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Towards a Christian View of Literature

ARTHUR POLLARD

I begin with four quotations taken from two Christian poets. First:

> What I do is me: for that I came.

I dare say that most people, if not everybody, would agree with that in its statement of individual action and purpose.

Second:

> The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

Every Christian and indeed every theist would agree with that.

Third:

> Gertrude, lily and Luther are two of a town,
> Christ's lily and beast of the waste wood.[1]

Here Christian sentiment would differ. Hopkins's praise of the German nun who drowned in the wreck of the *Deutschland* does not, for some of us, improve by juxtaposition with the gratuitous insult to Luther: but the passage helps us to understand not only the high feeling of Hopkins but also the rancour between Romanists and Protestants in the nineteenth century—and thereby perhaps better to appreciate the passage itself. We all find it difficult to overcome our prejudices, and my fourth example is from a different, and lesser, poet, John Betjeman. For me not even the charm of his amiable eccentricities can excuse his persistently acidulous note whenever he is dealing with any brand of churchmanship other than Anglo-Catholic. Here is his imaginary after-service conversation with the churchwarden at an Evangelical church in Bristol:

> 'Forgive me, aren't we talking rather loud?
> I think I see a woman praying there.'
> 'Praying? The service is all over now
> And here's the verger waiting to turn out
> The lights and lock the church up. She cannot
> Be Loyal Church of England. Well good-bye
> Time flies. I must be going. Come again.
> There are some very pleasant people living here.
> I know the Inskips very well indeed.'

These last two examples represent domestic differences among Christians, but all of them present problems both for Christian readers and even more for non-Christians. Dr. Leavis has remarked:

> Hopkins is the devotional poet of a dogmatic Christianity. For the literary critic there are consequent difficulties and delicacies.[2]

I begin thus to remind ourselves that, besides the possibility of doctrinal or attitudinal problems in the writings of non-Christian authors for Christian critics, there are similar problems the other way round and, in addition, the Christian critic may have his own problems with Christian texts. Leavis, however, goes on.

> But there is something that can be seen and said, at once: Hopkins's religious interests are bound up with the presence in his poetry of a vigour of mind that puts him in another poetic world from the other Victorians. It is a vitality of thought, a vigour of the thinking intelligence, that is at the same time a vitality of concreteness.[3]

In other words, doctrinal questions apart, it is possible, says Leavis, to recognize literary quality in a writer with whom we may not sympathize, superior to that in one with whom we may. He is hinting at the autonomy of literary criticism, a topic with which we must grapple, ere long.

Before that, however, I must attempt a definition of what I mean by 'Christian'. This is all the more necessary in that, as D.S. Savage has put it,

> the life of Western man stands inescapably in a relationship to the Christian faith which has provided the foundation for his culture and his civilization, so his art is, willy-nilly, positively or negatively, in a similar relationship.[4]

Thus, however much one may be tempted to apply a modern interpretation to an older text (and this, let it be said, may do much to explain our own enjoyment of it), our understanding will be by that much defective as it fails to respond to the need for a proper historical perspective, a judgment of the writer in relation to his time and environment. The Chaucerian character-types are always with us, the hypocrisy that arises from the gap between the demand and the performance is an ever-present fact of human experience, and though we may comprehend the contemporary detail of pardons, enclosed orders, absentee clergy, it requires more than this; it requires a sensitive sympathy with the mediaeval mind and the place that Christianity had in it fully to appreciate the vices of the Pardoner and the Friar or the virtues of the Knight or the Parson. Likewise, I would argue that the meaning of *Dr. Faustus* will yield more in Christian terms than any other. It is the story not just of a man yielding himself to evil courses and paying the penalty, but of one who sells his soul to the Devil, who

rejects the opportunities of repentance and who in his last speech comes face to face with the four last things—heaven, hell, death and judgment.

It might, however, be argued that these examples come from the ages of faith and that more modern literature has freed itself from Christian assumptions. Certainly, in the era since the French Revolution and the so-called Enlightenment there are manifest differences of emphasis. Tennyson struggled with his own doubts in *In Memoriam* even though, as I think at any rate, he won through in the end. Arnold so attenuated faith that God became simply that 'something not ourselves that makes for righteousness', but even he insisted that great poetry had the note, albeit indefinable, of 'high seriousness' and poetry was to take the place of religion. T.S. Eliot even endeavours a brief history of the changes in Christian consciousness as reflected in the novel:

