DOES THE FUNERAL TAKE PLACE? A Christian Reading of Tradition and Literature

David Barratt

I TRADITION & HISTORY

The great majority of English courses at our Universities and Colleges are historically orientated. Part of the first year course I took as an undergraduate was a global course on the history of Eng. Lit. from the Anglo-Saxons in October, to wherever we got to by the following May. Having done a 6-texts-in-2-years 'A' level course, I was quite grateful for this change and survey of the field I had committed myself to for the next few years. The courses I teach now while not global, are on the whole 'period', either in a strictly temporal sense (the C17th, the C20th etc), or in a more general cultural sense (the Renaissance, the Augustans etc). I suspect that these period courses make up the majority of our undergraduate courses; the other parts being made up of practical criticism, genre studies, thematic or theoretical courses, and special papers on individual authors.

If this is so, then we need to think carefully about the presuppositions of the history. Is the history, for example, basically a series of great writers or great texts, to be admired in splendid isolation as soaring mountain peaks, with the rest of the range more or less obscured in cloud? Or is the history seen as gradual development, with causes and effects neatly packaged, facts noted, plus or minus a series of value judgements? The Marxist way (1), which often labels itself 'historicist', examines literary output as a product of various forces contemporary to it, these forces being described particularly in economic, social and political terms. Such forces are seen basically as impersonal and structural, and the interest is away from personality. It is often content to be descriptive and causal rather than evaluative.

A much more sceptical approach can be seen in the words of Bonamy Dobree:

There is no general agreement as to how, or to what end, a history of literature should be written. My object here has been to give a general view of the literary activity of the period, and to be descriptive in such a way as ... will make the reader free of the realm here treated of ... (2)

The stress here is on the 'descriptive' in terms of writers and texts. If there are sections on background, they are usually brief and again descriptive: e.g. in Dobree's own volume quoted above, only 33 pages out of a total of 697 are given to background. What I want to do in this essay is to look at the possibility of seeing *tradition* as a way of interpreting history, to look at the presuppositions involved and to see how Biblical such presuppositions are. This will help us to see, as Christian students, whether we wish to hold such a view of literary history, and how we should use it. I propose to do this partly by looking at the views of three major Christian critics - T S Eliot, C S Lewis and A E Dyson - but only after some preliminary spadework.

'Tradition' is a term we use all the time - but perhaps to such an extent that it has become vacated of meaning. Blurbs in a recent catalogue of 'avant-garde' books on literature still talk of 'setting out to read the English tradition - from Shakespeare to Eliot - as a simple discourse'; or of 'questioning the realist tradition she inherited'; or of 'writing obliquely in the post-modernist tradition'. Just how many traditions are there? Is there one English literary tradition, or many? Or perhaps, *one* tradition, like a vast river, but many channels? If so, is this river Christian in any way, or at least the major channel? or should we not label in this way?

So a lot of questions, most of which I am not aiming to discuss. But to clear the ground on which this essay is built, I will say at once that I believe it is possible to see a unitary meaning for the term, even though when applied to any one culture or its art there may be disagreements as to what exactly may be its expression. But I wish to try to keep my discussion to this unitary sense, even when applying it to English literature specifically.

The concept of tradition in literature, it seems to me, involves three elements: **process**, **content** and **form**. The process is the **learning from** previous writers and writings within the individual's own culture, the **handing over** (this is the literal meaning of 'tradition') of the writer's work to his own generation and the **handing down** of the new thing made out of the subtle interaction of the first two parts of the process with the writer's own genius. The content might be described as certain values and beliefs central to that culture (as well as certain images, themes and motifs), as modified by the writer's own ideals, experiences and insights. The form in which the content is expressed is again largely determined by the shared belief of previous writers and contemporary custom that certain forms are better suited to saying certain things than others. When a culture no longer wishes to say certain things, certain forms tend to get discarded (e.g. the pastoral), to be replaced by others (e.g. the novel). Thus I see

tradition, as Eliot and others before him, as a dynamic, complex and changing process (v. p50). Whilst historicist approaches might want to see process, content and form as products of non-artistic forces of social evolution, Christian approaches, as I hope to show, would prefer to see them either as primary functions (not necessarily with a sharp content/form division), or less satisfactorily I feel, as products of the 'spiritual health' of the culture of any age.

At this stage, we need to ask as Christian students how the Bible speaks of historical process, to what extent it sees its message as a response to social and economic forces, and to what extent it concretises the unitary concept of tradition. Without going into any sort of detail, it might be fair to say that the Bible talks very little of social forces but a good deal about tradition. Economic and political concerns are voiced, of course - for example in the laying down of the law in the Pentateuch, or when the social justice that law embodies is being fractured or distorted, as in the prophetic writings of Isaiah or Amos. But it cannot logically be argued that a work which is written in response to injustice and oppression is a **product** of those things. In fact, the sense of the writings quoted is that they stem from a revelation of God as a God of justice and righteousness, who desires to fashion his people to his nature. The Bible is frankly not interested in the human origins or production of any text, but in its revelatory nature (2 Peter 1:21).

As far as work, or 'a work' is concerned, there is no definition in terms of production or economic output (q.v. a Marxist account), but as **moral** acts of goodness reflecting God's nature. Works are seen ultimately as voluntary, since compulsion is counterproductive, being 'of the flesh' or 'of the Law' (of self-effort), and thus standing opposed to God's grace. It is this gradual revelation of God's grace which is at the core of 'Salvation history' in the Bible - an unfolding which is seen in terms of tradition: not the bad tradition of the fathers (e.g. Gal. 1:14; Col. 2:8; Mt. 15:3), but the continuous and dynamic inspiration of the Holy Spirit (e.g. Heb. 1:1-2; 11:39-12:4). The tradition of salvation history is handed down by narrative (e.g. the Passover/Exodus; the Gospels); by liturgy (the Psalms); by proclamation (the prophets); by teaching (the Epistles). The tradition of the Old Covenant lost its way and had to be radically re-interpreted by the revelation of Christ (q.v. the letters to the Romans and the Hebrews); but Christ sees himself still as fulfilling the old (3), since it was still the tradition of God's mercy and grace revealed and written down. There was thus a concretisation of tradition in terms of specific revelation, ultimately focussed in the Incarnation. Always Jesus specified, by actions and signs, by parabolic teaching, and by his own life-style, in order to transform the tradition of Israel into the good news of the Kingdom. The elements of process, content and form can be clearly seen in this. Thus, to see history as tradition is a thoroughly Biblical way, and a way, moreover, which is fully able to keep the supernatural, personal direction of God central to its thesis, rather than resort to a naturalistic and impersonal account. This view of tradition, again, is not static, but

constantly able to re-evaluate and re-interpret itself, finding new forms to say new things.

We can now return with new courage to a closer examination of the concept of tradition within English literature in particular. For any real treatment of the concept we have to turn away from the literary historians to philosophical critics - Dr Johnson, Coleridge, Arnold, T S Eliot, F R Leavis, and a growing number more recently, as the shift in literary studies turns away, perhaps, from the historico-descriptive to the theoretical and philosophical. One of the earlier pursuits of such writers was the effort to establish an English literary tradition in terms of its great writers. This necessarily involved a discussion on what makes for greatness in writing, and involved terms like 'classic', 'major' and 'minor'. At first the discussion confined itself to poetry - Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* is an early example; Arnold's *Essays in Criticism* a very influential later one. Only with F R Leavis's *The Great Tradition* does prose fiction become included. Drama seems not to have leant itself to searches for greatness - that was early resolved in terms of Shakespeare. It is interesting to see this genre difference: only poetry was held capable of containing true greatness in a literary sense (4), especially in terms of the epic and tragedy. But with the achievements of the C19th novel, the traditional view has modified itself.

One of the interesting differences between Arnold and T S Eliot (and in many ways they are very similar in approach and style (5)) is not just that Eliot wants to redefine the English poetical tradition (and therefore has to find a different combination of 'great writers' or 'classics'), but that Eliot sees a **Fall** in English literature - a clear break between a time of health and potential greatness, and a time of falling away, or imaginative disease. For this fall he coined the phrase 'dissociation of sensibility' (6). This fall, he felt, occurred about the time of the Restoration, when poets lost some central imaginative unity, and their sensations became divided between emotion and intellect. This affected religious feeling as much as anything else. He writes:

In the C18th we are oppressed by the limited range of sensibility, and especially in the scale of religious feeling. It is not that, in England at least, the poetry is not Christian. It is not even that the poets were not devout Christians: for a pattern of orthodoxy of principle, and sincere piety of feeling, you may look long before you find a poet more genuine than Samuel Johnson. Yet there are evidences of a deeper religious sensibility in the poetry of Shakespeare, whose belief and practice are a matter of conjecture. And this restriction of religious sensibility itself produced a kind of provinciality: the provinciality which indicates the disintegration of Christendom, the decay of common belief and a common culture. (7)

Eliot's aim was to restore the English poetic tradition to its integrity before this time, specifically to the Metaphysical poets and the Jacobean tragedians, with some help on the side from French symbolist poetry.

A number of critics took up this terminology from Eliot, including L C Knights and Cleanth Brooks (8). Brooks posited a 'tradition of wit' as the central tradition of English poetry, which was broken by this dissociation. He names Hobbes as a villain here; Knights names Bacon. C A Patrides (9) also posits a decisive break in a Christian tradition of English Literature, again placing it just after Milton, who he sees as the last and great exponent of a whole Christian world-view. Patrides' break is similar enough to a 'fall' idea: what is different is in the 'fall from what?'. Here we see a dichotomy creeping in to a good deal of the 'fall' talk - is it a general cultural fall from some unitary world-view; or is it a specifically artistic fall, in terms of imaginative unity?

Eliot and Brooks did not feel the fall was irremediable. In fact, Brooks suggests Eliot himself has undone the fall, and restored the tradition of wit. Others, such as C S Lewis, are far more pessimistic. His 'decisive break' is placed much later, at the beginning of the C19th (10). Duncan Williams (11) also puts it there - indeed, he sees the C18th as a high point in our literary culture. Thus we see a fall or 'decisive break' posited from some sort of literary grace or golden age, although there is some disagreement when this happened, and what exactly was involved. Inevitably, perhaps, a 'decline' concept becomes included - not so much a 'decline and fall' but a 'fall and decline' pattern. Even Arnold senses a decline, despite his admiration for the Romantic poets, but he sees the decline arrestable in terms of the development of the critical spirit.

Frank Kermode, however, attacks this dissociation view of the English literary tradition (12), although his reasons are not always quite consistent with one another. On the one hand, he sees the split as a perennial problem, as much to be found in the Medieval period as in the Renaissance, an ongoing conflict between natural and supernatural. On the other hand he sees the split theory as a result of Eliot's imagistic theory of poetry. And then again, comparing Eliot with Yeats, and citing Yeats' cycles of history hypothesis, where 1550 was the precise date for the total unification of body and soul, he posits a whole set of writers looking for a period after which everything went wrong.

For all the inconsistencies, Kermode's article is perceptive and may give us a clue as to how to think of the fall theory Biblically. Clearly, the Bible talks about a fall - but only one fall: an original one. There were periods in the history of Israel where long declines took place - after the death of Solomon, for example. The declines are seen in terms of disobedience and false worship. But they result from man's fallen nature - not any immediate defect in the culture. David is held up as an example; but his age is not seen as 'the golden age'. It seems to me that the ideal of 'the golden age' of some unfallen past is deeply embedded in us as human beings, but to pin this on some historical moment of time is theologically mistaken, except if we are positing the first two chapters of Genesis. All of our literature is bound to be fallen, at the best only seeing through a glass darkly.

However, it would seem possible biblically to talk of decline from some high point of achievement, but we must be careful not to project our own ideas or ideals on to some moment of the past and label that the point of perfection. A recent book warned me again of that danger. Arthur Wallis's book *The Radical Christian* (13) tries to find the most perfect expression of Christianity. The early church is the normal place to conduct such a search. Wallis refines further: he posits a brief moment of time before Peter's Jewish legalism creeps in to overcome the preaching of grace. The extension of this line of thought could easily be, at the hand of some future writer, to see the perfect church existing some five minutes after Pentecost, perhaps before Peter first sneezed! Not only is this quite absurd, but very unhelpful. So in our case. Clearly Elizabethan and Jacobean literature had a dynamic, an inventiveness about it, that has rarely been surpassed. But to make this an ideal for all time is to stultify the dynamic concept of tradition, and to transfer the fallenness of man in general to some specific moment of fallenness.

