

The Christian novelist – where are the limits?

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In contrast with the favourable reaction to my first two novels,¹ a number of reviewers of an early draft of my third novel *Seeking the Divine Spark: A Satire in the Style of Evelyn Waugh* had criticism. There was strong objection to the ‘vivid’ description of ‘immoral... acts, with accompanying coarse language’. Such mind-polluting writing would revolt ‘a person with a healthy outlook’, my severest critic claimed. Christians ‘whose bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit’ should avoid exposure ‘to the perversions so common in society’. I was exhorted to abandon my project and seek ‘an approach that will not portray sexual sins vividly’.

Although my sensitive critic exaggerates the number of scenes and their explicitness (there are three, possibly four) and the coarse dialogue (it is mild dialogue consistent with character) he raises a valid point of critical interest for the Christian novelist.² The issue here is not about the standard of writing. It is about the limits a Christian novelist must impose upon himself, regardless of the subject matter of the story, and regardless of his talent as a writer. To go beyond those limits in an attempt to expose ‘the perversions so common in society’ is to risk promoting them, and putting the reader in the way of temptation. Perhaps such an activity may be compared with screening a pornographic film to show how vile and immoral it is. That seems to be the point my critic was making. If it is, it is a poor analogy.

Traditional ideas of sexual morality are not restricted to orthodox Christians, whether Catholic or Protestant. Modesty in dress and behaviour, faithfulness in marriage, and the equivalent of the Christian concept of the body being the temple of the Holy Spirit are to be found in other cultures and other religions. The views of the ordinary pious Muslim, though sometimes stricter in their cultural application, would not deviate much from traditional Christian sexual morality. I make an important distinction here between religious motivations and cultural/political motivations in Islam.

In fact, such views about sexual morality should not be thought exclusively religious. In theory – and this is backed by observation – non-religious people and cultures can and do hold similar standards. Many of us would claim that it is part of our nature – both as regards feeling and reason – to hold that sexual activity ought to be an expression of the love of an enduring relationship between male and female, one that is consecrated, if it is to maintain its integrity. The fact that many of us struggle to live up to that ideal says nothing about our ability to recognise that ideal – and the obligation to adhere to it. We are, after all, fallible beings and, as Christians believe, prey to the effects of original sin.

¹ *The Castle of Heavenly Bliss* and *In This Vale of Tears*. Both novels have a strong Burkean influence (See <http://gerardcharleswilson.com/books.htm>). The opening paragraph of this essay may give the impression that I am engaged in naked self-promotion. It is, however, a serious attempt to outline rudiments of a view of literary fiction, drawing on the thoughts of Edmund Burke and on Evelyn Waugh’s views about the writer’s craft. (Revised 2011 Kindle ebook editions of the three novels are available on amazon.com).

² The novel has since then gone through many revisions during which I took close notice of the criticism. The rawness of the offensive passages has been dulled as much for style and subtlety as for their explicitness.

The case is analogous to the fat man unable to walk by a cake shop. No matter how often he gives into temptation the fat man, who knows that his weakness will sometimes get the better of him, remains conscious that if he eats too many cream cakes he will get fat. Traditional ideas of sexual morality, then, belong to the natural law, the law that the mind and conscience recognize in the order of things, a law whose recognition enables us to distinguish right acts from wrong acts those corrupting our nature. Revelation confirms and enlarges what our natural thoughts and feelings teach us.

Most people, no matter who they are and what beliefs they hold, acknowledge that Western society is presently suffering from an enervating preoccupation with sex whose manifestation is the sexual exploitation of women. This, I would claim, is an unavoidable manifestation of the mentality of the Kinsey generation. Without much effort one could write pages of examples of the different ways the exploitation of women confronts us in our daily lives. But let me go on with one example among many for my purpose. There is, at the moment of writing, an American television sitcom popular right across the world. I have seen one complete program and the first five to ten minutes of a number of programs. The dialogue is mostly crude, tasteless, and vulgar, spoken by characters that are crude, obnoxious and vulgar, and of a puerility that must be heard and seen to be believed. If ever there was a sign that Western Civilization is in regression this program is it.