> There have been three chief phases. In the first, the novel took the Faith in its contemporary version for granted, and omitted it from its picture of life. Fielding, Dickens and Thackeray belong to this phase. In the second, it doubted, worried about, or contested the Faith. To this phase belong George Eliot, George Meredith and Thomas Hardy. To the third phase, in which we are living, belong nearly all the contemporary novelists except Mr. James Joyce. It is the phase of those who have never heard the Christian Faith spoken of as anything but an anachronism.[5]

What then is this Christianity which seems to have given way to secularism? I must content myself by briefly trying to indicate within the limits of our present purpose what it is and what it is not. I must stress the singularity of being a Christian. For many people it might consist in believing in God, leading a good life, and, perhaps, going to church. Crudely, yes: but believing in God is merely theistic or at best religious; leading a good life is merely moral; and going to church is merely observing a discipline. Raymond Chapman, in my view a much under-estimated critic, has put it well. Christianity, he says,

> is the revelation in history of the eternal God, offering each individual human being a share in the redemptive process that embraces all Creation. Because it establishes a relationship between God and men, it requires a certain way of life for its adherents. That way of life is explained in the precepts and example of Christ: but to follow Christ in outward actions only is not to be a Christian....
>
> A Christian is not just a person who behaves in a particular way. Still less is he one who is 'better' than others, in the sense of being kinder, more loyal, more generous. He is a person who believes in a particular creed and accepts the traditional forms of membership of the Church. . . . Because he believes thus, he is obliged to regard certain ethical precepts as of divine origin and to try to follow them. His success or failure in doing so does not necessarily mean the sincerity or insincerity of his faith. In revealed

> religion, faith precedes action. It is not simply the rationale of action that has been found in practice to be desirable. Action is subordinate to faith.[6]

Put alongside that, the *Five Approaches to Literary Criticism* (1962) which supply the title to Wilbur Scott's book—the moral, psychological, sociological, formalistic and archetypal, and one thing is missing, though it might just conceivably appear within some of these. It is the supernatural dimension. Eliot put it of the writers between the wars that they were

> simply unaware of, simply [could] not understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life. . . . The greater part of our reading matter is coming to be written by people who have no such belief, but are even ignorant of the fact that there are still people in the world so 'backward' or so 'eccentric' as to continue to believe.[7]

It is a sad commentary on our century that one of its greatest poets had to speak thus.

He claimed elsewhere that this had moral consequences and, as a result, consequences for the significance of the literature being produced:–

> With the disappearance of the idea of Original Sin, with the disappearance of the idea of intense moral struggle, the human beings presented to us both in poetry and prose fiction to-day . . . tend to become less and less real. It is in fact in moments of moral and spiritual struggle depending upon spiritual sanctions, rather than in those 'bewildering minutes' in which we are all very much alike, that men and women come nearest to being real.[8]

T.E. Hulme indeed found this 'inability to realise the meaning of the dogma of Original Sin' a phenomenon of the whole of post-Renaissance history. As he put it, 'Ethical values are *not* relative to human desires and feelings, but absolute and objective. . . . Religion supplements this . . . by its conception of Perfection',[9] whereas, by contrast, with humanism man is the measure of all things and man becomes fundamentally good. We have then, I think, the Christian succession—sin, redemption, faith and action, each following dependently on its predecessor.

What then is the relationship of literature to Christianity? That theologian *manqué*, Northrop Frye, insists that there is none:

> The study of literature takes us toward seeking poetry as the imitation of infinite social action and infinite human thought, the mind of a man who is all men, the universal creative word which is all words. . . . The critic, *qua* critic, has nothing to say for or against the affirmations that a religion makes out of these conceptions . . . Christian critics may see their total Word as an analogy of Christ, as medieval critics did, but as literature itself may be accompanied in culture by any religion, criticism must detail itself accordingly. . . . To defend the autonomy of culture in this sense seems to me the

> social task of the 'intellectual' in the modern world: if so, to defend its subordination to a total synthesis of any kind, religious or political, would be the authentic form of the *trahison des clercs*.[10]

The danger of this passage lies in its very claim for the autonomy of literature; literature does not exist in a vacuum. Its strength is in warning us of the insidious temptation to distort by doctrinal insistence. The rightness of Frye lies in claiming that moral or religious criticism cannot be a *substitute* for literary criticism. Eliot put it rather differently when he said that 'we must remember that whether [a piece] is literature or not can be determined only by literary standards', but he preceded that remark by saying 'The "greatness" of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards' and, before that, 'Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint'.[11] Both critics therefore agree that to a trained sensibility certain works will be recognized as literature and others will not. In other words—those of Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*[12]—those of us with 'a definite ethical and theological standpoint' cannot allow ourselves to accept the views of the nonconformist *The British Banner* rather than those of the culturally enlightened *Saturday Review*; or, in more contemporary terms, Mrs. Whitehouse must not rule. The glib certainties of the average mid-Victorian hymn are not to be preferred to Tennyson's wrestlings with his doubts; or, to take perhaps a more useful example, the New English Bible is not, because of its modernity, to be allowed to supersede the Authorized Version. Here we can make a pure literary judgment about the same basic material. We can reach verdicts about language and the way in which it conveys a meaning and is able to move us. In the instances I am here concerned with I am arguing, not for the autonomy of criticism as Frye would, but for the integrity of the work of art, for the Coleridgean view which sees all artistic creation as a special kind of imagination at work, as 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.'[13]