Charles Williams puts all this well when he writes:

A voice, crying out in song, went through the air of Eden, a voice that swept up as the eagle, and with every call renewed its youth. All music was the scattered echo of that voice; all poetry was the approach of the fallen understanding to that unfallen meaning. All things were named - all but man himself, then the sleep fell upon Adam, and in that sleep he strove to utter his name, and as he strove he was divided and woke to find humanity doubled. (14)

While literary and cultural critics are divided about a fall - tradition, there seems to be less division about decline, a 'falling away', which is most obvious, it is claimed, in today's culture, often labelled post-Christian, and in the literature it is producing. Christian and non-Christian writers seem to differ little in that feeling, although their differing understanding of certain features of the Western cultural tradition in general and the English literary tradition in particular means that they have different symptoms and explanations. Evangelical Christian writers like Francis Schaeffer, H R Rookmaaker and Os Guinness are readily available through IVP (15), and make a powerful and urgent statement about the present state of our culture. We shall look at C S Lewis's 'state of literature' comments in a moment. But non-Christians are writing as powerfully. Take, for example, this quotation:

.... to the world-city belong not a folk but a mob. Its uncomprehending hostility to all the traditions representative of the Culture (nobility, church, privileges, dynasty, conventions in art, and limits of knowledge in science), the keen and cold intelligence that confounds the wisdom of the Peasant, the new-fashioned naturalism that in relation to all matters of sex and society goes back to quite primitive instincts and conditions all these things betoken the definite closing down of the Culture and the opening up

of a quite new phase of human existence, anti-provincial, late, featureless but quite inevitable. (16)

The passionate pessimism and bleakness is striking; the sense of tradition in Western culture broken and ruined is indeed tragic. And this was written over fifty years ago. The upholding of form and hierarchy suggest the classical ideals upheld by the C18th, a sense more explicitly though more superficially expressed by Duncan Williams (17). Peter Ackroyd (18) sees modern day literature 'celebrating' the death of man, the inevitable result of the 'failure of our cultural and intellectual tradition (with its) implicit refusal to operate upon anything other than an empirical and pragmatic base'. I A Richards writes:

For centuries countless pseudo-statements - about God, about the universe, about human nature, the relations of mind to mind, about the soul, its rank and destiny ... have been believed; now they are gone, irrecoverably; and the knowledge which has killed them is not of a kind upon which an equally fine organisation of the mind can be based. (19)

This claim raises the question: to what extent is this decline tied up with a decline in Christian belief? Are we really in a post-Christian era, and is the bleakness and hopelessness expressed all part of this loss of faith? In other words, are we witnessing the funeral of a traditional Christian culture? If so, when did the body die? While I can make no substantial answers to these questions, I would like to suggest a few points for consideration:

(1) Writers of decline-theories are often somewhat vague as to the nature and state of the culture from which such a decline proceeded. We wonder sometimes to what extent they are, as Kermode claims of Eliot, projections of the writer's own ideals. Eliot sees the prelapsarian culture as typified by a unified consciousness. The explicitness of belief systems is discounted (Eliot, in fact, propounded this theory before he became a Christian at all). L C Knights (8) writes similarly, in terms of 'wholeness of living', where the imaginative-spiritual was held in equal honour with the rational-pragmatic. There is no attempt on his part to tie these categories up with any Christian tradition. Other writers do - Lewis, or Patrides, for example. These writers stress the strength and unity of the Christian world-view, where God is seen as central and active in the universe; where all authority and power stem from him; and to whom worship is actively due. Rationalism and the C18th Enlightenment, they see, replaced this view by seeing man at the centre of the Universe, and progress, rather than worship, as the desirable human attitude. Time and history were no longer seen in God's control, but in man's. But as Peter Ackroyd writes:

humanism which we take to be our inheritance and our foundation - apparently unaware of its origin in the late C17th - has turned out to be an empty strategy, without philosophical content or definitive form. (18)

While the latter has a specifically Christian focus, running parallel, say to Rookmaaker's, it is difficult to translate into literary terms of decline, unlike the former (dissociation) view. Do we say that writers like Spenser and Milton are 'greater' than Dryden and Pope because their Christian views are more 'central' or 'spiritual'? Arnold, an agnostic, tried to make such a case out (4) - so this would not seem a specifically Christian enterprise. In any case, the logical conclusion to this view would be to see writers declining in stature from this time of great spiritual purity. Clearly this is nonsense. C20th poetry for example, has been seen as regaining vitality and purpose. However, it is probably true to say that it becomes progressively more difficult to be an explicitly Christian writer, since the world of the spirit has been more and more divorced imaginatively from the physical and social world around us. But having said that, and agreeing that we can hold a cultural-historical idea of the decline of the Christian traditional world-view, to trace the results of this in English literature is difficult, if not impossible, in terms of 'greatness' or creativity. The most we can do, as I think Rookmaaker and Dyson do, is to show great artists across the 'declining' centuries witnessing to man's diminution in a world which God is left out of. There is thus the deepest irony and ambiguity when the humanist world-view tries to increase man's stature. This is theologically inevitable; but we must realise it is not inevitable in terms of a literary tradition. In fact, the ironies and tensions of this situation may produce a more creative literature than, say, the relative complacencies of the C18th.

(2) While it makes sense to see Christianity as foundational to Western culture, the reverse makes no sense. Even if the Christian tradition of that culture is in decline, that does not mean that Christianity itself is in decline. In fact, statistics would suggest the reverse: in Asia, Africa and South America it is growing rapidly. It is in decline in Eastern Europe and in Western Europe, though for different reasons. The decline in Eastern Europe is numerical only, though clearly its cultural expression is very limited. In Western Europe, while no longer a main cultural force, it is still a sub-culture and readily available. In North America, the Western culture has seen no decline in Christianity. Thus, we must ask: to what extent is the claim that we live in a 'post-Christian' era a myth, posited by an era of Western European scepticism, not only at odds with cultural realities elsewhere in the world, but also which speaks against the very nature of Christianity itself, which can survive whether a culture is consonant with it or not, since ultimately it is metacultural? Or to put the question another way: are we to believe that the decline is permanent, inevitable and catastrophic; or should we see it as a provincial aberration of European man, hacking away at the branch on which he is sitting?

(3) It could be suggested, as Kermode does, that writers, at least within the English literary tradition, have always suggested a decline of the culture - Donne's *Anniversaries*, Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, Pope's *The Dunciad*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Arnold's *Culture & Anarchy* to name but a few. Have we really been declining so long, or again, is this a perennial feeling that any artist could

have, reflecting our human fallenness, especially as it takes on cultural expression? Could this not be seen as an ongoing struggle of darkness against light; truth against falsehood? Or is this truly another 'Decline and Fall' into a new Dark Age? (20)

To help us as Christians, we must turn again to the Bible to see whether we have theological support for seeing a temporary/provincial interpretation or a final/universal one. If we oppose the view of decline and decay in man's civilisation with the evolutionary- progressive view so tenaciously held by the Victorians, we can certainly see that the Biblical teaching would support the first. The idea of human progress to some 'golden age' has no place in Christian apocalyptic or eschatology. Rather the view is of increasing turmoil, confusion and godlessness, where Christians have to hold themselves in a constant state of readiness to be 'rescued' by the appearing of Christ himself (21). The fact that many ages in the past have felt that their generation might well be the last before that return does not alter the other fact that, as far as the Bible is concerned, there will be a last generation. We are meant to anticipate it. If this then is the true pattern of history, it is hardly surprising that spiritually sensitive and thinking non- Christians will also pick this up because (a) this is how created man and his society is, and (b) salvation history to a limited degree is by general revelation. What the Bible forbids us to say is that this culture, this age is definitely the last (22). So a theory of cultural decline, a falling off of the values and achievements of a tradition, whether literary or otherwise, is quite compatible with a Biblical mode of understanding. The particular reasons for that decline must ultimately be understood in terms of man's fallenness and his refusal of God's grace. Thus, it is fully legitimate to measure the health or sickness of any culture by its spirituality. In God's mercy, there is always the hope of renewal or revival, which must exist until the moment this age actually does end. (23)

II TRADITION IN THE WORK OF THREE CHRISTIAN CRITICS

As we have already seen, T S Eliot concerned himself greatly with the concept of tradition, with the reality of a European and English literary tradition within which he and his generation could continue to write. A number of his essays and writings are crucial, especially 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', 'After Strange Gods', and 'What is a Classic?' (24). There have been a number of accounts of Eliot's views, one of the fullest being Sean Lucy's *T S Eliot and the Idea of Tradition* (25), and I feel I cannot do better than summarise some of what Lucy says.

Eliot's own description of tradition generally reads:

Tradition is not solely or even primarily the maintenance of certain dogmatic beliefs. These beliefs have come to take their living form in the course of the formation of a tradition. What I mean by tradition involves all those habitual actions, habits and customs, from the most significant

religious rites to our conventional way of greeting a stranger, which represents the blood kinship of 'the same people living in the same place'. (26)

The real keynote of Eliot's sense of tradition is its dynamic. He writes:

Tradition ... involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write with not merely his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole literature of Europe from Homer, and within it the whole literature of his own country, has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (27)

This is from a writer's point of view. For Eliot, a sense of tradition in this way will give a writer a sense of what can be done in a language, and what has been done. It will also act as a criterion for himself, and will prevent him from trying to repeat what has already been done well - i.e. it will prevent him from becoming traditional in the bad sense of imitative. In 'After Strange Gods' he tries to bring in the concept of heresy, defining it in terms of writers without a sense of tradition - he picks on Hardy and Lawrence particularly. The attempt brought rather bizarre, even if interesting, judgements, and was not repeated.

The dynamic of tradition implies both growth and change. Even a literary revolt can be traditional if it acknowledges what has gone before, which is, of course, precisely what Eliot was doing in his poetry. Development is defined in terms of growth and complexity, with an increasing awareness of the possibilities and limitations of language.

The idea of dynamic also brings reconciliation to the Classical/ Romantic dichotomy. Tradition is the necessary authority and the necessary impersonality outside of an individual artist. At its most extreme he writes: 'The progress of an artist is a continued self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality' (28). This is an early, pre-Christian view. Later modification involves the idea of orthodoxy rather than impersonality. But clearly a writer has to submit himself to the tradition, from which he gains strength and, ultimately, his own ground of utterance, since for Eliot, no tradition means no audience and therefore no purpose.

The critic's job, as opposed to the creative writer's, is: 'to preserve tradition - where a good tradition exists ... to see it beyond time.' (29). That is to say he is to create the balance between past and present. The critic is both guardian and re-interpreter, since every new piece of writing modifies the tradition, and thus the reading public, every so often, needs a new orientation. This is what he believed Dryden, Johnson and Arnold did. In some ways he sees himself as poet-critic in a better position than an academic critic, since the poet-critic often has an

intuitive sense of what the present age is doing and how this is modifying the tradition (30). In any case, the critic's prime function is to discover what is permanent and enduring. In all this, he is clearly taking an anti-historicist position. As Arnold also held, an historical estimate or understanding is insufficient. A critic needs to re-evaluate according to the needs of the present.

Lastly, he sees a European cultural unity which, as Arnold, he sees as an amalgamation of the Graeco-Roman and the Christian (Arnold's Hellenism and Hebraism). Eliot tends to elevate the classical over the Christian, following Arnold again, who looked forward to the end of Christian dogma and its replacement by the spirit of poetry, a programme which F R Leavis sought to sustain.

We must ask, in all this, just what is specifically Christian, and to what extent the literary tradition of English Literature is seen as a Christian one. Lucy writes:

Eliot's concept of a literary tradition is only one aspect of the whole system of his thought. Literary tradition is for him the unified vision of literature: a unity which at once takes its meaning from each true work of literature within it, and gives the fullest significance to each of these works. (31)

I find that the fullest expression of this unity is not in his critical writings at all, but in 'The Four Quartets'. Here, tradition as the presentness of the past, and the timelessness of the moment of truth are expressed in a language which is consciously selecting 'traditional' language of theology and mysticism, through allusion and imagery, to re-interpret that tradition to speak to the present. That the imagery is spiritual is beyond doubt; that it is intuitively Christian likewise. The submission to tradition is for Eliot ultimately the submission of the spirit to God. And this must be true for us, as Christian students of that tradition. But we need to make that submission, not as an intellectual gesture, but as an act of self-effacement. How we translate the insights gained by doing this into words was Eliot's struggle, and will necessarily be ours.

This, of course, is to talk outside the normal critical terminology of critical discussion, and it might be held that while Eliot points ways forward, there is in him still too much tentativeness to act either as apologetic or as guidance for us. Certainly, his critical work was constantly modifying its position, and it could be disconcerting to realise his own conversion to Christianity did not seem to lead him to revise explicitly or drastically his views on tradition. Rather, it was his own strong feeling for tradition that led him towards Christianity, and that Christianity which he saw as central to the English literary tradition: Anglo-Catholicism. We may well have started from different positions ourselves - for instance, in nonconformity or from a less right-wing stance. In that case we will not perhaps be tempted to idealise tradition in the way Lucy claims Eliot does (32). Nevertheless, Eliot must be allowed to speak to us deeply about

tradition if we are not to find ourselves robbed of our heritage by false notions of traditionalism or conservatism.

Perhaps where Eliot does fail more obviously is in his giving away some of the centrality of the European tradition to the classicism of Greek and Rome. Lucy asks some pertinent questions here:

The question is whether one believes that the cultural tradition of Europe, and hence of each of the nations of Europe, is entirely dependent on the persistence of the Christian faith; or whether one believes that, if Christianity became extinct in Europe, European culture could continue its natural tradition If you believe that culture and religion are inseparable, if you believe literature is an integral part of culture, if you believe that a culture based in a religion cannot survive without that religion - and Eliot believes all these things - then you must believe that European ... literary tradition cannot persist without Christianity. (33)

In other words, he accuses Eliot of fudging the issue, and choosing Arnold's humanism rather than an explicit Christian position. In mitigation Lucy suggests that perhaps Eliot, as a good Christian, saw no danger of Christianity losing its convicting force. But only to those who hear, and how shall they hear....?

A second point of some failure for the Christian is in his treatment of tradition as authority. Chalker writes:

The concept of maturity, like this of tradition and impersonality, provides a framework of objective authority which, while it remains valid for many stages of the argument, is in the last resort illusory. (34)

This is both because Eliot sees the critical need for re-evaluations, i.e. any critical judgement is bound to be relative; and because concepts such as maturity are ultimately subjective. Eliot can produce no external criteria. The Christian would expect to find a critical notion of authority bound up with a theological one, in terms of Biblical revelation, even if that is extended, Catholic-wise, to the Church fathers. Eliot gives no such anchoring.