The 'hero' obviously thinks that women are there as a release for his immature and ungovernable sexual tension. This is no satire, as may be said of the popular and sometimes tasteless 'Seinfeld' in its day. The hero's moronic behaviour is projected as cute and funny, to be aspired to by boys and admired by girls. The attitude pervading the program is that any sexual activity whatever is a fair thing. Sex is morally neutral – a pleasure to be taken greedily and not fussed about too much, no matter how much pain and humiliation it may cause in real circumstances.

If the antics and attitudes of the hero of a ragingly popular television program are held out to be admired by youth, it's a good chance they will be. It is an even better chance that that admiration will be acted upon. The consequences and the sparked moral indignation fill newspaper columns and radio and television talk time. There is obviously not a little hypocrisy involved here, which can be multiplied a hundredfold across all forms of media, as well as of entertainment. How is a Christian novelist to satirize the pervasive hypocrisy that is set off by the carefully tutored behaviour of young males?

Most readers and critics who lavished praise on Evelyn Waugh's brilliant satires in the late 1920s and early 1930s did not understand that Waugh's motivations were deeply religious and philosophically political (as opposed to party political). When *Decline and Fall*, his first satire, burst on a public in awe of his powerful imagination and style, he was in the process of converting to Catholicism. His conversion in 1930 caused a sensation. Critics and readers were stunned and appalled at the ultramodern writer turning ultramontane. I refer the reader to Professor Douglas Patey's excellent critical biography, *The Life of Evelyn Waugh*,³ for a detailed discussion of Waugh's conversion and the philosophical background to his satires.

My point in bringing Evelyn Waugh into this discussion is that despite his attempts to explain his reasons for converting to Catholicism, all the time outlining an historical,

³ Douglas Patey, *The Life of Evelyn Waugh*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford, 1998.

philosophical and political perspective that obviously drew on well-known contemporary Catholic thinkers, papal social writings and philosophers of conservatism like Edmund Burke, not all Catholics were on his wavelength. Indeed, some were among his most ferocious critics. Among these was Ernest Oldmeadow, editor of *The Tablet*, which was owned by no lesser personage than the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster and thought to reflect his views. With the release of Waugh's third novel, *Black Mischief*, Oldmeadow could no longer allow *The Tablet* to remain silent. In January 1933, he went on the attack:

A year or two ago, paragraphs appeared in various newspapers announcing that Mr Evelyn Waugh, a novelist, had been received into the Church. Whether Mr Waugh still considers himself a Catholic, *The Tablet* does not know; but, in case he is so regarded by booksellers, librarians and novel-readers in general, we hereby state that his latest novel [*Black Mischief*] would be a disgrace to anybody professing the Catholic name.

Support for Waugh from prominent Catholics was not lacking. In accusing Waugh of wallowing in the nasty sordid side of life, Oldmeadow had clearly missed the point. Waugh was engaged in powerfully satirizing rudderless contemporary society. Once understood, Waugh's novels reveal a far more penetrating critique than his explicit political writings. In fact, *Decline and Fall*, *Vile Bodies*, *Black Mischief* and a *Handful of Dust* (his fourth novel, 1934) show just where the novel can go, and where non-fiction writing about politics and society is barred. Oldmeadow remained impervious to the public support Waugh received. His obstinacy may not have been helped by Waugh's sometimes intemperate and contemptuous defence of his novels. With the release of *A Handful of Dust* Oldmeadow again went on the attack in an editorial.

[Waugh's] 1934 novel...is free from the gross indecency and irreverence which made his forerunner [*Black Mischief*] abominable...

But this is hardly an improvement, Oldmeadow considered.

...A reproof to the author from our unimportant selves was amplified from a quarter so authoritative that his co-religionists reasonably hoped to find Mr Waugh turning over a completely new leaf. He has not done so...

The pity of it is that Mr. Waugh is misusing his indubitable talent... If he wants to taste true happiness, he will make a clean Franciscan break with the past. He will stop the reprinting of every ignoble book of which he controls the copyright, and will show the world that a writer of genuine talent is not dependent upon malodorousness for his drawing power. So acting, he may lose the recommendations of the Book Society; but will some day hear a 'Well done!' from a Voice of more consequence.⁴

In time, the patronage of the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster ended with his death and there was a changing of the guard at *The Tablet*. Waugh's writings not only became

⁴ The conflict with Oldmeadow and the quotations from *The Tablet* are in Patey, pp. 108 & 110

acceptable but he himself contributed to *The Tablet's* pages. Nevertheless, the change did not necessarily mean that Ernest Oldmeadow did not have a legitimate point about fiction written by a Catholic presumably in good standing. No doubt there are many Catholics today who would find Waugh's satires puzzling, if not deplorably 'dependent upon malodorousness'. How could any Christian writer, not just a Catholic, steep himself so deeply in the aimlessness, sordidness and moral decay that are critical parts of *Black Mischief* and *A Handful of Dust*?