It remains that my literary criterion is the expression of a vision of life, and though it is both difficult and dangerous to divorce content and form, it is nonetheless something that we do all the time. In the best works we recognize that form most aptly embodies content. At times we may feel that the form is better than the content, and, of course, at other times, the opposite. In discussing form we can indeed confine ourselves to literary judgment, but, generally speaking, we cannot leave it there. We may note that the form brings out some quality of the content, but more often we shall also feel the need to judge the content, the author's vision, for itself. To take a contentious example, what is the difference, say, between *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and some piece of pulp pornography? First of all, whether it does this or not (and many who thought it would and bought it for this purpose), *Lady Chatterley's Lover* does not set out primarily to

pander to a taste for the obscene. I happen to think that Lawrence was ill-advised to try to do what he did, but the attempt was in line with his theories about sexual relations and the vocabulary of sex. Equally, I happen to think that those who engaged in his defence during the trial, even to the extent of claiming him as a puritan, were the victims of sanctimonious self-deception. Likewise, if the novel has to be read as some kind of allegory of the life-defeating effects of modern industrial society and the life-enhancing powers of the natural life, I find it a somewhat laboured way of doing it. All this may be to criticize both Lawrence's vision of life and his expression of that vision, but it is not to deny the presence of either, whereas the average piece of pulp pornography, so far as my very limited acquaintance goes, has neither vision nor expression to commend it.

I have here been critical of Lawrence, partly, I suppose, because I know he has done better elsewhere, but partly also because I disagree with him. Thus, Raymond Chapman:

> If the literary critic is honestly doing the job for which he has been trained and to which his inclination has drawn him, he must be prepared to suspend some of his personal presuppositions and temporarily to adopt those of the writer whose work he is assessing.[14]

Am I guilty? This is where the difficulty arises for the committed critic of any variety. On the one hand, there is the view that 'the responsibility is always with the reader, the individual, to appropriate that which is valuable and to reject that which is useless'.[15] That is surely individualism to the point of idiosyncrasy. On the other, there is the warning of I.A. Richards against the rigidity of 'doctrinal adhesions'.[16] I should like to return to Chapman:

> Now one effect of Christianity—or indeed of any religious belief—is to raise the act of individual choice above the level of pragmatism and present it as one movement in a cosmic process. A Christian recognises himself to be alone, unique and perhaps without communication with his fellow-men on the deepest issues, but at the same time he believes that there is an ultimate criterion in the Will of God. . . . The Christian is sure that there is an abiding criterion that makes sense of his slightest thought and which involves his private choice in the unfolding of all human history. The acceptance of Christianity does not mean, as some people to-day seem to suppose, a freedom from ever making any further choices. It means a responsibility which gives new significance to those choices which none can escape from making.[17]

This is the distinctive position of the Christian writer. To deploy Eliot's phrase, the Christian is always having to contemplate and act upon 'the intersection of the timeless with time.' Time posits the existential; the timeless presents the absolute. That is why the Christian choice is not predetermined; that is why in every case it is individual. That is why it is

supernatural and religious, and never merely moral and ethical.

As Eliot has reminded us, 'moral judgements of literary works are made only according to the moral code accepted by each generation, whether it lives according to that code or not.'[18] And sometimes not even that—the Puritans judged Restoration comedy very differently from the Court and, taking the same example, one can cite the libertine view of Bonamy Dobrée in the nineteen twenties and the moralistic verdict of L.C. Knights in the nineteen forties, the one seeing these plays as 'an attempt to rationalise sexual relationships,[19] and the other finding in them as much human significance as the activities of a barnyard cock.