But there is a more difficult dilemma contained in these last two criticisms of Eliot. How explicit should a Christian critic be in matching his present (non-Christian) generation against a Christian tradition of literature? Clearly, before Eliot became a Christian, there was no problem - so his 'fall' concept of the dissociation of sensibility can be made in purely humanistic terms. But as we have mentioned, the attempt to be explicitly Christian in 'After Strange Gods' produced some rather bizarre judgements. Samuel Hynes addresses himself to this crucial question in his essay 'Trials of a Christian Critic'. He writes:

Modern literature is a chaos, and could not be otherwise, given the chaotic state of faith in the world. Literary examples are therefore to be seen only

as symptoms of sickness for which the cure cannot be literary: nothing could make Lawrence and Hardy acceptable to Eliot except their conversion to the Church. And even then that would not do for them as writers what their spiritual environment had failed to do. The kind of art that Eliot wanted would only come as a consequence of a general restoration of orthodoxy; it could certainly not be a cause of that restoration. And so what we have in 'After Strange Gods' is Christian criticism of a kind, but in the voice of the critic-as-prophet, railing against the false gods of men.

Hynes clearly sees this as mistaken. He goes on to say:

Eliot would have succeeded as a Christian critic if he had made his Christianity invisible; but he made it visible, and so made his religion seem a way of being reactionary, ungenerous and cold. (35)

Eliot no doubt saw this for himself and turned away from such visibility - but then, as Lucy and Chalker have criticised him, has he compromised too much? The tracing of our present chaotic world through literature can be done in a perfectly explicit and visible way, as Ruth Etchells has done (36), but Miss Etchells is making no great claims for or challenges to the tradition. She is content to show that our present literature, in witnessing to the absence of God, indirectly posits his presence: i.e. her aim is apologetic, not prophetic. The prophetic stance for the critic of literature is surely not to be dishonoured, however: there is a noble lineage - Ruskin, Arnold, Richards, Leavis, Raymond Williams, to name but a few - although the way is also littered with false prophets and band-waggoners, whether conservative or Marxist. But the presentation of one's faith can so easily be distorted by the prophet, and it is not entirely possible to clear Eliot of this charge.

Let us now turn to C S Lewis and A E Dyson, to see how they handle this dilemma. I want to deal very much more briefly with these two writers, however, since both write far less on the concept of tradition, and we have already raised in some detail some of the issues involved. C S Lewis is without doubt a major Christian apologist, but most of the apologetics is done in writing which is theological not literary, in content. We need not concern ourselves with this here. Much of his literary writing was of a period nature, since he was a leading scholar of Medieval literature. But in his *Selected Essays* we do have a series of literary essays, the first one of which particularly sets out his views as a Christian on tradition and the philosophy of literary history. This essay is variously known as 'De Descriptione Temporum' and 'The Last of the Dinosaurs', being in fact his inaugural lecture as Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge. (37)

Lewis claims he is a 'desperate sceptic' of any attempt to find clear patterns in literary history, preferring to see 'life flowing ceaselessly'. Interestingly, however, his own volume in the Oxford History of English Literature (38), and

especially its opening chapter (much longer than Dobree's, in fact) is a marvellous example of charting a clear course through a complex age, finding far more patterns than writers who set out looking for them. The essay in question finally acknowledges the need for historical division, although, as in the Oxford History, he rejects the traditional one between Medieval and Renaissance. He finds his divisions in four places in European culture:

- (i) Between 'Antiquity' (i.e. Graeco-Roman civilisation) and the Dark Ages. Yet he sees the loss of classical learning far more pronounced in the C20th. We are the new Dark Ages in classical terms - a view more extreme and pessimistic than Eliot's.
- (ii) between the Dark and the Middle Ages (c. early C12th.)
- (iii) at the end of the C17th - where others, including Eliot, placed their 'fall', although Lewis rejects Eliot's concept of dissociation.
- (iv) the most important division for Lewis: the beginning of the C19th. He calls the culture before this division the 'Old Western Culture', which is dissociated politically, artistically, religiously and mechanistically from the 'New Western Culture'. He clearly sees the new culture as vastly inferior, including its literary culture. His essay on Donne indicates what he sees as the many false tastes in our literary criticism. But basically he sees loss - of Christian faith (he parallels the C20th de-Christianising of Europe with its C5th Christianising) being part, though a crucial part, of a total loss. For him, the biggest factor in the loss of faith is the loss of worship rather than of dogma.

Challenging as this is, I think ultimately Lewis's views fail to be satisfactory from a Christian and literary point of view. Firstly, they posit the 'fall' idea, which, as we have seen, is Biblically suspect. Secondly, they represent almost blind reaction which fails to see anything good in modern literature. This may be the medievalist taking over. But it did mean, for example, that Lewis was totally unable to appreciate Eliot's poetic achievements, even though their own Christian experience and views were so similar in many ways. And thirdly, it does give Lewis's Christianity what Hynes complains of in Eliot: a 'reactionary' and 'ungenerous' even if not 'cold' note. We see Lewis as the lone, embattled defender of a faith now irretrievably lost. Interestingly, this is the same criticism Hynes makes (unfairly, I think) of Eliot:

That is part of the temptation, to be persuaded that you are the only champion of your cause. Another part - so seductive to the intellectual - is the conviction that though your cause be just, it can never win. (39)

Lewis does, perhaps, tie Christianity too closely with a particular epoch of our literary tradition, and makes the (claimed) discontinuity of the one become involved in the discontinuity of the other. We must question this

oversimplification - an oversimplification that unfortunately undermines much of Lewis's methodology, both literary and apologetic.

Before we leave Lewis, we do need to consider one other question which he himself raises indirectly in his *Preface to Paradise Lost*: in what way will a Christian critic be a better critic than a non-Christian one? Lewis saw himself defending Milton, and at times the defence is clearly that of a fellow-Christian. I think we had better restrict the case, as Dyson does, to Christian writers. Can we expect Christian critics to defend and appreciate the Christian tradition and writers in it better than non-Christian critics? With Lewis, the answer is not at all clear. His methodology tends to turn us away from the text towards either the background or the intentions. His thrust, unlike Eliot's, is away from verbal texture, to the 'truth' behind it - which, here, is an explicit Christian truth. But this falls into the intentionalist fallacy - of saying a writer achieves what he intends. Non-Christian critics can surely judge as to what is achieved, even if they cannot respond sympathetically to the ideas expressed. Or can they? In reading a Marxist like Christopher Hill on *Samson Agonistes* (40), one sees no mention of the central concept of 'grace'. Such a concept is, of course, quite foreign to Marxist dogma. Here a Christian critic would act as a corrective, at least, and witness to the centrality of this idea in all of Milton's poetry. But we must beware of the fallacy of saying that just because a writer intends to be Christian, either he succeeds, or we should feel duty bound to defend him. Notwithstanding this, I feel (subjectively?) that some of the best and most positive recent criticisms on Milton have shared, to some extent at least, his Christian presuppositions - but unlike Lewis, they have done this through careful engagement with the text. (41)

A good example of this is A E Dyson's essay on *Comus* in his *Between Two Worlds* (42). Describing himself as a Christian Platonist, he is clearly fully in sympathy with Milton's own platonism in the poem, and certainly his insights seem truer to the text than non-Christians like Tillyard or Woodhouse. In fact, Dyson claims for the poem the possibility of 'immutable truths', which it is clearly the task of a critic to reveal and set forth. Dyson's method here borders on the didactic, but remains within the expository and evaluative. But, as we have seen with Arnold or Leavis, those borders are fairly wide. The only comment I would expect a Christian critic to make that Dyson doesn't is the serious implication of moving from 'charity' to 'chastity'. Dyson's Platonism sees this as inevitable. I would want to protest that in fact it is a moving away from grace to law.

With Eliot, Dyson agrees in his prologue that great works modify one another. If anything, he is more anti-historicist than Eliot, seeing the artefact standing ultimately outside time in its own world, which also stands outside the artist's own world. His Platonism posits a sort of timeless present for the work of art. Tradition as history in a flow of time is therefore de-emphasised, though tradition as a series of great writers or great works of art is not. This shift does enable him to deal much more positively with the present than many of the 'fall

and decline' critics, since the impulse to create is always positive for him - man in God's image. Thus he writes:

...hopelessness cannot, after all, be affirmed in a work of art ...to experience art is necessary as a human being, responding to triumphant creativity, resilience, communication from a fellow mind. Our response to art must be creatively human, and so - this point I shall return to - in itself is evidence of one, most important aspect of the nature of man. (43)

His Christian witness comes in generally in the sense that:

...only a Platonic or Christian universe can give the imagination a fitting home (44)

and specifically in that the English literary tradition comprises a very great number of explicitly Christian writers, and we need to witness to the truths of their faith in its artistic expression (45). But any examination of any great literary text will witness, even if negatively. Thus his *Between Two Worlds* is basically an examination of texts from *Comus* to Kafka's *The Trial*, which he sees as landmarks of the decline of sanity founded on the older Christian tradition which acknowledges man's fallenness and guilt. Each text shows progressive frustration and madness, with *The Trial* as the final extreme. There is thus a coherent reading of literary tradition as moving away from a Christian faith, and the consequence of this - but the value of the art is not diminished, but is fully respected.

Inevitably, perhaps, Dyson is not always consistent. At times we have polemic outbursts against Romanticism (akin to Eliot, but against Arnold or even Lewis). Thus:

What has been rejected, along with the charge of guilt, is the whole Jewish and Christian awareness that man is everywhere confronted with powers greater than himself.... Romanticism has indeed been the experimental discovery on a grand scale of the old truth, that if a man tries to live as a god, making himself the measure of good and evil, he plunges into the prison-house traditionally known as hell. (46)

In the context of a discussion of *The Trial*, this is just defensible. But it does introduce, not just a Biblically acceptable decline idea, but suggests 'fall' language, pinned to a certain period of history - and there is more than a sneaky suspicion that the co-editor of 'The Black Papers' is just round the corner, as 'reactionary, ungenerous and cold' as our other two friends.

On the whole, though, I see Dyson's attempt to work critically within a concept of tradition from a Christian standpoint more cohesive than Eliot's, though not as wide-ranging. I am disappointed, however, by his failure to be a little more explicitly theological, and to tie in the texts studied into a Biblical pattern rather

than a polemic outburst. But there is a way forward here, even if we happen to be no more Platonists than Anglo-Catholics.

III. CONCLUSIONS

There are many areas which a limited article such as this is unable to explore. For example, Eliot's remarks pertain specifically to poetry, Dyson's to both poetry and the novel. Does the genre matter? A recent theorist puts the tradition-genre nexus like this:

The repertoire of a literary text does not consist solely of social and cultural norms; it also incorporates elements, and indeed, whole traditions of past literature that are mixed together with these norms. It may even be said that the props of this mixture form the basis of the difference between literary genres... (47).

Is the relatively newer novel genre less open to spiritual or supernatural categories, and therefore, of itself less easy to integrate into a more (poetic) Christian tradition? Or would this be because of its origins in the pragmatic and common-sense world of the C18th? Has the incorporation of the romance into the novel, and the recent growth of fantasy especially in Children's Literature, made it more possible to integrate now? Or is the Christian moralism of, say, *Mansfield Park* or *Jane Eyre* as far as Christian expression in the novel can go?

Another omission in our discussion concerns the 'content' of a literary tradition. Perhaps this is a good thing. When F R Leavis tried to define the content of the English novel tradition, he immediately excluded about 75% of novels written in the language (48). Eliot suggested that we define tradition more in terms of linguistic possibilities and maturities (49). But if we do move away from content, we also move away from a Christian concept of tradition, which at some level is bound to be dogmatic, even if the loss of Christianity could also be defined in terms of loss of worship (Eliot) or loss of a sense of the numinous (Dyson). As we said at the beginning, tradition does need content. We just have not had space or time to discuss at what level description of this content is needed, and what sort.

These are all questions we should continue to think about. But for now I would suggest, as I stated at the beginning, that we must see tradition as dynamic, as existing in the present - whatever the difficulties of this - and as witnessing to us now of the presence of God. In terms of a specific tradition of literature, that witness also comes couched in terms of man's fallenness, of efforts to run his own fictive world, yet unavoidably remembering some sort of state of perfection. We cannot see this perfection in terms of a simple 'fall' within human history so much as in the very sense that a fall and decline has taken place, somewhere, sometime - but ultimately outside history as chronology, but within history as tradition. Thus while we may be attracted to historicist approaches, we should

never allow them to cut us off from a work's presentness. And as Dyson points out (45) we should see a Christian tradition also as heritage, our birthright as Christian readers - a faith once delivered to our fathers. Satan would have us to be like Esau, giving away this birthright for a mess of pottage (be it some fashionable literary theory or some trendy lecturer). But that traditional faith does need re-reading in the light of the present, as Eliot claims and Dyson does. A defensive, all-is-lost attitude, such as Lewis is tempted to, will consign us to obscurantism.

Satan would also isolate us in the present, hem us in with the contradiction that present-day values and beliefs, in literature or elsewhere, are both relative and absolute. We should, as Lewis urges us, escape from 'temporal provincialism', not into the pastness of the past, but into its timelessness, as it witnesses to enduring truths and values, to perennial images and forms, to the word itself. This, after all, in the mystery of our faith: the Word made flesh and dwelt among us - in history - yet is eternal, before time and beyond it; and yet again he comes to us now in time and reveals himself anew. Does not all great literature reflect the nature of its source? And thus does not tradition become dynamically an artistic and spiritual stratum of that revelation which can become exposed again and anew to us? And thus lead us on to maturity as we perceive, respond to and understand him who is the eternal Word.

NOTES

1. For an account of Marxist 'historicism', see Raymond Williams: *Marxism and Literature* (O U P 1977) or Peter Widdowson (ed): *Re-reading English* (Part II) (Methuen 1982). As examples of such criticism, see David Craig *The Real Foundations: Literature and Social Change* (Chatto & Windus 1973) or Raymond Southall: *Literature and the Rise of Capitalism* (Lawrence & Wishart 1973). Marxist approaches can also have a sense of tradition, but it tends to be anchored in the concept of the gradual evolution of the proletariat.
2. Bonamy Dobree: *English Literature in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Vol VII of the Oxford History of English Literature, 1959), preface.
3. e.g. Matt 5:17. Matthew's gospel is full of fulfilments, even though some are used basically as proof texts.
4. Matthew Arnold: 'The Study of Poetry' (*Essays in Criticism* 2nd Series). This has always been the tradition, however - see Sidney's "Apologie for Poesie".
5. The similarity of Arnold and Eliot has been frequently noted, e.g. Vincent Buckley: *Poetry and Morality* (Chatto & Windus) - a study of Arnold, Eliot and F R Leavis as moral critics; or C K Stead: 'Arnold and the English Poetic Tradition' (collected in *The Literary Criticism of T S Eliot* - David Newton de Molina (ed.) (Athlone Press 1977)). Compare particularly Arnold's 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (*Essays in Criticism* 1st Series) with Eliot's 'The Function of Criticism' (*Selected Essays*).
6. The phrase is used in his essay on 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921).