Oldmeadow just could not get his mind around the incident of cannibalism in the concluding pages of *Black Mischief*. And he is certainly not the only one. I found the conclusion to *A Handful of Dust* unnervingly claustrophobic. Whereas I and others find such passages in the novel a powerful bringing home of Waugh's purposes, purposes that of their nature transcend the normal discursive or analytical scope of non-fiction writing, other readers appear trapped in the vehicle of his purpose, namely what they think of as his 'malodorousness'. But what is meant by being trapped in the malodorousness of a work of fiction? My critic made explicit what Oldmeadow does not say.

The Christian mind should remain aloof from the nastiness and moral decay of everyday life. A mind free from the spiritually polluting influences and features of daily life is a mind open to God's love and the laws issuing from love of God and neighbour. It is a mind better equipped to avoid temptation, and when tempted better able to resist. The deliberate exposure to scenes or descriptions of sexual immorality is equivalent to the fat man deliberately seating himself at a table covered in cream cakes. As the fat man fares better from avoiding the cream cake laden table, so a person benefits from giving a wide berth to the many stinking puddles of moral pollution that modern society lays in his way.

I have no issue with this view – as far as it goes. I have no issue with the person who counsels avoidance of such exposure as the better way of maintaining a moral life. Moreover, it is the responsibility of the educator to exhort those under his charge to stay clear of such mind polluting influences. This is little different from the football coach insisting that some of his footballers steer clear of particular entertainment venues, and forbidding others – those with a deplorable record of drunken behaviour and sexual indiscipline. I hardly need point out that the behaviour of some football stars is of constant concern to the community. It is a non-debatable point that the Christian novelist should not indulge in gratuitous descriptions of sexual immorality as a way of attracting a readership – which is what Oldmeadow accuses Waugh of doing. And it is precisely here that Oldmeadow, all those years ago, unwittingly touched not only the limits of the Christian novel but where the Christian novel may go and where non-fiction writing cannot go, simply because it is not equipped to do so. Indeed, where I think the Christian novel should go, as I will argue.

No doubt, as Patey suggests (p. 108), Oldmeadow had in mind Pope Pius XI's encyclical *Rappresentanti in terra* issued a few years before (1929) in which the Pope 'had called on Catholics to renew their vigilance against 'impious and immoral books and films'. The precise instructional style of a papal encyclical, a style evidently conducive to Oldmeadow's manner of thinking, serves its purpose, that is, to teach unambiguously. It is ordered, systematic and mostly abstract, explaining duty in terms of principle and law, as dictated by Revelation and reason combined. The reference to concrete cases or circumstances is usually minimal. The style of the Pius XI's encyclical was proper for his purposes. It is the style of papal writings dating from the seminal social writings of Pope

Leo XIII.⁵ The irony is that Waugh's non-fiction writing was concerned with the same issues that Leo dealt with so masterly in, among others, *Immortale Dei*, *Rerum Novarum*, and *Libertas*. These themes formed the background of his satires. But whereas Pope Leo focused on the key mistake of modern philosophies as the denial of a supernatural order, reducing the world to its observable material aspects, Waugh in his fiction focused on the consequences of rejecting that supernatural order. As part of his response to the media sensation caused by his conversion in 1930 he said:

It seems to me that in the present phase of European history the essential issue is no longer between Catholicism, on one side, and Protestantism, on the other, but between Christianity and Chaos.... Today we see it on all sides as the active negation of all that western culture has stood for. Civilization... the whole moral and artistic organization of Europe – has not in itself the power of survival.⁶

Waugh's satires do not merely describe this chaos.