At the same time, taking a novelist I have criticized and a critic I have mustered in my support, let us also remind ourselves that the terms 'Christian' and 'religious' are not synonymous. Speaking of Lawrence, T.S. Eliot wrote:

> His strictures upon Christianity . . . are often ill-informed; at other times they go straight to the heart of the matter: and no Christian ought to feel sure that he is religious-minded enough to ignore the criticism of a man who, without being a Christian, was primarily and always religious.[20]

The religious sense pervades much of the first two books of Wordsworth's poetic autobiography, *The Prelude*. His awareness of what he addresses as 'Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe' gives a numinous quality to all his experience, but this is not Christian. Nevertheless, the fact that it is not Christian should not prevent the Christian critic from appreciating that quality. In like manner, a disapproval of what for his time is not surprisingly an obsession with more candid expression of sexual realities, should not prevent us from appreciating in Lawrence his religious sense, to use the Wordsworthian phrase, of 'something far more deeply interfused'.

Eliot's reminder is salutary even further than he himself went. It does not necessarily require a Christian to state a Christian truth, whilst conversely 'not every statement made by a Christian is necessarily a Christian statement, since men often neglect the promptings of faith'.[21] One may even go further still and say that one Christian writer may make what he sincerely believes to be a Christian statement on one thing, and another, a quite different and yet sincerely considered Christian statement on that very same thing: the third participant in this transaction may well be the Christian reader. As Chapman said in a quotation I used earlier, none of us is exonerated from the constant act of choice, and all of us are under the obligation to seek light and, in a phrase dear to Matthew Arnold, to make sure that our light is not darkness. There is no party-line to Christianity, only responsible liberty.

That last phrase is reminiscent of Milton who pleaded so eloquently for freedom of expression in *Areopagitica*. He was later in *Paradise Lost* to write the greatest Christian poem that the world has ever seen. Some criti-

cal views of that poet may help us further in our investigation. Putting aside Dr. Leavis's attack on its language as of a kind never spoken by anybody or thought by anyone but Milton, I want to look at two recent Marxist criticisms. I would agree with Eliot in denying that 'the reader must share the beliefs of the poet in order to enjoy the poetry fully.'[22] I would insist also—indeed I have already done so—on giving proper regard to the author's contemporary circumstances. I must therefore be careful in approaching Christopher Hill's historian's treatment of *Milton and the English Revolution*. There are insights—and I do not want to seem patronizing—that are valuable. Thus in rejecting Irene Samuel's belief that we are to disapprove of Samson right to the end, he remarks shrewdly that she is perhaps attributing 'to Milton a modern liberal Christianity which he did not share'.[23] but in much else in the book I suspect that he is trying to prove the case most congenial to him. He is very informative on the politically radical movements of the seventeenth century and he emphasizes with obvious relish Milton's theological unorthodoxies,[24] but to argue that Milton used 'the story of the Fall to explain the failure of a revolution'[25] is a somewhat peculiar perspective to adopt, and in alleging parallels between Old Testament episodes in *Paradise Lost*, Books XI and XII and events after 1660 in England, he is forced to admit that he cannot demonstrate them, but 'their effect seems to me cumulative.'[26] Hill will serve to describe the other Marxist critic:

> Empson was so sure that the Christian God is evil that he could not convince himself that Milton did not agree with him. . . . Empson's skilful analysis is the *reductio ad absurdum* of Lawrence's principle that we should trust the tale rather than the teller, ignoring evidence relating to the author's conscious intentions.[27]

In this case the conscious intentions are inside, not outside, the tale—'to justify the ways of God to man', something, as Milton reminded us, 'unattempted yet in prose or rhyme'. Whether he succeeded or not, we should allow that this *was* his intention and not try to explain the failure of a revolution. Having allowed that as his intention, we should try to accommodate our explanation to it and not just disbelieve it, as Empson does. Then going on from there, we should try to understand Milton against the theological beliefs of his own time, and if we do not like his picture of God, we have no need to liken Him to 'Uncle Joe Stalin'; we can just put it down, as critics from Pope onwards have done, to a failure of imaginative response on Milton's part and not to any conscious or unconscious belief. Of course, if we share Milton's Christianity, we may, as C.S. Lewis did, recognize an orthodox adherence to the historic doctrines of sin, redemption and grace, and we may even go on to the counter-attack and say that 'the adverse criticism of Milton is not so much a literary phenomenon as the shadow cast upon literature by revolutionary politics, antinomian

ethics, and the worship of Man by Man.'[28] That illustrates what I meant when I rejected Frye's claim that literature must be autonomous.