7. T S Eliot: *What is a Classic?* (Faber 1945) p.18.
8. 'Bacon and the Seventeenth Century Dissociation of Sensibility' (*Explorations*, Chatto & Windus). For similar views see Basil Wile: *The Seventeenth Century Background* (Penguin), or Cleanth Brooks: *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (Oxford/Galaxy 1939 rev. 1965).
9. C A Patrides: *The Grand Design of God* (RKP 1972).
10. 'De Descriptione Temporum' (*Selected Literary Essays* CUP 1969) p.1.
11. Duncan Williams: *Trousered Apes* (Churchill Press 1973).
12. Frank Kermode: 'Dissociation of Sensibility' (*Kenyon Review* 19 (1957)) pp. 169-94.
13. Arthur Wallis: *The Radical Christian* (Kingsway 1981).
14. Charles Williams: *The Place of the Lion* (Faber 1931) p.191.
15. For example:
Francis Schaeffer: *Escape from Reason* (1968)
H R Rookmaaker: *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (1970)
Os Guinness: *The Dust of Death* (1973)
16. Oswald Spengler: *The Decline of the West* (trans. C F Atkinson Alfred Knopf 1926)
17. *Trousered Apes* op.cit. This, like other such books, is seriously flawed. It attacks egalitarianism and the loss of a sense of excellence; extreme Romanticism leading to violence and the merely instinctual; and the rejection of religious beliefs and moral absolutes, leading to blankness and despair. So far, so good, but his exploration of literature produced is superficial in the extreme. In the end literature becomes reduced to the level of propaganda. It is an interesting example of what happens when literature is used, not to define or place a literary tradition, but as a weapon of attack against certain social and cultural tendencies. Ruth Etchell's book (see below) is a much more honest-to-literature approach. But for a more favourable review, see A E Dyson's editorial in *The Critical Quarterly* Vol.13 No.2.
18. Peter Ackroyd: *Notes for a New Culture* (Vision Press 1976) pp. 146,147
19. I A Richards: *Science and Poetry*, quoted by T S Eliot: 'The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism' p.134. Other writers taking a humanist view of the decline of the literary tradition include F R Leavis (e.g. *English Literature in our Time and the University* (CUP 1969); Peter Abbs (eg. *The Tyranny of the Modern* (Gryphon Press 1972); David Holbrook (eg. *Lost Bearings in English Poetry* (Vision Press 1977)).
20. Compare Eliot's statement: 'The World is trying the experiment of attempting to form a civilised but non-Christian mentality. The experiment will fail; but we must be very patient in awaiting its collapse; meanwhile redeeming the time: so that the Faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us; to renew and rebuild civilisation, and save the world from suicide.' (from 'Thoughts after Lambeth').
21. q.v. Mt.24:10-14, 28-31; Mk.13: 5-37; Lk.21: 12-19, 25-36; I Thess.5: 3-11; 2 Thess. 2:1-12; I Peter 4:7; 2 Peter 3:3-13; Revelation chs. 6,7,12,13,18,19. For a

- simple theological account of the Biblical teaching see Stephen Travis: *Christian Hope and the Future of Man* (IVP).
22. The suddenness and unpredictability is stressed: eg. Mk.13:32; 1 Thess.5:1-2; 2 Pet. 3:10.
 23. eg. 2 Pet. 3:9.
 24. All of T S Eliot's work is published by Faber, apart from *Selected Prose* ed. John Hayward (Penguin 1953). 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919) appeared first in *The Sacred Wood* (1920) and now appears in *Selected Essays*, as does 'The Function of Criticism' (1923). *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933); *After Strange Gods* (1934) and *What is a Classic?* (1949, 1950) were all published as separate volumes, although the last mentioned is also collected in *On Poetry and Poets* (1957). Also useful reading are his *Notes towards a Definition of Culture* (1948) and *The Idea of a Christian Society* ed. David Edwards (1939 rev. 1982).
 25. Sean Lucy: *T S Eliot and the Idea of Tradition* (Cohen and West 1960). Also referred to are: John Chalker: 'Authority and Personality in Eliot's Criticism' (collected in Graham Martin (ed.): *Eliot in Perspective* (Macmillan 1970)); and Samuel Hynes: 'The Trials of a Christian Critic' (in *The Literary Criticism of T S Eliot* op.cit.).
 26. *After Strange Gods* p.18.
 27. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in *Selected Essays* p.14. For a survey of the immediate philosophical background behind this view of the contemporary sense of tradition, see Ian Bell: *Critic as Scientist* (Methuen 1981) ch.5 'Tradition and Race Memory'; or P G Ellis: 'The Development of T S Eliot's Historical Sense' (R E S 1972 pp. 291-301).
 28. *ibid.* p.17
 29. *The Sacred Wood* (op.cit) pp.xv-xvi.
 30. q.v. *The Use of Poetry* Intro. p.30 and the chapter on Arnold pp.103-119. cf. Chalker (op.cit) p.203.
 31. Lucy (op.cit.) p.15
 32. *ibid.* p.14
 33. *ibid.* p.25
 34. Chalker (op.cit.) p.205
 35. Hynes (op.cit.) pp.86,87.
 36. Ruth Etchells: *Unafraid to Be* (IVP 1969).
 37. *Selected Literary Essays* (op.cit.). For a much fuller account, see my paper 'C S Lewis as a Christian Critic', available from the Literary Studies Group of UCCF Associates.
 38. *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, excluding Drama*, being Vol.III of the Oxford History of English Literature.
 39. Hynes (op.cit.) p.65
 40. Books referred to are C S Lewis: *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (OUP 1942) and Christopher Hill: *Milton and the English Revolution* (Faber 1979).
 41. I am thinking, for example, of C A Patrides (op.cit.) or Stanley Fish: *Surprised by Sin: the Reader in 'Paradise Lost'* (Univ. of California 1971). Their

grappling with the text contrasts with the pin-pricks of A J A Waldock: *'Paradise Lost' and its Critics* (CUP 1947). The case of William Empson: *Milton's God* (Chatto & Windus 1961) is more difficult.

42. A E Dyson: *Between Two Worlds: Aspects of Literary Form* (Macmillan 1972).

43. *ibid.* p.7

44. *ibid.* p.12.

45. see his editorial to the 'Critical Quarterly' Vol.13 No.4.

46. *op.cit.* p.131. C S Lewis claims that we are all inevitably Romantics at heart. It is strange that Dyson sees such disparity between Romanticism and Platonism, where Lewis sees convergence.

47. Wolfgang Iser: *The Act of Reading* (RKP 1978).

48. F R Leavis: *The Great Tradition* (Chatto & Windus 1948) esp. ch.1.

49. q.v. *What is a Classic?* p.11.

RESPONSIBILITIES IN AN UNRESPONDING UNIVERSE

Thomas Hardy's 'The Mayor of Casterbridge'

Rosemary Nixon

(All references are to the Penguin edition (1978), edited by Martin Seymour-Smith)

Hardy's popular reputation is that of a writer of pessimistic novels about characters who are the victims of fate, playthings of the gods, or otherwise have dice loaded against them. Some passages from his novels certainly seem to support this view. The ending of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is perhaps the most frequently quoted example: "'Justice" was done, and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess.' Michael Henchard, the Mayor of Casterbridge often feels that circumstances are conspiring against him; it is ironic that no sooner has he gained the friendship of Elizabeth-Jane, his dead wife's daughter, and she has agreed to take the name of Henchard as his daughter, than he discovers that the girl is not related to him at all:

Henchard, like all his kind, was superstitious, and he could not help thinking that the concatenation of events this evening had produced was the scheme of some sinister intelligence bent on punishing him. Yet they had developed naturally. If he had not revealed his past history to Elizabeth he would not have searched the drawer for papers, and so on. (ch 19, p 197)

Hardy tells us that it is because Henchard is superstitious that he feels that there is some power working against him, and it might seem reasonable to deduce that this is how Hardy believed the world to operate, other passages in the novel also appearing to support this view. Towards the end of the novel, when Henchard

has left Casterbridge and found work as a hay-trusser near the scene of his original appearance in the novel, Hardy comments:

Externally there was nothing to hinder his making another start on the upward slope, and by his new lights achieving higher things than his soul in its half-formed state had been able to accomplish. But the ingenious machinery contrived by the Gods for reducing human possibilities of amelioration to a minimum - which arranges that wisdom to do shall come *pari passu* with the departure of zest for doing - stood in the way of all that. (ch 44, p 395).

While the 'Gods' have so arranged things that there is no 'external' hindrance to Henchard's progress, there is some stratagem which ensures that 'wisdom to do' comes with 'departure of zest for doing'. But it is also possible to see this not as 'ingenious machinery contrived by the Gods', but rather as a natural law. It may be that only when one has been through much difficult experience, been aged by it and therefore has less energy, that one has, by very virtue of that experience, grown to be capable, potentially, of coping much more effectively with problems of equal or even greater magnitude. Hardy himself suggested, in a conversation with William Archer in 1904, that 'whatever may be the inherent good or evil of life it is certain that men make it much worse than it need be.' (quoted, F B Pinion, *A Hardy Companion* London, 1968, p 178). When things go wrong men would like to blame 'the gods' or some outside influence for what happens to them, but, Hardy implies, they have some responsibility - 'men make it much worse than it need be'. And men's actions, it can be argued, stem from men's characters: 'Character is Fate, said Novalis', Hardy writes in ch.17, taking his statement from George Eliot's use of Novalis in *The Mill on the Floss*, Bk VI, ch 6:

For the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within. 'Character,' says Novalis, in one of his questionable aphorisms - 'character is destiny'. But not the whole of our destiny.

Hardy uses the 'aphorism' to stand against the idea that Henchard's downfall - Farfrae's rise - is due to 'luck', and compares Henchard to Faust. He is the opposite of Farfrae who is the type of character likely to succeed. Henchard's hasty temper and tendency to speak before thinking work against him, leading to the lies which contribute to his downfall despite his search for honesty. In both Hardy and George Eliot it is a combination of character and outside influences which leads to tragedy; as Maggie Tulliver and Henchard live out their lives, they react to situations in certain ways, but the outcome cannot be predicted simply from a knowledge of character.

In fact, while Henchard often wants to blame 'luck', he realises his responsibility, hard as that seems to him. Most Victorians held that

the full acceptance of individual responsibility, though the sternest of duties, is also the highest, and ... no one who shrinks from it can earn the brightest crown of manhood.

(Peter Bayne, 'Neo-Evangelism', *Fortnightly review*, 2(1865), p.687)

but it was also a dangerous characteristic of the age to be

unreasonably perturbed at circumstances we cannot alter, that are not of our own making, that have nothing in them of which we ought, in strict reason, to be ashamed.

(Anne Mosley, 'False Shame', *Saturday Review*, 12 (1862), p.322)

There seems to be a careful balance in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* between blame for outcomes on 'character', and on 'luck'. While Henchard blames himself, the fact that consequences cannot always be predicted means that what seems like coincidence is in fact the 'concatenation of circumstance.' Elizabeth-Jane realises that Henchard himself will not ultimately blame coincidence for what happens to him; as Hardy says for her:

He had not expressed to her any regrets or excuses for what he had done in the past; but it was a part of his nature to extenuate nothing, and live on as one of his own worst accusers (ch.45, p.405).

By going away from Casterbridge at the end of the novel, he is choosing not to plead on his own behalf, but to take on himself the punishment that he feels he deserves, separation from society. Martin Seymour-Smith in his introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, agrees that Henchard 'is fundamentally a man of high conscience, doomed by himself to suffer the exact destiny he deserves.' (p 55) Because he has this conscience, Henchard is aware of his mistakes, and is also prepared to suffer in some way for them, doing so by self-punishment, even to death, in addition to the failure of all his plans.

Hardy's use of coincidence is problematic however, not only in being part of this delicate balance of opposites of 'luck' (or 'bad luck') and personal responsibility arising out of the cause-and-effect sequence of character, but also in its formal aspects Hardy limits his *dramatis personae* to the bare minimum, yet makes them move over large geographical distances throughout a longish plot. Coincidence is the only fictional device available to him to keep his *dramatis personae* together. Paradoxically, the economy is necessary because of his desire to focus on **character**, and the subtle interplay between character and event.

Hardy is thus having to deal with two quite different literary problems at the same time. Philosophically, he wishes to obtain a moral framework, inherited from traditional Christian concepts, for moral responsibility in a natural moral order, which though flawed, is still recognisable against the possible invasion of chaos and arbitrary forces. This philosophical conflict is also played out within the consciousness of Henchard, though its realisation there is not necessarily

identical to the authorial realisation. At a fictional level, he wishes to concentrate on character, its development and reaction to events, but needs to use categories of arbitrariness in the plot, which seem to undermine at points the philosophical, moral and psychological dimensions. In Hardy's praise, it must be said these tensions, even contradictions, are handled intuitively, dramatically, and become, by a *tour de force*, strengths, rather than weaknesses.