It is an observable fact that arguments challenging today's materialist philosophies with their empiricist epistemologies struggle to convince their opponents. The tenacity of Marxism is indication enough. Even when those arguments are followed by a description of the murder and mayhem wrought by atheistic materialism, one is often met with a ho-hum reaction. A hundred million victims of Communist regimes? Well, yes...that's just, you know...reds under the beds...

Leaving aside the political tactics at play here, the important disadvantage of a descriptive catalogue of the consequences of materialist theories is that the reader or listener being addressed is looking in from the outside. He is at a distance from the subjective suffering. The subjective experience is lost in that distance. But it must be that way, I hear the familiar echo. Argument must be coldly logical; empirical evidence must be free from emotion if it is to be taken seriously. Argument and empirical demonstration tainted by emotion are ruled out of court by the propagators of rationalist and materialist theories. The issue of abortion, it is said, is just such a case of emotion tainting the issue of human rights, no doubt all the emotion being on the side of those protecting the unborn child who passes in the space of a few moments from a mass of cells to a person capable of being murdered, and all the cold logic on the side of supporters of 'reproductive rights'.

The familiar stock response that reason must not be tainted with emotion begs the question in this discussion; the rationalist case rests on assumptions about the nature of reason. Consequently it evades the distinction I am making between the roles of fiction and non-fiction writing. It is one thing to outline the denial of rights and injustice in a Communist or Nazi regime; it is another to create a scene in such detail that you feel present when a gang of thugs from the secret police smash the door down in the middle of the night and drag off the occupants to torture and death. The horrors of the French Revolution with its murder of predominantly ordinary citizens appear lost today when

⁵ Pope Leo XIII, 1846 - 1878

⁶ Quoted in Patey pp. 40-41, drawn from Donat Gallagher Ed., *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, Methuen, London, 1983.

that monumental historical happening comes up for discussion, and when France's fighter jets are flying majestically over the Champs Elysee trailing plumes of *bleu, blanc rouge*. That discussion is usually about the 'rights of men' that drove the triumphant overthrow of tyranny and a society of class. It is only when one takes up and reads a novel like Dickens's classic *A Tale of Two Cities* that the horror and barbarism underlying that revolution comes at you and strikes you between the eyes. And it was not just barbaric acts; it was also a barbarism of morals, a code of freedom and equality that killed innocents and set up a competing hierarchy of class. Hypocrisy was the core virtue of the new order.

I have not chosen the example of the French Revolution randomly, the reader may suspect. Edmund Burke, a contemporary of those political events across the Channel, responded with a body of anti-revolutionary writings that unrelentingly attacked the specious reasoning he claimed underpinned the 'rights of men' theory. It was this theory – this set of abstract propositions – that drove and was meant to justify the revolutionary action. That specious reasoning is the rationalistic analysis of rights – understood as 'individual subjective rights' – that today has triumphed in the formulation of most anti-discrimination legislation. Burke did not deny rights existed; he claimed that the reasoning mode proper to arriving at them was dramatically different from the mathematical mode of the rationalistic method. It is outside my object here to go into the detail of Burke's analysis of rights. I do that elsewhere.⁷ I want to take one epistemological element in that analysis and relate it to the present subject. That element is 'moral feeling' or more precisely the indispensable role of moral feeling in knowing and distinguishing right from wrong.

Dr Price, a well-known dissenting minister at that time, gave a rapturous speech in the [1688] Revolution Club in which he extolled the 1789 Revolution's victory of reason over superstition and the triumph of the rights of men over slavery. It was this rapturous speech that spurred Burke to write the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, his manifesto and masterpiece. Price's joyous outburst over the violence and the treatment of the king and queen of France as they were marched from Versailles to Paris was a grave affront to Burke's reason and his sense of justice. This was no triumph of reason over superstition or of rights over slavery, he said. Price had let his abstract deliberations take hold of him, with the result of perverting his human nature. His natural feelings should have told him that the revolutionary violence was nothing to crow over. Even worse, his denial of his human nature with its natural propensity of feeling had the taint of blasphemy about it.

