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CHRISTIANITY AND THE NOVELISTS[1]

A. N. WILSON

You have asked me to discuss the relationship between Christianity and the art of fiction, and so I must begin by determining what sort of relationship this might be. That is, are we to be contemplating a practice which is compatible with the Christian revelation, even one which grows out of it, as all goods things grow? Or are the two things opposed?

If I were an architect or a musician, my task would be easier. Many of the most beautiful buildings in the world are not simply great works of art. They are tangible and visible expressions of Christian truth, very often full of deliberate Christian symbolism. The stones of Salisbury Cathedral, rooted and grounded in earth, soar upwards into the sky, defying gravity, with such stupendous delicacy that the most unobservant wanderer in the aisles of Salisbury could not fail to grasp that we, creatures of earth, can be led upward into the godhead through the mystery of the ascended Christ. And how? When the eye does not stray up, it is led, by the perfect perspective of the nave and chancel, towards the high altar, to remind us that the link between earth and heaven is to be found there, at God's board. Similarly obvious Christian truths can be discerned simply by listening to Mozart's *Ave Verum Corpus*, or Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* or Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*.

Novels are, of course, lesser things than buildings, lesser things than music. But in this regard, they are also different in kind. There *are* Christian novels – by Tolstoy and Dostoievski, by Charlotte Mary Yonge and Rose Macaulay, but nobody could pretend that fiction has necessarily been at its best when it has been most Christian. Indeed, there are a number of disturbing facts which I think you will probably wish to contemplate or discuss. I do not present them in any logical order, but here they are.

First, there has been a consistent tradition in Protestant England that there is something vaguely unChristian about reading novels at all. Until about 1920, perhaps until the second world war, it was not at all unusual for English families to disapprove of reading novels on a Sunday. And there must still be many people who regard it as tantamount to a sin to read a novel in the morning. In the early days of the novel, it was not customary to acknowledge one's authorship of works of fiction. Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen both wrote anonymously. And there lurked behind this reticence not merely the sense that the art of fiction was ungenteel, but that it was improper.

What was improper about it? Well, unquestionably, there were improper novels about; so that even to pen *Waverley* or *Pride and Prejudice* was to put yourself in the same league table as the authors of sensational or scabrous or even pornographic productions such as *Tom Jones, The Monk* or *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. The impropriety of novels, by this standard, did not consist solely in the fact that they contained frank depictions of licentiousness. It was that they stirred up artificial extremes of emotion about non-existent characters; emotions which it perhaps was, and perhaps is, improper for a Christian man or woman to feel in any case. As you turned the pages of *Melmoth the Wanderer* (the work of a clergyman), you could enjoy all the dizzying sensations of artificial fear. And yet we are supposed to have believed another book which tells us that perfect love has cast out fear. *Melmoth* contains, moreover, like *Tristram Shandy* (the work of another clergyman) a great deal of simple smut: dirty passages, written for the sexual titillation of the audience. It is sexual excitement stirred up by images of cruelty, and by silly phantoms of evil, a man who has sold his soul to the devil, and paces the earth, an accursed soul, unable to find peace. Scott and Jane Austen were both devout Christians, and there can be no doubt that this played its part in their hesitancy about proclaiming authorship of novels. I suspect that the hesitancy goes very deep, and has an ancient lineage. The Church learnt much of its wisdom from Plato, and one of the features of the Reformation was a rediscovery of that Platonic wisdom. Plato was himself a poet. But he banished the poets from his Republic simply because what they wrote was *untrue*. Those devout English men and women who were brought up not to read novels on a Sunday would, if they were pressed, give very similar reasons for their devout habit. The mind is dark enough, cloudy enough as it is. It needs all the discipline of the Christian life to be able to penetrate the shadows and see into the life of things. The great end of all Christian mystics has been to see beyond the forms of this world into the light of the heavenly places. How then can we dare to sully our vision by deliberately contemplating imitations of this world, shadows of a shadow?

So much for the Protestant world. If we go abroad and look at the continental tradition, we find a remarkable similarity. There are a great many good books on the *Index*, of course, including *The Bible*, and the works of Voltaire and *The Water Babies*; and the *Pensées* of Pascal. But there we will also find the names of the great French novelists: Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola. Ever since Cervantes suffered at the hands of the Inquisition, there has been a natural enmity between the Catholic Church and the novelists. It is in fact very rare to find any great Italian, French, German or Spanish novelist who was a practising Catholic. The death of Proust is entirely emblematic in this respect. Like Bergotte, the novelist in his own great masterpiece, Proust was scribbling his fiction to the end, revising, changing and improving, his semi-fictionalised vision of French high society. Napoleon, at the end of his life, had relented; he consented to receive last rites, and asked for his bed to be placed in a position from which he could gaze at the Blessed Sacrament. There was, in the end, no contradiction between Christianity and the man of action. But Proust left instructions that they should only send for the priest when they knew it was too late. The novelist was dead by the time that dear man Abbé Mignier reached 44 rue Hamelin.