This sense of responsibility in Henchard is, as I have already suggested, one of his most striking qualities. Right at the beginning of the novel, after the sale of his wife, he takes responsibility for his action - he resolves to put up as best he can with the shame involved in trying to find his wife and daughter again, since 'It was of his own making, and he ought to bear it' (ch.2, p 84). Despite at times blaming 'the gods', or 'fate', this is his attitude throughout the novel. His stature as a character is increased as we see his attempts to make amends to Lucetta and to Susan. These well-intentioned efforts fail, but they show him to be a full moral agent, aware of responsibility for the consequences of his actions. But it is impossible to put the clock back, or totally to undo the mistakes he has made in the past. Such is the law of life.

There is no hint in the novel of the Christian solution to guilt, which would involve repentance on Henchard's side, and allow forgiveness on God's. Hardy claimed that, 'I have been looking for God 50 years, and I think if he had existed I should have discovered him' (Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, London, 1962, p.224), yet he continued to employ in his novels the words of a theological belief-system - words such as 'sin', 'guilt', and 'forgiveness', and the plot structures that derive from such concepts - but for characters trapped by their past deeds, there was no possibility of a real solution apart from death as the end of all striving.

A comparison with Maggie Tulliver's death at the end of *The Mill on the Floss* is interesting at this point. It likewise appears to be the only solution for her, death as the end of striving. But in her case, the stress is not on death as the solution, but on her being reunited with her brother. George Eliot differs from Hardy in seeing a possible solution to guilt outside the Christian moral order. Some ill consequences will necessarily follow, but the wrongdoer can be redeemed through an increase in 'fellow-feeling' (an expression frequently used in *Adam Bede*, for example), which will lead to his acting better in the future. Arthur Donnithorne, for example, learns from his experience, but poetic justice and the problem of his re-acceptance into the community demand his death. Maggie's death is beset by critical arguments about George Eliot's intentions, but the keynote of the end is the final quotation, 'In their death they were not divided' which stresses the fact that Maggie has grown in fellow-feeling sufficiently to be more mindful of the lives of others than of her own when the floods are rising, and has attempted to rescue Tom. Her life has potential, and she dies fighting, whereas Henchard has ultimately given up the struggle and foreseen death as the only possible peace.

In trying to make restitutory acts, and being his own worst accuser, Henchard behaves as if he were trying to propitiate the wrath of God. There is, Hardy tells us, something 'fetishistic' in his beliefs (ch.2, p.84). Earlier in the century, Newman wrote that the world:

makes an open mock at sin, yet secretly attempts to secure an interest against its possible consequences in the world to come. Where has not the custom prevailed of propitiating, if possible, the unseen powers of heaven? - but why, unless men were universally conscious of his danger, and feared the punishment of sin, while he 'hated to be reformed'.

(*Newman's University Sermons*, ed. D M MacKinnon and J D Holmes, London, 1970, p.116).

It seems to be just this propitiating which Henchard tries to do - and which, as Newman explains later in the sermon - can be to no avail, since the initiative for salvation comes from God rather than from man. Without this hope of salvation, Henchard, who has a conscience far more awakened than that of many characters in literature, dooms himself to suffer the futility of attempts to make this propitiation in an apparently Godless world.

Part of his suffering also comes from the fact that all Henchard's human relationships are spoiled, as is, Christians would also say, the intended divine one. He needs to love and to be loved, but when he tries to repair earlier broken relationships with Susan and Lucetta, he fails, and attempts to form new ones are unsuccessful too. When Henchard asks Farfrae to stay in Casterbridge as his manager (ch.7 of the novel), it is much more because Henchard needs him as a person than because he needs him as a manager. Farfrae reminds him of his own dead brother (p.117), a small but significant detail. Henchard wants Farfrae to be a replacement, someone to whom he can turn, and tell his problems and worries, as he does very ironically in view of later developments. Hardy makes this need explicit when writing about Henchard's attitude to Elizabeth Jane, in ch.19:

He was the kind of man to whom some human object for pouring out his heat upon - were it emotive or were it choleric - was almost a necessity. The craving of his heart for the re-establishment of this tenderest human tie had been great during his wife's lifetime, and now he had submitted to its mastery without reluctance and without fear (ch.19, p.195)

This is what lends such great poignancy to his attempts, when he finds Susan's letter, to conceal from Elizabeth-Jane the fact that she is not his real daughter. He needs her, and just as a tie between them is being established, it is found to be based on a false assumption.

The same tie, but on a different basis, is renewed towards the end of the novel, but is broken again because of Henchard's lie to Newson, Elizabeth-Jane's real father, that she is dead. Hearing of her imminent marriage to Farfrae, Henchard

resolves to make a final attempt at reconciliation, to renew some kind of bond, even though it can never be the same:

To make one more attempt to be near her: to go back; to see her, to plead his cause before her, to ask forgiveness for his fraud, to endeavour strenuously to hold his own in her love; it was worth the risk of repulse, ay, of life itself. (ch.44, p.397)

Since his only hope of happiness now lies in human relationships, he is heart-broken when he is rejected by Elizabeth-Jane. He does risk 'life itself', since without her he has no-one to care for him or for whom to care:

There would be nobody for him to be proud of, nobody to fortify him; for Elizabeth-Jane would soon be but as a stranger, and worse. Susan, Farfrae, Lucetta, Elizabeth - all gone from him, one after one, either by his fault or by his misfortune. (ch.41, p.371).

When they are gone from him, he is alone, and even though it may be partly his 'fault', it makes for a bleak ending to the novel, typical of those endings to Hardy's later novels which have earned the reputation for pessimism. Yet in his emphasis on personal responsibility, Hardy seems more realistic about human nature than some of his contemporaries and novelists writing earlier in the nineteenth century, who had great faith in institutions and social change, or in the possibilities of human nature for good (Dickens and George Eliot, for example), to relieve man's problems. Hardy's novels bear witness to the existence of a moral order, within which man feels guilt for his wrongdoings and must bear the consequences of them.

With a sensitive conscience, yet in the absence of God, without any means for that conscience to be relieved, life is bleak, and deprived of companionship in his suffering, Henchard can have no reason for living.

ON BRECHT'S *The Good Person of Szechwan* economics, ideology, theatre

Anthony Phelan

...for the sons of this world are
wiser in their own generation than
the sons of light. (Luke xvi:8)

Bertolt Brecht was a communist. In some respects this means that we already know too much about him; for the fact that he was a communist not only reveals an important truth about his political sympathies - it also seems to uncover significant features of his plays: and because his communist views are well known, it has become fashionable to denounce his dramatic work as didactic - particularly among metropolitan critics who balance things up by their approval of Brecht the poet. (Edward Bond is another socialist playwright whose work, itself very much engaged with Brecht's, has suffered similarly.) In another respect, Brecht has been his own worst enemy in giving students of his work the impression that all is transparently clear in his dramatic writing - hence the currency of so many of Brecht's own critical coinages: 'epic theatre', 'anti-aristotelian', 'alienation effect (V-Effekt)', 'gestic'.

*The Good Person of Szechwan*¹ is a striking counter-example to this view of Brecht's plays as a theatre of foregone conclusions. The play proper ends in a moment of baroque mechanism, a self-conscious reversal of the intervention of a *deus ex machina*, as the three gods *ascend*, singing the 'Trio of the Vanishing Gods on their Cloud', but fail to leave any remotely satisfactory resolution of the ethical problems posed by the action of the play. Finally an actor appears to apologize to the audience:

Should men be better? Should the world be changed?
Or just the gods? Or ought there to be none?

Only one of these is actively preferred:

There's only one solution that we know:
That you should now consider as you go
What sort of measures you would recommend
To help good people to a happy end.

Two of Brecht's major and recurrent concerns are drawn together in the Epilogue: the harsh air of economic reality blows through the actor's line 'Our play may fail if you can't recommend it', as it does through the rest of the play; and, secondly, the audience is invited to reflect critically on ideological constructs and assumptions: 'human nature', the 'world order', the significance of the existence of god(s). Taken with the departure of the gods in the previous scene, the Epilogue also stresses the theatricality of the whole enterprise - Brecht's constant

attention to the presence of the stage and the actor as physical realities. The line 'We for our part feel well and truly done' means more literally 'We're shattered and that *isn't* an illusion'. These concerns and the way they are worked out in Brecht's play give *The Good Person* an extraordinary range and complexity which challenges any idea of naked, 'hardline' didacticism. In this brief account I shall consider each of these aspects of the play in relation to its Christian or theological coordinates: its form as a parable for the theatre and its critique of the social and ethical function of a deity or deities.

1 Economics

Brecht always thought of himself as a realist. In spite of the apparently symbolic nature of its action, it is an exaggeration to suggest, as Murray McGowan has recently in an otherwise splendid argument,² that the play is set in a 'totally mythical China'. In one of his numerous attempts to work on the Szechwan material (which was conceived in outline in 1927), Brecht noted in his *work journal* in May 1939

Incidentally, the danger of chinoiserie must be resisted. the idea is of a chinese suburb with cement factories etc. there are still gods there and they already have aeroplanes. perhaps the lover should be an unemployed pilot.

The same could be argued for the China of the earlier Lehrstück or 'teaching play' *The Measures Taken*: China is no more fictional here than Chicago is in *St Joan of the Stockyards* or *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* - perhaps it is less so. The simultaneous presence of gods and aircraft is cashed in in the location of the action, in German editions, as 'the capital of Szechwan which is half Europeanized'. This might well lead us to expect that other aspects of the play are more than an emblematic outline designed to make the moral argument possible.

The central line of the plot concerns the relationship between the successful management of a small business and the possibility of acts of charity. In order to examine certain questions concerning the survival of goodness in a corrupt (ie. capitalist) world, Brecht dramatizes an economic calculation. He had, of course, done so before. In different ways both the *Threepenny Opera* and *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* deal with the relationship of morality to money, and the first Finale of the former directly anticipates the apparent point of *The Good Person* - 'We should aim high instead of low / But our condition's such this can't be so' ³. A much fuller dramatization of economic issues followed, in the politically more explicit period of the Lehrstücke, with *St Joan of the Stockyards* and its account of overproduction and stagnation in the American meat market; in *The Mother* too the production relations of industrial capitalism are staged. It will be useful to get clear the 'economic action' in *The Good Person*: here Brecht made the 'economic' a central issue again for the first time since his version of *St Joan* around 1930.

Having uniquely been willing to offer shelter and hospitality to three visiting deities, the prostitute Shen Teh is rewarded by a payment of 1000 silver dollars. This is not a gift (the gods are not permitted to make donations), but the inflated price of their overnight accommodation in Szechwan. With this money Shen Teh purchases the shop-fittings and stock of a tobacconist's from Mrs Shin. Shen Teh believes that her ownership of the business will enable her to live up to the gods' injunction to be good. She regularly provides rice for the previous owner and her family; she gives food and shelter to her previous landlords and their family - eight people in all; she gives away to the unemployed man a cigarette from her stock. The gods describe these actions of Shen Teh 'following the impulses of her gentle heart'. Other moments of generosity, later in the play, are evidences or expressions of Shen Teh's love for Yang Sun, the unemployed airman. In all of this we scarcely see Shen Teh actually earning any money at all, and by Scene 7 she is forced to sell up the shop if she wishes to pay back the loan; her last impulsive action is to give away her handcart and household belongings to Wang in the hope that these will suffice to pay a doctor to set his broken hand.

Meanwhile, as they say, another interest in Shen Teh's shop has emerged in the person of her 'cousin' Shui Ta. By his intervention the majority of the family of eight are arrested and, we gather, in her absence Shen Teh's provision of rice is also terminated. Shui Ta intervenes whenever Shen Teh's livelihood itself is threatened - yet his intervention meets with only limited success, as he realizes at the end of his interview with Mrs Mi Tzu, the property owner from whom the premises are rented:

SHUI TA, bitterly: To save this little shop, officer, which my cousin regards as a gift of the gods, I'm prepared to go to the utmost limits of the law. But toughness and duplicity will serve only against one's inferiors, for those limits have been cleverly defined. I am in the position of a man who has just got the rats out of the cellar, when along come the floods. (p29)

Shui Ta is then advised by the policeman to arrange a favourable marriage for his 'cousin' by advertising in what sounds like a cross between a lonely hearts column and *Exchange and Mart*:

THE POLICEMAN: 'What respectable gentleman...small capital.. widower considered...desires marriage...into progressive tobacconist's?' And then we'll add: 'With charming attractive brunette.' How's that? (p31)

This solution comes to nothing since Shen Teh meets and falls in love with Yang Sun on the way to meet her first respondent. Shui Ta is then confronted with a further demand for \$300 to make up the bribe that will secure Sun's position in Peking as an aviator: the only possible source is the sale of his stock to Mi Tzu. Shui Ta signally fails to prevent Yang Sun from wrecking his negotiation of the price so that \$300 and not \$500 are offered. Even after the failure of her wedding to Sun because this money is still not forthcoming, Shen Teh is still faced with

her debt to the carpet dealers. All in all, Shui Ta's management of the shop is not materially more successful than Shen Teh's.

When financial success does come to Shui Ta, it is achieved partly because 'in future it must all be rather more sensibly arranged. No more free meals without working for it' (p79), but more significantly because the open cheque given to maintain Shen Teh's charitable work by her admirer, the wealthy barber Shu Fu, is in fact cashed by Shui Ta for \$10,000. This enables him to pay the rent on the shop/office and develop his business in the sphere of production as well as distribution by opening his tobacco factory. What is striking is that Shui Ta's access to this necessary capital is fortuitous in the same sort of way that Shen Teh's acquisition of her celestial investment at the beginning of the play is fortuitous. In each case Brecht brackets off, as it were, the remainder of the economic process - the accumulation of capital, for instance, or the productive process (growing tobacco) which sustains the production and sale of cigarettes.