Why do I feel so differently from the Reverend Dr Price, and those of his lay flock, who choose to adopt the sentiments of his discourse? – For this plain reason – because it is *natural* that I should; because we are so made as to be affected at such spectacles with melancholy sentiments upon the unstable condition of mortal prosperity, and the tremendous uncertainty of human greatness; because in events like these our passions instruct out reason; because

⁷ I deal with the issue of rights in my MA thesis in philosophy, *Natural Law Conservatism: The Epistemological Basis of the Political Philosophy of Edmund Burke* which I am at present revising and updating and propose publishing as *Edmund Burke: Knowing and Reasoning in Politics*. At the time of writing, I am posting a summary of the main features of Burke's political philosophy on my website: <http://gerardcharleswilson.com/default.htm>.

when kings are hurl'd from their thrones by the Supreme Director of this great drama, and become the objects of insult to the base, and pity to the good, we behold such disasters in the moral, as we should behold a miracle in the physical order of things. We are alarmed into reflection; our minds (as it has long since been observed) are purified by terror and pity; our weak unthinking pride is humbled, under the dispensation of a mysterious wisdom.
(*Reflections*, Penguin Edition, p. 175)

This is far from the emotionless measured argument the rationalist considers prescriptive, but it is an argument. It is an argument deliberately phrased in a manner meant to demonstrate the point about moral feeling instructing one's reason. The mode of Burke's writings – a form of non-fiction – places him half-way between the rationalism of the purveyors of the rights of men and the fictional style of Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*. He is unique in this way. But a caution: his claim about the role of feeling in moral judgement should be distinguished from Scottish philosopher David Hume's famous and much quoted claim that the passions determined a person's actions, and reason (understood as a computing process) was totally at their service.⁸ Burke's metaphysics was a classical realism drawing on the heritage of Hooker, Aquinas and Aristotle.⁹ Moral feeling is an inextricable part of the reasoning process that recognizes an intelligible (moral) order in the world. For Burke moral feeling could not be separated from the workings of reason, the sort of reasoning that operates in the ordinary person's life where deductive and inductive processes mix continually in practical judgment. Reason is perverted when it is treated solely as an abstract linear process unconnected to what we are as human beings.

This sort of people are so taken up with their theories about the rights of men, that they have totally forgot his nature. Without opening one new avenue to the understanding, they have succeeded in stopping up those that lead to the heart. They have perverted in themselves, and in those that attend to them, all the well-placed sympathies of the human breast.
(*Reflections*, Penguin Edition, pp. 156)

The natural 'sympathies of the human breast' are attached to and ratify the concrete objectification of those moral and political truths that persist whatever the time and place, and whatever the particular form of community.

We know that *we* have made no discoveries; and we think that no discoveries are to be made, in morality; nor many in the great principles of government, nor in the ideas of liberty, which were understood long before we were born... In England we have not yet been completely embowelled of our natural entrails; we still feel within us, and we cherish and cultivate, those inbred sentiments which are the faithful guardians, the active monitors of our duty, the true

⁸ 'Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.' (*A Treatise of Human Nature*)

⁹ Again, I deal with the question of Burke's metaphysics in *Natural Law Conservatism*. See also Joseph Pappin, *The Metaphysics of Edmund Burke*, Fordham University Press, New York, 1993, which argues a similar case, but in far more detail.

supporters of all liberal and manly morals... We preserve the whole of our feelings still native and entire, unsophisticated by pedantry and infidelity. We have real hearts of flesh and blood beating in our bosoms. We fear God; we look up with awe to kings; with affection to parliaments; with duty to magistrates; with reverence to priests; with respect to nobility. Why? Because when such ideas are brought before our minds, it is natural to be so affected; because all other feelings are false and spurious, and tend to corrupt our minds, to vitiate our primary morals, to render us unfit for rational liberty; and by teaching us a servile, licentious, and abandoned insolence, to be our low sport for a few holidays, to make us perfectly fit for, and justly deserving of slavery, through the whole course of our lives. (*Reflections*, Penguin Edition, pp. 182/83)

No doubt, many in today's society would scoff loudly at the idea that respect and reverence are due to kings and priests. Kings and priests and others like them are there by accident of birth or the usurpation of the democratic process that elects and transfers authority from the people to their representatives. Far from special respect being owed to them, their position is illegitimate in an enlightened democratic society, and they should be dismissed forthwith; elected officials are to carry out the mandate given them or, failing that, be shown the door. But this is just evading the issue and proving Burke's claim. Such an attitude and the accompanying ridicule arise precisely from a warped reasoning process, a bloodless mathematical process that leads to reducing the world to the material. It is the reduction of the world to the material that provides the basis and prescription for the modern democratic order: there being no inherent order whether moral, political or social, the 'people' are left to impose order by an act of will. Since the Revolution of 1789, the world has been treated to numerous attempts to impose order on the world by an act of will of persons claiming to represent the people.