Why does that seem so appropriate? Why do we feel, if we value Proust's masterpiece, that this ghastly risk was almost worth making; and that the presence in his horrible cork-lined bedroom of a Christian priest, even for ten minutes before his death, would have been inappropriate?

Before I attempt a stumbling sort of answer, let us contemplate one other great novelist, perhaps the greatest novelist in the history of the world: Tolstoy. How can a man capable of writing *War and Peace* dismiss it as 'gossippy twaddle'? How can a man, on finishing *Anna Karenina* feel so deeply dissatisfied with it? How could Tolstoy develop, as we all know he did, such a profound aversion to his own work, and to the whole art of fiction that he reached the

same conclusion as Plato, as the Popes who put Zola on the index, and as the sabbatarian men and women of Victorian England?

I think that the answer lies partly along these lines. Nobody can help having points of view about something or another. It may be that we believe that Socialism will alone save the world; or that the world is flat; or that alcohol is evil, or that the Russians, or the Jews, or the Irish are plotting to over-run what is left of our civilisation. If we happen to believe these things, and write a novel, it is perhaps equally inevitable that some vestige of this creed will creep through the pages, in the dialogue between the characters, or even in the turn of the story's events. But it will be neither a worse novel, nor a better one – and *that* is the important point – for these beliefs of ours. It is notoriously difficult to define the nature of great fiction, but whatever else it depends upon, it does not depend on a point of view. *Waverley* or *Pride and Prejudice* or *Dombey and Son* or *War and Peace* are not great novels because they are expressions of a *point of view*. Their greatness derives from something quite other. It derives, largely, from the extraordinary fact that Scott and Jane Austen and Dickens and Tolstoy were able to create wholly real worlds, peopled with characters in whom it is possible to invest all our sympathy; whether they make us laugh or weep, they are *there*; as magically real, while we read the book, as we are. Tolstoy could call this achievement 'gossippy twaddle'. In fact, the greatness of his fiction offended his own egotism. Although he had the extraordinary capacity to invest, create and shape great human characters, he valued it less than his own desire to sound off about vegetarianism, pacifism and the simple life.

Nevertheless, however much we try to vilify Tolstoy, the strength of his position remains. If it is true that the greatness of a novel does not depend upon its point of view, is it not corollory of this, if not a *sequitur*, that the novelist, when she or he holds a pen in hand, should suspend opinion and belief? Is it not perhaps necessary for the novelist to be agnostic and amoral in surveying the world? Regardless of his or her private beliefs, does not the novelist need to gaze solely at the world they have created, and at that only? The task of the novelist is to paint that world as accurately and as fully as he can, to bring the figures in it to life, to observe them in their moral predicaments without passing a judgment and without defining a point of view?

Take, for instance, the novels of Evelyn Waugh. There are readers of his books who would say that though they are unblemished in style and form, they fail only in the passages where they press home a theological point of view. The necessarily cold eye, the unerring eye, which sees Captain Grimes and Lord Copper and Anthony Blanche in all their absurdity and comedy is misted over with sentimentality when it attempts to look at Mr. Crouchback. His sanctity is implausible not because there are no saints in the world, but because Evelyn Waugh, in describing him, has ceased to be a novelist, *tout simple* and shown his hand as a devout Catholic. We see something of the same thing at work in Graham Greene's *End of the Affair*. In his introduction to the revised edition of that book, Mr. Greene confesses to have lapsed from the high code of artistic excellence into the position of a propagandist. The agnostic who is converted to the Faith when his hideous facial mole is removed through the intercession of the heroine at the end of the book has ceased to be a figure in the very world which is the world of all of us and become a cardboard cut-out from a Catholic Truth Society pamphlet. That is *not* because miracles are an impossibility. It is because novelists must, if they are true to their calling, be detached from theology, just as they must be detached from politics.

We find then, every reason for not reading a novel on a Sunday. On the one hand, novelists presume to be creators of worlds, of men and women. In so far as they are dealing with something manifestly fake, made-up, and unreal, they are distracting us from the Truth. And in so far as they are successful in their creation of human characters, they are setting themselves up as rivals to God. But in addition to this they are pursuing a craft in which excellence would appear to be dependent on a colourless detachment from any theological point of view. Though they are born within the Christian dispensation and have perhaps heard the good news of Christ, they must, for their professional livelihood, behave as though they had not been so born, had not so heard. They must lie, like the dead Proust, in the dangerous never-never land of the unredeemed, unhouseled, disappointed and unanneled.

It would therefore seem to be very questionable whether Christians should take novelists very seriously or waste much of their time reading their work. But what of the Christian novelist himself? Even if he decided to disregard the standards of the highest artistic excellence, and to use his fiction as a vehicle for an expression of Christian belief, a manipulation of plot and characters into positions which disturb the reader into believing the Christian gospel, is there not a deep impropriety even about this? Are not the truths of Christianity too important, and too searching, to be dressed up in the frivolous pages of an essentially trivial form such as fiction?