This process of simplification is parallel to - and may well be derived from - Marx's analytical procedure in the first chapter of *Capital*. As a result Brecht's play can concentrate on three moments in the economic process; need (scarcity, demand), distribution, and production. The water-seller's song of Scene 3 analyses the relation between scarcity and distribution, supply and demand, in terms of the simplest possible commodity: when abundant it cannot be sold, when scarce it is too expensive. Shen Teh seeks to 'meet the needs' of her neighbours (and thus to do the will of the gods) by utilizing her small profit margin. This proves impossible on two counts. First, the profits from the shop are insufficient to meet the need without in effect running the business into bankruptcy; secondly - and it is an objection of principle - sale for profit cannot be made to serve the end of abolishing scarcity without self-contradiction, for her trade depends on and exploits scarcity. Shen Teh cannot simply cut herself and her shop loose from the larger economic structures represented by the property owner Mi Tzu. Her purchase of a cup of water in the middle of a rain storm represents an attempt to convert the commodity, caught in the alienated network of 'market forces' and in the rules of supply and demand, into a sacrament of the real presence of human kindness and warmth - as Wang says in Scene 9, 'Where is the woman who once bought a mug of water from me in the rain, months ago, in the joy of her heart?' That utopian reconstruction of the commodity is invoked in her 'Song of the Defencelessness of the Good and the Gods' in the third Interlude; but it is Shui Ta's 'toughness that elsewhere builds empires' (p 48) that finally restores order and turns the recipients of Shen Teh's charity into the objects of his exploitation in Scenes 8 and 9.

I have written so far as if Shen Teh and Shui Ta were independent characters - and Brecht's text proceeds along these lines itself. In Scene 2 his stage direction simply reads 'Enter a young gentleman' who announces with equal simplicity 'I am her cousin'. Like most breeches roles, it conceals what is for the audience an open secret, even though the *process* of the dedoublement is not revealed until

the third Interlude, and not understood 'on stage' (by Mrs Shin) until much later in the play. Yet it should now be clear that the splitting of Shen Teh is presupposed by the contradictory roles she takes on - the conquest of scarcity and its exploitation, as demand for a saleable supply. This is her defence before the judgement of the gods:

Your original order
To be good while yet surviving
Split me like lightning into two people ...

The ruse ceases to function adequately in Scene 9 when three elements of the plot variously put pressure on Shen Teh/Shui Ta: her popularity among the poor and destitute (and sometimes grasping), represented by Wang; the physical effects of her pregnancy; but above all her relationship to Shu Fu the barber and, to a lesser extent, to Mrs Mi Tzu. Shui Ta must attempt to negotiate new premises for the tobacco factory; he hopes to locate it with Mi Tzu, assisted by finance from Shu Fu:

SHUI TA: My friends, an unpredictable eventuality, which may have certain consequences, compels me to speed up the negotiations which I have recently initiated as to the future of my business. Mr Shu Fu, my factory is in difficulties.

MR SHU FU: It always is. (p 94)

This scene echoes the earlier one in which Shui Ta is bested by Mi Tzu in his attempt to negotiate a reasonable rent contract, and the scene where Yang Sun effectively ruins his negotiating position on the sale of stock. However, it is again a *kind* of economic consideration that finally makes Shui Ta's position untenable. Where the poor are not relieved, they are exploited, but conditions are now so bad that even the police have begun to complain. The only possible solution is a relocation of the factory in other premises. However, this is only possible on two conditions: Shui Ta must surrender Yang Sun to the lust of Mi Tzu (and Shen Teh must thus abandon her lover), and the promise of Shen Teh's favours (her 'hand in marriage'), on the strength of which Shu Fu has been offering credit to support the enterprise, must finally be 'encashed'. Shui Ta has in effect been getting advance payments on Shen Teh, and now he must come up with the goods. In two senses, here, Shen Teh is forced to revert to her female persona: she cannot otherwise satisfy Shu Fu, and in a stronger sense she must now in reality do what Shui Ta has long since achieved potentially - *sell herself* and so revert to her original role as prostitute.

We have seen that in a number of instances Shui Ta is no more successful in his management of the shop than Shen Teh. In these failures Brecht lays the groundwork for his major critique of (a no doubt highly simplified) capitalism in the Trial Scene (Scene 10) which concludes the play. This critique includes three main points: the in-built competition - between Shui Ta, Shu Fu, and Mi Tzu, for

instance - in capitalist systems always sends the weakest to the wall; the opportunities of self-betterment offered by capitalist enterprise are in fact degrading and brutalizing:

SHUI TA: The man she loved was a crook.

WANG: Him?

He indicates Sun.

SUN leaps up: Was it because he was a crook you took him into your office?

SHUI TA: To help you! To help you improve!

THE SISTER-IN-LAW: To turn him into a slave-driver!

WANG: And when you had finished improving him, didn't you sell him to her? ... (pp 102f)

but crucially, Brecht summarises his criticisms in the kind of aphorism he so often leaves his audiences to unpack:

WANG: ... And she always tried to do good, and you always came and brought it to nothing.

SHUI TA, beside himself: Because they'd have stifled the source, you fool.

MRS SHIN: That's quite true, your worships!

WANG: What's the good of a source that can't be drawn on? (p 104)

The pattern of capitalist economy, Brecht suggests, is always a distortion of the social character of labour and so can never be a source of 'good' without self-contradiction.

The intricacy of the 'economic action' of *The Good Person* gives the plot a tight logic that recalls the narrative roundedness of a biblical parable. That is, the story is defined not only by its 'other', emblematic or allegorical meaning but by its feeling of being complete and closed off. Just as in many NT parables, we are given no further detail than is absolutely necessary, and this makes possible a concentration and pregnancy in the narrative which is importantly provocative for an audience; but it may also mean that a certain enigmatic quality attaches to the action. St Luke, for instance, explains in his version of the parable of the talents (Lk. xix,12ff) why the rich man/nobleman goes on a journey; in Matthew's account (Mt. xxv, 14ff) the purpose of the trip is not at all clear. One of the most 'Brechtian' of the NT parables is that of the enigmatic 'unjust steward' (or 'shrewd manager' - NIV!) of Luke xvi. As we shall see, this concentration of a parable's narrative is an important feature of its role in teaching and exposition: the economic analysis of *The Good Person* is achieved by a similar concentration or 'bracketing off'. The enigmas thus generated are not, however, always or necessarily useful. Brecht neglects here, as in the majority of his work - *Galileo*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and *Days of the Commune* are important exceptions - the role of the *state* in economics and politics, and this is a significant limitation in his work as a marxian writer.

2 Ideology

Having established within a severely limited economic model the constraints imposed on charity by a system answering to the profit motive and not to human need, Brecht's play can also question the nature of 'moral standards': his heroine Shen Teh is a prostitute and Brecht can be readily seen to revamp a well worn theme through her - the cliché of the prostitute with the heart of gold. As we have noted, a favourable marriage is designed to be the solution to the financial problems besetting Shen Teh's business. The end of Scene 2 where this proposal is made sets out three attitudes to what Shui Ta calls in Scene 5 'the most deadly' weakness, *love*. First, the policeman accuses Shen Teh of 'saleable love' for 'immoral earnings':

THE POLICEMAN: ... Shen Teh, let's face it, lived by selling herself to men. You may ask, what else was she to do? For instance, how was she to pay her rent? But the fact remains, it is not respectable. Why not? A: you can't earn your living by love or it becomes immoral earnings. B: respectability means, not with the man who can pay, but with the man one loves. C: it mustn't be for a handful of rice but for love. ... (p30)

With sublime ingenuousness the policeman who is stumped by his own questions then comes up with the morally acceptable (and financially satisfactory) alternative - marriage via an advertisement in a personal column. As Shui Ta will discover, the role imposed by this solution is as determined by the laws of commerce as Shen Teh's the prostitute's had been. Between the policeman's brainwave and its formulation as an advert., Brecht places the arrival of the old woman from the carpet shop who comes to buy a cigar for her husband on their fortieth wedding anniversary. Hers is still a romantic view of love and marriage - and she it is, of course, who encourages Shen Teh's liaison with Yang Sun. These variations on a theme - especially the relations and contrasts between 'immoral love' and social convention - can be traced from Brecht's first play *Baal* and *The Wedding* (?1919), but are most important in *The Threepenny Opera* and here in *The Good Person* where Scene 6 once again parodies 'conventional' wedding receptions.

The assessment of Shen Teh and the commercial aspects of bourgeois marriage is only the most striking of a number of questions about morality. Shen Teh sees friendliness not as a psychological attribute of the personality but as a practical feature of human action. Goodness in the view of the three gods however, consists in the (successful) attempt to reach the standards they set and not in the ambiguous attempt to satisfy a human need - hence their injunction to Wang to 'show some interest in Shen Teh's goodness, for no one can be good for long if goodness is not demanded of him.' (p.22). Subsequently his account of Shen Teh's goodness in the second Interlude visibly disappoints the gods who are constantly hoping for examples of heroic virtue. Indeed, Wang's last intervention on Shen Teh's behalf seeks to negotiate 'a slight reduction of the

precepts' which, as Wang can see, are effectively ruining Shen Teh. Wang's proposals consistently seek to replace idealist abstractions with realizable social standards.

THE THIRD GOD: For instance, Wang, for instance?

WANG: For instance that only good will should be required instead of love, or ...

THE THIRD GOD: But that is far harder, you unhappy man!

WANG: Or fairness instead of justice.

THE THIRD GOD: But that means more work!

WANG: Then plain decency instead of honour!

THE THIRD GOD: But that is far more, you man of doubts! (P 82)

'Good will' is harder than 'love' because it resists abstraction or interiorization - rather in the spirit of *Peanuts's* 'I love mankind, it's people I can't stand'; similarly fairness would mean more work than the lofty abstraction, justice. It is the function of the three deities to represent dramatically the value system of this and similar societies understood as an *ideology* - i.e. as a set of doctrines and beliefs which keep a particular power structure (the dominance of a particular class) in position. At first sight they certainly resemble the Christian account and its formulation in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The gods' visitation to Szechwan finds a clear parallel in the visit of the three 'men' to Abraham in Genesis 18, while the number three itself seems to point to a trinitarian theme. As a whole the action is perhaps reminiscent of the Son of Man's promised search for faith on earth (Lk. 18:8) and of OT parallels like Psalm 53:2. By and large there are very few indications that the uneasy divinities of Brecht's play have any specific reference to Christian theology; yet they do take up and dramatize a recurrent problem in the ethics of the Bible - namely, the prosperity of the wicked. The Psalms as well as Job constantly call for God's justice to redress this imbalance (See Ps.10:1-15; 73:3-12; Job 21:1-16). Philosophically, this is the problem of *theodicy* - the vindication of divine justice in an imperfect world. In Brecht's play one might say that the problem was conceived as a *geodicy* - an attempt by the gods to vindicate the world as it is (and by bourgeois ideology to indicate the dominance of a particular class): the gods of the play have, it seems, been commissioned to find 'good people, able to lead a decent human existence' in sufficient numbers to justify the continued existence of the world unchanged. In the end they settle for only one, but Brecht's economic argument demonstrates that effective and efficacious 'goodness' is incompatible with an exploitative mode of production. Abstract moral values of the kind sustained by religion are at best expressions of human aspiration, but at worst they conceal corruption and brutality. The alternative posed in the Epilogue - 'Should men be better? Should the world be changed?' - is also recognized by the gods themselves in the last interlude when the Third God confronts the other two: The world is unfit to live in, you have to admit it'. It is not the divine justice that cannot be vindicated but the world order it maintains.

3. Theatre

The dramatic function of the gods in *The Good Person* can help us to see what kind of play we are dealing with and what sort of questions it raises. I noted at the beginning of this essay that the departure of the gods on their pink(!) baroque cloud is an ironic inversion of the traditional intervention of a divinity to resolve a particularly intractable piece of plotting, whether it is Pallas Athene at the end of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* or Aphrodite at the end of Gluck's opera *Orfeo* - or, for that matter, Diana at the conclusion of Shakespeare's *Pericles* or Jupiter in *Cymbeline*. Conversely, the way *The Good Person* is set in motion by a divine intervention suggests that Brecht has set out to order certain fundamental dramatic structures. A similar kind of convention is appealed to in the Epilogue:

We had in mind a sort of golden myth
Then found the finish had been tampered with.

Brecht seems to conceive of his 'Life of Shen Teh of Szechwan' as a piece of hagiography. This would turn her into another figure from the baroque stage - the martyr or martyr-drama.

The gods on their cloud and the suffering role of the heroine constitute, then, two important allusions to the history of European theatre. This is one of a number of ways in which Brecht draws attention to the theatricality of what is going on when we watch his play. He stresses two main aspects of this theatrical quality in *The Good Person*. The ascent of the gods, by overemphasizing the *illusions* possible on a stage, reminds us that what we see is the effect of theatrical mechanisms and techniques: it is a matter of certain physical arrangements. Brecht was certainly aware of this in his work on the play. His *work journal* observes (15.3.1939), 'it's a work of charades, not least because of the act of dressing up and changing make-up'; there is a good example of this use of a costume change as part of the stage action in the third Interlude where Shen Teh gradually puts on the costume, gestures and voice of her 'cousin'. Secondly, Brecht uses the themes of his play to draw attention to its place in theatre of literary history by reference to the Bible and Goethe, but above all to martyr-drama and to the 'happy end' convention of European comedy.

The most widely discussed example of classical martyr-drama on university literature courses is probably Pierre Corneille's *Polyeucte*, though there are German examples too. Nearer the present, the most obvious cases are T S Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* and *Murder in the Cathedral*. Broadly speaking such plays can be characterised in the following way: the central figure, the martyr, displays in her life the power of a belief, of a *faith*; but this is not merely a doctrine held psychologically, as it were, in the mind but one that is acted upon and acted out. Secondly, the 'faith' is not displayed in the 'saint' by an act of her will. The role of witness-to-the-'faith' is *given*. (Eliot dramatizes this in *Murder in the Cathedral* through Thomas's struggle with his own desire for martyrdom as voiced by the Fourth Tempter.) Thus, the human actions of the foreground are played out

before a divine presence. Finally, the martyrdom draws in other characters who in turn bear witness to the reality of the 'faith' displayed in the saint.