In contrast, the mind 'unsophisticated by pedantry and infidelity' recognizes God's order in the world, the prescriptive nature of that order and (though people are equal in a metaphysical sense) a hierarchy of rule whose authority is conferred by that divine order – the nature of things – whatever the process of designation. There is thus, regardless of the person, an inherent dignity in the office of priest, king, magistrate, or parliamentary representative which comes from God and to which, because of its origin, it is natural to give respect and affection, especially when the particular expression of authority meets the prescriptions of the divine order and unstintingly serves the common good.

This is not an essay about political theory, but about the nature and purpose of literature, or more precisely the writing of fiction. Though I have sketched contrasting philosophical views leaving much to be explained, for the literary purpose I have said enough. Burke and Waugh saw a clash of worldviews whose outcome would be of momentous importance for civilisation. In philosophical terms it is the clash between classical realism and metaphysical materialism and its accompanying empiricist epistemologies. Both understood this. Where Burke saw 'in the groves of their [materialist] academy... nothing but gallows,'¹⁰ because '...this method of political computation... would justify every extent of crime,'¹¹ Waugh saw a social chaos filled with aimless self-indulged people living from one moment to

¹⁰ *Reflections*, pp. 171/72

¹¹ *Reflections*, p.176

another, forgetful of the guide of proven traditions. Understood on an everyday level, the political violence and the social disintegration were the result of a manner of thinking that was in complete opposition to the manner of thinking that underpinned Christian Civilisation. Western Civilisation, more accurately called Christian Civilisation, could not exist without that foundational underpinning. The crucial mistake made by the theorists of the French Revolution, and locked in the heritage they gave to the like-minded who followed them, was the sundering of the mind and the heart. There can be no moral knowledge, and thus no moral judgment, without the moral feeling that has its spark in the 'heart'.

More than two centuries later, we find similar thoughts about the necessary connection between the mind and the heart outlined in the first three encyclicals of Pope Benedict XVI.¹² It is outside the scope of this essay to draw out the astonishing coincidence of thought. It is, nevertheless, instructive – and putting Burke's arguments more firmly in the context of the issue I am dealing with here – to show the link with the latest Pope whose examination of the role of the heart in dealing with social issues was simply a further unfolding of the Church's consistent social doctrine. In all three encyclicals, Benedict emphasizes that effective political and social action, action in harmony with man's nature, can never be without the heart (the seat of love – *caritas*) leading the way.

Knowledge is never purely the work of the intellect. It can certainly be reduced to calculation and experiment, but if it aspires to be wisdom capable of directing man in the light of his first beginnings and his final ends, it must be 'seasoned' with the 'salt' of charity. Deeds without knowledge are blind, and knowledge without love is sterile.¹³

With this quotation, and the manner of its expression, we are back with the mode of writing proper to teaching, which is the Pope's object. Though Benedict's encyclicals are characterized by an impressive subtlety of thought and a wide knowledge of schools of thought and their influence in history, that mode of exposition is limited in conveying how the heart functions in the acquisition and ratification of moral knowledge. The 'why' is clearly explained; the 'how' necessarily remains outside the boundaries of his mode of writing. Indeed, in his teaching task and the form of papal encyclical, he cannot deal with the movement of the heart in discerning evil behaviour and its effects in the concrete situation. This is precisely Burke's achievement. In a series of speeches and writings against abstract theory and its disastrous consequences in determining *particular* social and political action, Burke launched a passionate and enduring attack that came from the head and the heart. Burke's anti-revolutionary writings (the outstanding example being the *Reflections*) hardly have their parallel in political theory. Despite attempts to dismiss them as emotive political rhetoric designed to move his audience, they continue to have a central place in the discussion of conservative thought.¹⁴