I do not know. For myself, I have a weakness for such stories as those of James Adderley, whose novels were best sellers at the turn of the century, and which invariably told of how a heedless young worldling, as a result of attending an Anglo-Catholic mission in the slums of the East End, became a Christian socialist, selling all that he had in pursuance of evangelical precedent. Others probably can enjoy the yarns of Charlotte Mary Yonge (Was it Tennyson who said, on reaching an exciting passage in one of her books, "I see light at the end of the tunnel: the heroine is about to be confirmed"?) or the spikier passages of Compton Mackenzie or Sheila Kaye-Smith. But this branch of literature, or subliterature, is not quite what we are talking about. In the mainsteam of European literature, in the great novels, we do not find these literary equivalents of *bondieusierie*. And the novels in English which take man's quest for Divine Truth as their theme are both rare, and rarely good. I think what I enjoy in *John Inglesant*, for instance, is a mingling of my pleasure in a good historical film or 'costume drama' with the pleasure I would take, if I were less of a middle-brow, in reading the works of the Cambridge Platonists and the Molinist mystics. My pleasure in that book, deep as it is, is quite different from my pleasure in *Oliver Twist* or *The Last Chronicle of Barset*.

But of my pleasure in the great novels, I would say this, falteringly and uncertainly, to those who say that novels are an unChristian thing. Even more falteringly and uncertainly, I would say it to that inner voice which condemns my

own slight and occasional attempts to write fiction. The excellence of a novel depends on the extent to which its author has realised the characters within it. You cannot write a novel, even a bad one, without something bordering on an obsession with human character. Who knows where the 'characters' in novels come from? Novelists believe that they 'make them up'. Perhaps they do. And in that 'making up' there is involved a partial memory of lots of real people we have met and known and heard about. In the process of a fictional character becoming real on the page, they are detached from any of their 'originals'. And it is only by a total concentration of heart and intellect upon these 'unreal' creatures of fancy that they become 'real'. Good, or evil, or something in between, they only exist because of the novelist's obsession with them, an obsession which borders on love. When Paul Dombey died, Dickens paced the streets of London, dazed with grief, as if he had lost one of his own children. Each of his characters bears the stamp of this manic concentration; he has worked at them and worried at them until they have come to worry him, he will not be at peace until they are down on the page. Once written about, they are real and solid for posterity, more real to us than most of the hundreds of thousands of people who swarmed about the streets of Victorian London and now lie buried in its cemeteries. Novelists are not necessarily good people. In many cases, they have been positively wicked or unpleasant. But they have all, the great ones, possessed or perhaps been possessed by, a curiosity about the human race bordering on mania. I have already said that, in this act of creation, there is a danger of blasphemy, of the novelist playing at God. And we have remembered Plato's banishing the poets because their art can only be a shadow of a shade.

But when we turn to the writings of the neo-Platonists, in particular to Plotinus, we find a different view of art. Plotinus believed that a work of art need not necessarily be a shadow of a shadow. He accepted Plato's theory of the Forms; the view that everything in Nature was but a shadowy imitation of a real idea which existed in Heaven. But he believed that it was possible for the artist, in depicting nature, to penetrate that shadow, and give us a glimpse of thing itself. It would be over-solemn to apply his doctrine to most novels. To any novel, perhaps, except those of the greatest writers – Tolstoy, Scott, Dickens. Any human being's perception of another human being is likely to be distorted: by sentiment, by ignorance, or by sheer absence of sympathy. The obsessive interest which a novelist takes in his characters compels sympathy. By sympathy, I do not mean that our hearts bleed for Quilp falling into the sludge of the Thames; or, for that matter, for Bingo Little falling into the swimming bath. I mean that a novel enables us to see human beings much more fully than we can ever see one another in 'real life'. By pure artifice, a novelist can take us into another character's thoughts and emotions. We can watch, not merely the outer actions of that character, but chart the movements of his soul. In that process of sympathy, between a novelist and his creation and (if it is successful) between the creation and the reader, there is something which is not necessarily at all at variance with the following of the incarnate Christ. If we realise that it is something *like love* which creates even the evil characters in a novel, something like love, even, which satirises them and makes us laugh at them – then, we might blow the dust off our novels and read them with a less troubled conscience on a Sunday afternoon. Then it would seem that the extraordinarily dangerous detachment of which I have spoken (detachment from point of view, detachment from prejudice) which is necessary for great fiction to work, has something in it of the wisdom which told us to judge not that we be not judged. And the acceptance of human character which is forced upon us by reading fiction might, on occasion, have something in it of *sic Deus dilexit mundum*. But it would still be silly to think of novels as a very high art form; and positively dangerous to take them too seriously.

1 A talk given to King's College Joint Christian Council on 1 March 1983.