It should be fairly clear how these definitions can be applied to *The Good Person*. Yet at the conclusion of this play every claim made for Shen Teh's saintliness by her friends and admirers (who are convinced that she is dead!) in fact displays her duplicity. Brecht has retained the dramatic structure but hollowed it out by presenting the life of a saint who just isn't a saint at all. The net result of this is to produce a *parody*. He had already had a shot at parodying martyr-drama in his *St Joan*, while *The Measures Taken* actually has a communist saint. Here the effect of parody is comic, and this gives an important clue to what Brecht is up to. For onto the framework of a comic martyr-drama he further imposes the (failed) convention of 'all ending happily in marriage' of the comic tradition. What all this leaves us with is perhaps rather surprising: *The Good Person of Szechwan* emerges not as a tragedy of the depravity of human nature, but as a comedy of the distortions of human society (i.e. of actual kinds of social organization).

As Peter Christian Giese has pointed out,⁴ the play is not merely comical, of course. We are not at liberty to play down the absence of a happy end. But Brecht seems to have shared a specifically marxian sense of the comic. Brecht's company, the Berliner Ensemble, have drawn attention to this sense of comedy by reference to a remark of the young Marx. In 1843 he wrote:

History is thorough and passes through many stages while bearing an ancient form to its grave. The last stage of the world historical form is *comedy*. The Greek gods, who already died once of their wounds in Aeschylus's tragedy *Prometheus Bound*, were forced to die a second death - this time a comic one - in Lucian's dialogues.⁵

But the idea is probably known best from the opening of the later *Eighteenth Brumaire*.

Hegel remarks somewhere that all the great events and characters of world history occur, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.⁶

The notion that the good are rewarded with happy ends has, with this sense of anachronism, become entirely laughable for Brecht - nor is laughter entirely out of place, for it might yet prove possible to devise a different outcome, at any rate a different society.

The comic treatment of the theme of goodness compromised takes three main forms in *The Good Person*. The attempt to be good is seriously incommensurate with the social formation in which it takes place; the expectation of goodness, voiced by its recipients, leads to impossible situations (for economic reasons we considered); consequently, the prospective happy end - love and the moral ideal of marriage - becomes ludicrously impossible too. Here a darker side of the

comedy is apparent. Shen Teh does love Yang Sun but is forced to abandon him; similarly, Wang's hand really has been broken - that is irremediable, and, like the heroine, stands in need of a happy end.

In *The Good Person*, then, comedy is in a general way derived from the disparity which emerges when an ideology (in this case a system of ethics) seeks to establish itself as timeless in a society caught up in significant historical change. Shen Teh does try to live out her calling by 'loving her neighbours' and helping those, like Mrs Shin and the family of eight, who have previously abused her. In doing so she attempts an 'imitation of Christ', the tragic exemplar; and these attempts to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless are not comic in themselves, but in their context and consequences. It is precisely when she accepts the divine command that the emergence of Shui Ta becomes necessary. That is to say, her calling to goodness and her social understanding of it impose a role on her; but it is only recognizable *as a role*, at the moment of its differentiation from Shui Ta. Here the theatricality of Brecht's comic conception is fundamental to his political point - that conformity to ethical requirements is a way of 'acting out' a socially imposed role which lends credibility to a social formation ('justifies the ways of god') that should be overturned.

4. Christian coordinates: history and parable

I've suggested that *The Good Person* is pretty remote from questions of Christian theology, and that it deals with 'faith' not as a set of intellectually held beliefs but as the foundation of a social practice. We would be hard put to it if we had to say what Shen Teh 'believes in'; but we do know her by her fruits. The play is comic not because her aims are false but because the means she adopts are inadequate within the terms of reference imposed by her society. Yet it would be foolish to claim that all forms of 'capitalist society' are so utterly incapable of sustaining charity. They seem to do just that, while the doctrine of a 'social market economy' claims that the market economy can, supremely, provide for such needs.

Brecht, I think, is careful to avoid abstract generalization about 'capitalism' and to establish a more specific historical context. 'The capital of Szechwan is half Europeanized', said the direction, and Wang makes it clear in the first speech that this place boasts a cement factory as well as cattle dealers and water sellers - very much in keeping with Brecht's note on gods *and* aeroplanes. This is then a society *in transition*. Further, the economic sphere we encounter is peopled by petty bourgeois tradesmen, offering services or consumer goods for sale. Only Mrs Mi Tzu is just a 'property owner', only Lin To the carpenter, an artisan. In the background we see the major movements of industrialization and modernization (cement factory, airborne postal service) move ahead. The scarcity of consumer goods (rice, cigarettes, shawls) is mitigated by Shen Teh's charity when in fact more sweeping changes are called for. Yet even these might fail to resolve the problem of 'the poverty of society in objects of consumption'

(Trotsky): in outline this might apply to China in the 1940s; Brecht almost certainly knew that it was true of the USSR where the effect was the bureaucratic control known as Stalinism.⁷ If the problem of the equitable distribution of goods associated with the process of rapid industrialization in pre-industrial societies brought for socialism the very thing that it had set out to overcome in capitalism, it is perhaps no wonder that we can sense a real and not merely rhetorical puzzlement in Brecht's epilogue.

All this raises questions concerning the circumstances and points of reference in Brecht's writing of the play; but asking them does not exonerate Christians from answering similar ones for themselves: what concrete social practice does Christian belief promote or cover up for? Is it a dangerous or laughable anachronism or is the 'Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' categorically different from the gods of mere religion displayed by Brecht? These questions of the relationship of belief to the dynamics of historical change are among the most pressing faced by Christians. Yet the problem is not new and the NT itself is heavily marked by the Church's struggle with the reality of history.

Many parables of the NT give rich evidence of that engagement. In the parable of the Sower, for instance, the 'main' point, the primary sense understood by Jesus's audience, is clearly that a certain amount of 'wastage' is to be expected in his ministry, although success far outweighs the opposition. Subsequently, in the explanation given to the disciples, the parable becomes an allegory of resistances to Jesus's teaching, and it is the seed sown in good ground that appears to be in the minority.⁸ What is characteristic here is that the parable becomes an object of interpretation; more specifically it is interpretable by or for a specific community at a specific historical moment. Thus, the parable of the tenants is directed by Jesus (Mark 12:12) against the Jewish religious leadership, while the Church discerned a prophetic sense (Matthew 21:43) and applied it to the Jews as a whole and to itself as recipient of the vineyard.

That openness to interpretation coincides with the sense of parable as riddling and enigmatic (see Mark 4:11f; Is. 6:9). It may even be baffling: Luke's unjust steward (Lk. 16) is given no less than three glosses to 'explain it'. Brecht's play is a good example of the first of these - that 'the sons of this world are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light'. His parable for the theatre offers a model by which we can examine societies in which men and women exploit other men and women - but leaves scope for his interrogation of 'goodness' to be turned on his own views. Above all, it remains marvellously open to interpretation within our own history and so provocatively becomes a reading of *our* society, economics, ideology.

NOTES

1. I use John Willett's translation (Eyre Methuen, 1965).

2. 'Comedy and the Volksstück' in *Brecht in Perspective* (Longman, 1982).
3. *The Threepenny Opera* (Eyre Methuen 1979) p 34.
4. '*Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*. Aspekte einer Brechtschen Komodie' in *Brechts Guter Mensch von Sezuan Materialien* (Suhrkamp 1982) p.221.
5. Marx: *Early Writings* (Penguin 1975) p.247.
6. Marx: *Surveys from Exile* (Penguin 1973) p.146.
7. See Perry Anderson, 'Trotsky's Interpretation of Stalinism', *New Left Review* 139, 1983, p 53).
8. See A E Harvey's *Companion to the Gospels* (Oxford and Cambridge Presses, 1972) ad loc.

TED HUGHES: 'SKYLARKS'

Roger Pooley

Gertrude Stein said that her famous phrase 'a rose is a rose is a rose' was the first time a rose had been *seen* in literature for centuries. I'm not sure that she has recovered real roses for literature either; but I can see the point. Poetic roses suffer from incurable symbolism. The same has been true of birds. In Marvell's 'The Garden', the bird is the emblem of the soul, as in much Renaissance Neoplatonism; for the Romantics the bird was an emblem of the artist. Shelley's sky-lark combines elements of both:

That from Heaven, or near it,
 Pourest thy full heart
 In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.¹

There is a similar admiration for the 'immortal bird' whose art can span history in Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale'.

Ted Hughes' birds are objects of the kind of rapt attention he has brought to a number of living things; like Shelley, he searches for the right similes to reveal them to our imagination. But it is not only their reality that he wants to capture (the first chapter of his *Poetry in the Making* is called 'Capturing Animals'). The birds have a numinous quality, too. This quality can be seen from a number of perspectives. One links with David Barratt's discussion of a cultural 'fall' some time before the Romantic movement, but one need not be historicist to make it: that, where God is no longer seen as the source of plenitude and wholeness, 'nature' takes on that role. The classic opposition, in Blake for example, or Lawrence, is between nature and culture, organism and mechanism. But Hughes does not travel that particular road; his birds can have some disturbingly efficient, mechanical qualities about them and still seem poetic avatars. Another perspective would be the mythologising strain in modern

literature. Hughes' principal mythological creature is Crow, whose life and songs provide a deliberate and precise counter-image to the Judaeo-Christian creator God. Elsewhere, Hughes has defined the purpose of myths and legends as part of a project for a unifying imagination:

The myths and legends...can be seen as large-scale accounts of negotiations between the powers of the inner world and the stubborn conditions of the outer world, under which ordinary men and women have to live.²

The need seems to be to come to terms with the power of the imagination which seems to contradict the restrictions the individual faces in the world outside his head. The Christian explanation of this might be fallenness; it is interesting that in *Wodwo* and *Crow* Hughes writes a number of parodies of Genesis 2 and 3 to generate different explanations of the relationship of God and evil, sexuality and nature. But what comes over more than all these features of myth (and we can call the Fall a myth, in its formal qualities, without compromising its truthfulness) is Hughes' urgent sense that we need to survive, to adapt, to live with cruelty and even to adopt it.

'Skylarks' was published in *Wodwo* (1967) and, with two extra sections, in *Selected Poems 1957-1981* (Faber, 1982) It is this second version I shall discuss, although critics such as Keith Sagar, and Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, have questioned whether Hughes has improved the poem with the new ending.³

The lark goes up at the start of the poem like a storm-cone - 'As if the globe were uneasy'. Throughout the poem the larks have an ambivalent relation to the earth, as its spokesmen ('The mad earth's missionaries'), and yet almost escaping it. Perhaps they don't really belong to either. Like Prometheus they are 'slung between heaven and earth'.⁴ For Hughes this position has become increasingly fascinating - a powerful yet tragic situation, a meeting of Psalm 8 and Icarus.

The lark's head is 'barbed like a hunting arrow', its body:

Leaden
Like a bullet
To supplant
Life from its centre.

A suicide mission? Not exactly, though the poem courts that possibility more than once. Nor is it the random violence that Hughes is sometimes accused of (sometimes justly). Firstly, it is a rhetorical and narrative climax to the first part of the poem; yet, as so often in Hughes' poetry, that climax turns out to be ironic, self-questioning, indicating a need to try again. Secondly, the violence is part of nature, not a pastoral or even Romantic plenitude, but there none the less. And isn't that a properly religious view of nature? St Paul wrote that 'God's eternal power and divine nature' could be understood from his creation (Romans 1:20). And, perhaps more centrally, God's answer to Job was an astonishing,

mouth-stopping recital of the wonders of creation, climaxing with the ferocity of Behemoth and Leviathan.

A close examination of the poem reveals that Hughes comes out from his investigation with a mixture of clues, bewilderment, and a sense of danger. Perhaps he is too ready to substitute the 'earth' for 'creator'. What of the lark's inbuilt command? Is this only about DNA?

shot through the crested head
with the command, Not die
But climb
Climb
Sing
Obedient as to death a dead thing.

The absence of God in the articulation of this explanation is odd. Where does the command come from? The obedience is interesting, too. It's very like the obedience of the disciple in Pauline theology; a dead thing is the ultimate example of obedience to death, completely taken over by its subject. So 'for me to live is Christ' (Philippians 1:21) is the consequence of a death to self. The lark's song, too, is the song of the disciple:

O song, incomprehensibly both ways -
Joy! Help! Joy! Help!

The 'incomprehensibly' comes, in part, from Hughes' wondering whether the lark's singing as it's breathing in as well as out. Partly, it's an expression of wonder, and, perhaps chiefly, agony at the position of the poet and the message he has to sing. The poet, like the lark, is under a mysterious compulsion to sing and suffer.

The longer lines at this stage of the poem indicate that Hughes is reflecting on the lark rather than trying to reproduce its flight as in those short, one or two word lines. But where is the help to come from? Again, we must conclude that Hughes has pointedly left God out. Is it because (as in his discussion of myth above) he sees God as one kind of language for the debate within oneself, a kind of 'strategy of inwardness' as Fredric Jameson calls it?⁵ That is the pressure from the Romantic view of the poet, particularly in the twentieth century where the dominant culture is not only secularised, but committed to a view of the poet as marginal man.⁶ But we can already see in *Wodwo*, in poems like 'Theology', and certainly in the subsequent volumes *Crow* and *Gaudete*, that this kind of enquiry is turning Hughes back to questions of creation and the nature of its creator. What he comes back to, though, is a version of Gnosticism, which was one of the rival religions to Christianity in the early Christian centuries. There are numerous versions of Gnosticism, but one essential feature is that there are two Gods, one transcendent and only reachable by an act of 'gnosis', knowledge or illumination, and an ignorant, evil creator, who is responsible for the material

world, which is perceived as valueless and irredeemable (this includes the human body).⁷ Hughes' version of this gives the transcendent God no power; and no human (or creature) really attains transcendence, though the desire is often there. Thus only two roles are possible - victim, or survivor.