These instances may, as Lewis suggests, be the results of a different doctrinal adherence. There is a paragraph of Eliot's on Dante which distinguishes the Christian more fundamentally from the others:

> The attitude of Dante to the fundamental experience of the *Vita Nuova* can only be understood by accustoming ourselves to find meaning in *final causes* rather than in origins. It is not, I believe, meant as a description of what he *consciously* felt on his meeting with Beatrice, but rather as a description of what that meant on mature reflection upon it. The final cause is the attraction towards God. A great deal of sentiment has been spilt, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, upon idealizing the reciprocal feelings of man and woman towards each other . . .; this sentiment ignoring the fact that the love of man and woman . . . is only explained and made reasonable by the higher love, or else is simply the coupling of animals.[29]

I repeat: man is not the measure of all things; for the Christian everything is *sub specie aeternitatis*. That is why in Spenser's *Four Hymns* the first two of earthly love and beauty are followed by two others of heavenly love and beauty

> With whose sweet pleasures being so possest,
> Thy straying thoughts henceforth for ever rest.

With the possibility of such perfections why not then Christian conformity in perfect aesthetic judgment? Simply, once again original sin, the inevitable imperfections of human nature, remembering St. Paul's 'The good that I would I do not and the evil that I would not that I do', whether through inability or the lack of will. One such shortcoming, in terms of literature judgment, is exclusivism—the kind of view one finds stated in such comments as these:

> Literature is the expression, through the aesthetic medium of words, of the dogmas of the Catholic Church, and that which is in any way out of harmony with these words is not literature.[30]

or this:

> From the Christian viewpoint, that literature is undoubtedly best which presents most fully the spiritual presence of Christ himself. At its purest, this is to waive the requirements of art in favour of doctrine or devotion and to upset traditional critical judgments. It means, for example, that such a poorly crafted work as James Street's *The High Calling*, which in addition to being poorly crafted is crudely sentimental, even bathetic, ranks by 'Christian' standards as high as Henry James' *The Golden Bowl* or Proust's *The Remembrance of Things Past*.[31]

We remember that even a Milton could put into the mouth of Christ the rejection of all the glory that was Greece:

> Think not but that I know these things, or think
> I know them not; not therefore am I short
> Of knowing what I ought: he who receives
> Light from above, from the fountain of light,
> No other doctrine needs, though granted true;
> But these are false, or little else but dreams,
> Conjectures, fancies, built on nothing firm.[32]

Admittedly, questions of faith intruded here.

If this is the rigorist position, at the other end of the spectrum is the liberal, represented notably in our day by Tillich and his disciples, who would take over the Hellenic good, true and beautiful without too much discrimination as to whether these are Christian, or even religious, since they provide an essential component in the answer to man's search for the power of being. This seems to me, as did John Robinson's *Honest to God* in relation to the 'something not ourselves that makes for righteousness', to be a regression to, or at best no advance upon, Arnold's emphasis on sweetness and light and the pursuit of perfection—in no sense, specifically Christian at all.

Vagueness, however, is outstripped in 'progressivism' by sheer astounding 'trendiness'. My example is from art criticism:

> In an evil hour for Christianity this magnificent genius [Raphael] stereotyped all the incidents of the life of Christ—but Raphael did much more, he injected and saturated the minds of millions with dull commonplaces about the Gospels . . . Raphael is probably one of the most dangerous heretics since the church began; his heresy is a subtle one which begins with a yawn and ends with nausea.[33]

So much for the centuries of Christian art; so much for the tradition that Eliot has recognized as an essential and important ingredient in both Christian creation and criticism. The inner voice will never be enough: this is the Romantic heresy. 'Men cannot get on without giving allegiance to something outside themselves.'[34]

At the same time there is no conformity or uniformity. There is room for Christian differences, and the problem here is probably more difficult for the Protestant than the Catholic. I like Amos Wilder's summary:

> We may speak informally of a Christian discrimination or criticism in the sense that theological and biblical insights are invoked. But there is, properly speaking, no such thing as a Christian aesthetic. If the term be used, it should be used informally, to throw into relief the contributions that can be made to the problem of aesthetic judgment by the Christian understanding of man and the world. All critics presuppose, or appeal to, one or another set of presuppositions.[35]

The Christian critic must be aware of his presuppositions. In this, however, he has an advantage over his fellows in that he shares these presuppositions as part of his very faith with most writers, certainly up to 1800, and with many since. He may, nonetheless, have to be on his guard at times and be prepared to suspend his disbelief. He must be open and he must be honest. He may not accept, but he must not distort. He may give literary assent without necessarily giving moral, religious or Christian assent, but in such cases it is unlikely that mere literary brilliance will have produced sublime art. He may therefore at times approve for some reasons, but disapprove for others. He may commend in part, but withhold full appreciation. He will recognize that art and faith may oft be separate, though sometimes joined together, but that both help to show that

> The world is charged with the grandeur of God

and that therefore, for both artist and critic, under God,

> What I do is me; for that I came.

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NOTES

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27 *Ibid.*, p. 242.
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