¹² *Deus Caritas Est, Spe Salvi, Caritas in Veritate*

¹³ *Caritas in Veritate*, No.30

¹⁴ Whether Burke was doing philosophy or not, has been a hotly debated issue. It is the central claim of my thesis that he was. J.G.A Pocock, a celebrated historian of the eighteenth century noted correctly: 'The claim that [Burke's] works are informed by a conceptual and philosophical unity requires a different sort of justification from the same claim with respect to [Hobbes]. Not all the great intelligences who have engaged in political discourse have engaged, directly or indirectly, in systematic political theorising.' J.G.A Pocock,

Burke's achievement was not only to lay the groundwork for the major form of philosophical conservatism for the next two centuries, but to show the literary starting point for the critique of rationalistic and materialist worldviews whether they come in the form of systematic abstract theory or in its different literary expressions – naturalist, existentialist, postmodernist, for example. It is significant that Burke's writings until the 1960s were often studied in schools for their literary quality, for their unsurpassed mastery of English prose, rather than for their political and philosophical content. Moreover, the fact that some commentators saw the content and style of his writings as heralding the dawn of the literary genre of Romanticism with its rebellion against rationalism, contributed to indicating the literary way forward for those who agreed with his analysis.

I am suggesting that the literary way forward for dealing with the political violence and tyranny, on the one hand, and the social and moral decay, on the other, brought on by the acceptance of materialist worldviews, was in fictional writing. It could not be in non-fiction because Burke had more or less exhausted the philosophical case against rationalistic theories; he had come to the end of the road where formal philosophising leads into the way of the moral imagination. But there is more than an indication here; the way forward is prescriptive. The Christian writer of fiction is *obliged* to take the way blazed by Burke.¹⁵

This is not difficult to understand. If one accepts the epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions of Burke's attack on abstract theory, then one is confronted with the teleology of human nature and the moral imperatives of the Natural Law. It is the Christian writer's vocation to confront evil. There is no escaping it. The Christian writer must enter with the heart and mind into the causes of evil in the world. He must confront evil at its source with all the literary ability at his disposal. To walk away from this task is equivalent to the Christian putting his hand up while the lions are approaching and telling Nero he is reconsidering his position. The ways a Christian novelist confronts evil and fallible human nature are as many as there are Christian novelists. Jane Austen and Evelyn Waugh, two of the greatest novelists in the English language, exemplify two different approaches, although most feminists would be aghast at my nominating Jane Austen as a Christian novelist.¹⁶

The reader may be surprised at how explicit Waugh was about the duty of a novelist. Selina Hastings in her much praised biography of Waugh gave close attention to his thoughts on writing.¹⁷

For Evelyn there were few doubts and ambiguities [about his faith]; the Way, though often hard was clearly visible. Man was put on Earth to love and serve God, 'an all-wise God who had a particular task for each individual soul, which the individual is free to accept or decline at will, and whose ultimate destiny is determined by his response to God's vocation'. Evelyn's vocation was to write;

Virtue, Commerce and History, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p.158

¹⁵ Burke is not the only one, of course, to provide a critique of materialist philosophies and the rationalistic method. Indeed, none is more penetrating than the Church's modern papal writings beginning with the Letters and Encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII. Burke's unique contribution is in the literary field, that is, in the way he has exposed the issues.

¹⁶ That Jane Austen was a devout Christian cannot be disputed. There are a number of references in her letters to her devotion and that of others. R.W. Chapman, ed., *Jane Austen's Letters*, Oxford University, Oxford, 1932, Appendix IV. I am unashamed about my claim that Jane Austen (1775 – 1817), a close contemporary of Edmund Burke (1729 – 1797), and certainly familiar with his fame, was already writing in the framework of Burke's conservative philosophy. This remains a thesis to be expounded.

¹⁷ Selina Hastings, *Evelyn Waugh: A Biography*, Minerva, London, 1995, pp. 503-504

and just as chaos was seen as the Devil's domain, so was the imposition of order by the artist part of the divinely imposed task. More specifically, the novelist's art must be dedicated to its primary purpose.

'The failure of modern novelists since and including James Joyce is one of presumption and exorbitance... They try to represent the whole human mind and soul and yet omit its determining character – that of being God's creature with a defined purpose.