This bleak dualism provides something of a clue to understanding section VI of the poem, where the language of religion is more clearly present:

Heaven is a madhouse
With the voices and frenzies of the larks.

It is a parody Sunday service, with 'Squealing and gibbering and cursing' instead of prayers and hymns, the birds sacrificed to the sun in an ineffectual mass, and the mad earth sending up missionaries.

Yet, in the next section, when the larks are given 'the OK' to come down, they end up 'conscience perfect'. How? The crucial context for this section of the poem is Hopkins' 'The Windhover', a poem we see behind Hughes' early 'The Hawk in the Rain', too. It's as if Hughes wants to parody Hopkins to undermine that sense of the mastery of the windhover (an image of Christ) in a God-soaked world. For both poets the bird is an image of risky achievement against fiercely buffeting odds, yet for Hopkins this is an achievement which is fruitful:

...AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

Even the stoop, the agony as it is for Hughes too, breaks out into bright heraldic colours, which is a further encouragement for us as readers to take it as pentecostal. But for the Romantic Hughes, the bird's song has been sucked out of them, emptied by the sun, and that is the end of it. But 'conscience perfect', because that's what a poet has to do.

It is not so stunningly exhilarated as Hopkins, but it is an image of possibility until stifled by the new last section of the poem (VIII). The perspective changes to the image of Cuchulain the defeated hero, derived from Yeats' play *The Death of Cuchulain*. Cuchulain (tied to a pillar stone so as not to die lying down)⁸ hears the trickster, a dark crow

Guiding the near lark nearer
With its blind song.

What began as mystery has ended in despair. What is the point of the lark's song if it is 'blind'? We are familiar with the image of the poet as blind visionary - T S Eliot's Tiresias in *The Waste Land* is one of many - but here is nothing but defeat and disappointment. We have moved away from a 'conscience perfect' sacrifice of the poet's inwardness to a despairing sense that those 'more feeble and misguided than thyself' may destroy the life and the career of the poet.

This addition, disturbing as it may be to an organic reading of the poem (one that prizes organic unity above all - surely a pagan rather than a Christian critical position) does bring out sharply the conflict between the two Ted Hughes we seem to find in his poetry. One is the sharp-eyed attender to 'nature', with a particular eye to the elements of capture and prey. This is the Ted Hughes who seems to have generated a particular approach to teaching poetry in schools. But the other Ted Hughes is the dark, sardonic, despairing Hughes of *Crow* and *Gaudete* even parts of Moortown, the reteller of myths where all is washed up, evacuated, muddled, destroyed. This duality, it might be argued, can be traced to his eclectic Gnosticism - but where is the median between the wonderful and the terrible in nature? Hopkins' traditional Christian approach allows him to hold the wonder and the terror together, without closing his eyes to either, because for him they don't exist at different levels, or require different languages as they seem to for Hughes. For the Gnostics, we remember, creation (including the body) was evil, but could be transcended with spiritual knowledge. For Hughes in 'Skylarks' even this knowledge seems only to return you to earth, empty. No incarnation is possible.

I have argued that a Christian, symptomatic reading of Hughes' poem points to a crucial theological dilemma at the heart of his, apparently simply Romantic, view of the poet and the traditional emblem of him in the bird. It is not the place to embark on an apologetic against Gnosticism; though it should be noted that Augustine's *Confessions* is an account of the passage from such a view to being a Christian. Rather, let us conclude with two further contrasting treatments of birds.

The first is Thom Gunn's, in his poem 'Thomas Bewick', from *Jack Straw's Castle* (1976). There he described the effort of the great engraver to revert to a 'selfless self' in his observation and recording of birds:

a selfless as difficult
to recover and hold as to
capture the exact way
a burly bluetit grips
its branch (leaning forward)
over this rock
and in
The History of British Birds.

The line break is superb, capturing the moment of 'imitation' which is behind this way of attending to birds. Christian symbolisers and parable tellers may seem more akin in approach to Hughes', but there is an important modesty about Gunn's approach (his whole poetic career might be seen as an effacement of the post-Romantic 'self') which chimes with my final example, the gospel treatment of sparrows, where both in Matthew and Luke it is asserted that they are very cheap, and yet God cares about each one as it falls. Not as a symbol, first of all,

but as itself. The wonder of the skylark, according to Hughes in most of the poem, is that they do not despair in the face of what he sees as divine indifference; and yet their very extraordinariness seems to point to another analysis of nature and divinity.

NOTES

1. Shelley 'To a Sky-Lark', in *Poetry and Prose* ed. Donald H Reiman & Sharon B Powers (Norton, 1977) p.226.
2. 'Myth and Education' (1976), reprinted in Ekbert Faas *Ted Hughes: the Unaccommodated Universe* (Black Sparrow Press 1980) p 192.
3. Keith Sagar *The Art of Ted Hughes* 2nd edition (Cambridge UP 1978) pp.88-93; Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (Faber, 1981) pp.79-80.
4. *Moortown* (Faber 1979) p.77.
5. Fredric Jameson *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (University of California Press, 1979) p 2. The context is of some interest: 'The most influential formal impulses of canonical modernism have been strategies of inwardness, which set out to reappropriate an alienated universe by transforming it into personal styles and private languages: such wills to style have seemed in retrospect to reconfirm the very privatisation and fragmentation of social life against which they meant to protect.'
6. For a summary of this later point see Frank Kermode *The Romantic Image* (Routledge 1957) chapter 1.
7. For a summary of the Gnostic position, see Werner Foerster *Gnosis* (Oxford UP 1972) I,9. Manicheism, which is properly understood as a form of gnostic religion, has been regarded as a most seductive alternative to Christian orthodoxy, not just in the early period of church history, but in such medieval movements as the Cathari and the Albigensians, and in the system of William Blake. Hughes' *Gaudete* can be seen as a story about what Foerster calls 'libertine Gnosticism'.
8. See also Lady Gregory *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (London 1902) p340.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

1 General; theoretical; literature and religious faith.

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| St. Augustine | <i>On Christian Doctrine</i> (various eds.) esp. Bk.IV - one of the earliest Christian analyses of rhetoric and eloquence. |
| Barclay, O R | <i>Developing a Christian Mind</i> (IVP 1984). The Bible calls us not to a Christian philosophy but to a Christian life. The Christian mind is that which should pervade everything we do and makes us what we are. |
| Blamires, Harry | <i>The Christian Mind</i> (SPCK 1963). Our present way of thinking is too secular, even if we profess Christianity. Specific marks of Christian thinking are suggested. |
| Babbage, S B | <i>The Mark of Cain</i> (Paternoster 1974) A useful introduction to the relationship of the Christian and artistic activity. |
| Eliot, T S | "Religion and Literature" (in <i>Selected Prose</i> , Penguin 1953). |
| Etchells, Ruth | <i>A Model of Making</i> (Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984). A discussion of what might be the characteristics and insights of a specifically Christian criticism. God as Creator, is a 'model of making' for both writers and critics. |
| Gardner, Helen | <i>Religion and Literature</i> (Faber 1971). Two series of lectures, one on tragedy and one on the nature of religious poetry. |
| Jarrett-Kerr, Martin | <i>Studies in Literature and Belief</i> (Harper and Row 1955). |
| Kermode, Frank | <i>The Sense of an Ending</i> (OUP 1967) Studies in the theory of fiction, using in part ideas from Christianity about 'the end' and death. |
| van der Leeuw,
Gerardus | <i>Sacred and Profane Beauty</i> (Weidenfield and Nicholson 1963). A historical study of the original unity between religion and the arts, and the development of splits between 'sacred' and 'secular'. An attempt to reconstruct a theology of aesthetics. |
| Lewis C S | 'Christianity and Culture' in <i>Christian Reflections</i> (Bles 1967). |
| Lynch W F | <i>Christ & Apollo</i> (Sheed & Ward 1960). |
| Niebuhr, Reinhold | <i>Christ & Culture</i> (Harper 1956). |

- Ryken, Leland *Triumphs of the Imagination: Literature in Christian Perspective* (IVP 1981). A reformed evangelical approach.
- Sayers, Dorothy *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement* (Gollancz 1963)
- Schaeffer, Francis *Art and the Bible* (Hodder 1973).
- Scott, Nathan A. ed. *The New Orpheus: Essays towards a Christian Poetic* (Sheed & Ward) 1964). 22 essays.
- Seerveld, C. *Rainbows for a Fallen World* (Toronto 1980).
- Sidney, Sir Philip *An Apology for Poetry* (ed. G Shepherd, Manchester UP 1973). First published 1595; the first major defence of literature in English.

II Historical studies

- Abrams, M H *Natural Supernaturalism* (Norton 1971). A study of the secularisation of theological ideas and ways of thinking in Romanticism and subsequent literature.
- Buckley, Vincent *Poetry and the Sacred* (Chatto & Windus 1968) The writing of poetry as seen as a sacred act, and an analysis of 6 writers, showing the 'sacred' nature of their work.
- Bush, Douglas *Pagan Myth & Christian Tradition in English Poetry* (American Philosophical Society 1968). Traces the inter-relationship of classical and Christian.
- Dyson, A E *Between Two Worlds: Aspects of Literary Form* (Macmillan 1972). Traces the gradual loss of faith from 'Comus' to Kafka, and how this is reflected in individual texts.
- Frye, Roland *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (Princeton/OUP 1963).
- Lewalski, Barbara *Protestant Poetics and the C17 Religious Lyric* (Princeton UP 1979). An analysis of the Reformation attempt to create a 'Biblical poetics'; readings of Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Edward Taylor etc. in that light.
- Lewis, C S *A Preface to 'Paradise Lost'* (OUP 1942). A specifically Christian reading of a Christian poem.
- Miller, J Hillis *The Disappearance of God* (Harvard UP 1976). A study of 5 Victorian writers and their delineation of the spiritual.

Nuttall, A D *Overheard by God: Fiction and Prayer in Herbert, Milton, Dante & St John* (Methuen 1980). The idea of God as felt audience in religious poetry.

Patrides, C A *The Grand Design of God: the Literary Form of the Christian View of History*. (RKP 1972).

III The Challenge of the C20

Anderson, David *The Tragic Protest* (SCM 1969) A Christian study of some modern literature.

Cary, Norman R *Christian Criticism in the C20* (Kennikat Press, NY 1975). A survey of the leading theorists and practitioners of Christian literary theory, not always exactly orthodox.

Etchells, Ruth *Unafraid to be* (IVP 1969). A contrasting study to Anderson's dealing with the (Christian) witness non-Christian contemporary writers make.

Grant, Patrick *6 Modern Authors & Problems of Belief* (Macmillan 1979). A study of changing attitudes to images, both in religion and literature, in the work of Huxley, Graves, Jones, Tolkien, Barfield and Polanyi.

Glicksberg, Charles *Modern Literature and the Death of God* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1966). The loss of faith and the search for God, from Nietzsche & Dostoyevsky through the C20.

Gregor, Ian & Stein, Walter eds. *The Prose for God* (Sheed & Ward 1973). Religious and anti-religious aspects of imaginative literature, focussing on modern novelists and the status they may be seen to have as theologians.

Morgan, Kathleen *Christian Themes in Contemporary Poets* (SCM 1965). A study of a number of C20 religious poets, including Muir, Gascoyne, Charles Williams, Auden, Nicholson.

Rookmaaker, H R *Modern Art & the Death of a Culture* (IVP 1970).

Miller, J Hillis *Poets of Reality: 6 C20 Writers* (Harvard UP 1965). Deals with Conrad, W C Williams and others.

Scott, Nathan A *Modern Literature and the Religious Frontier* (Harper & Row 1958).

The Broken Center: Studies in the Theological Horizon of Modern Literature (Yale UP 1966).

'Negative Capability' Studies in the New Literature & the Religious Situation (Yale UP 1969)

IV The Bible as Literature

- Alter, R. *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Allen & Unwin 1982) - see highly appreciative review by David Lodge in TLS for 5.11.82.
- Auerbach, Eric *Mimesis* (Princeton UP 1953). The first two chapters particularly.
- Clines, D J A "The Old Testament as Literature and as Scripture", *Interpretation* 34, (1980), 115-127.
- Falk, M *Love Lyrics from the Bible: a translation and literary study of the Song of Songs* (Sheffield, 1982)
- Frye, Northrop *The Great Code: the Bible as Literature* (RKP 1982).
- Kermode, Frank *The Genesis of Secrecy* (on the interpretation of narrative) (Harvard UP 1979). An attempt to bring modern critical theory in literature to St Mark's Gospel.

V Other Studies; collections of essays; biographies etc

- Auden, W H *The Dyer's Hand* (Faber 1963).
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Contributors *

David Barratt is Senior Lecturer in English at Chester College, affiliated to the University of Liverpool. Among other interests is one in children's literature, on which he has published articles and reviews.

David Greenwood is a research student at St Catherine's College, Cambridge, where he is completing a thesis on Renaissance Biblical paraphrases.

Roger Kojecky works for IBM. His book, *T S Eliot's Social Criticism*, derives from his Oxford D.Phil. He has recently completed a study of Noel Coward.

Rosemary Nixon gained her M.Phil, from Liverpool for a thesis on the Victorian novel. She now works for UCCF as Booklets Editor.

Tony Phelan lectures in German at the University of Warwick. He has published a number of essays on German literature and ideas since the 18th century.

Roger Pooley lectures in English at Keele University. He gained a Ph.D on Bunyan and has edited *The Green Knight: selected writings of George Gascoigne*. He has written a Grove Booklet on Spiritual Autobiography, and is an occasional broadcaster and lecturer at the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity. At present he is Chairman of the Literary Studies Group.

* *Descriptions of contributors as in 1984.*