So in my future books there will be two things to make them unpopular: a preoccupation with style and the attempt to represent man more fully, which, to me, means only one thing, man in his relation to God.'¹⁸

In typical style, Waugh is telling novelists that it is their duty to accept the philosophical and religious propositions he has accepted, and they would, if only they would get over their stubbornness and perversity and use their God-given reason. That is the logic of the position I am proposing in this essay. Perhaps Waugh was especially provoked by those critics (and they were many) who sneeringly claimed that the quality of his novels dropped in inverse proportion to the intrusion of his irrational religious beliefs. One may well ask who is irrational, Waugh most likely thought. The claim that the novel is essentially anarchic rests on the acceptance that (metaphysical) materialism is true. Unfortunately, novelists and literary theorists who make such an extravagant claim are unaware that they are guilty of the crassest question-begging. Materialism does not possess the means to prove itself. This is leaving aside, as I have discussed above, the materialist's assumption about the nature of reason.

There can be no doubt that Evelyn Waugh was familiar with Burke's anti-revolutionary writings.¹⁹ His newspaper and magazine commentaries on society are sometimes a paraphrasing of key ideas in Burke. But there is more to it than this. His manner, outlook and way of life give a hint of experiencing exactly the same 'well-placed sympathies of the human breast.' One of the most frequent criticisms heard from admirers and detractors alike is that he was a snob and social climber. The evidence, it is claimed, is his unashamed running after...no, let's say sucking up to the English nobility. Author Frances Donaldson and her husband, socialists by inclination, were neighbours of the Waugh family for many years. In her reflections of that time, she speaks vigorously against that accusation. Although Waugh abhorred socialism, and though he possessed one of the cruellest tongues of any literary figure when sufficiently provoked, he remained for the most part neighbourly and affectionate towards them. Donaldson says there was not a trace of snobbery in him.

His exclusiveness gave the lie to the public image of him as a crassly silly snob... But this concept was wholly false. It was not merely that he was extremely formal in tone, anything but a name dropper; he chose his society as rigorously in one group as in another. He had a romantic attachment to the

¹⁸ Both Waugh quotations come from magazine articles in 1946. Hastings, Source Notes, pp. 678-679.

¹⁹ It is a common (and mistaken) claim that Burke was inconsistent in his response to the American and French Revolutions (he supported the Americans). The explanation is straightforward: democracy can degenerate into tyranny as easily as monarchy. The same metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions supported his writings on the American issue.

aristocratic virtues, but he had no use for those of the aristocracy who lacked these...²⁰

The clue here is in ‘a romantic attachment to aristocratic virtues’. Selina Hastings discusses at length Waugh’s growing disillusionment with the changes in British (and by extension European) society. She devotes a chapter to it, ‘Age of the Common Man’. The changes represent decay for Waugh – the decay of European culture. Waugh’s disillusionment, which became deep depression towards the end of his life, is an echo of Burke’s famous lamentation in the *Reflections* that the ‘new empire of reason’ had destroyed the Age of Chivalry, that is, the culture of Europe. Burke’s critics dismiss this passage as the most ‘purple’ of his purple prose. I argue that it is one of the most compact expositions of his thought.²¹ The first paragraphs give its flavour and meaning.

But the age of chivalry is gone. -That of sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever. Never, never more, shall we behold that *generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exulted freedom.* The unbought grace of life, the cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprize is gone! It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honour, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness... (Reflections, p. 169 – my emphasis)

It is this view of European society and culture – and Waugh’s attachment to it – that motivates behaviour mistaken for snobbery. In this mistaken view of Waugh’s motivations we have one of the most important clues to understanding his novels. If European society and culture, built up over time through the direction of the heart and practical reason, is in decay and chaos, what better way for the novelist to drive that home than to take the reader into the concrete circumstances of people living out the despair and aimlessness accompanying that decay and chaos? And what more effective literary form is there for that task than satire?

Great social novels like Dickens’s *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* certainly succeed in portraying the evil that men and society are capable of. We, as readers, are not at a distance. We experience the concrete circumstances of the injustice a character faces and the evil of the evil doer. Our moral feeling is called into action; it predominates in that reasoning mixture that includes deductive and inductive reasoning. The virtuosity in storytelling is the great quality of such novels. The novelist conjures up an intricately linked world in which the good people, some of whom are flawed, prevail over the bad people and the breaches suffered by a society that is still civilised, a society still guided by ‘all the well-placed sympathies of the human breast’. Such storytelling is generally the task of the Christian novelist. In novels of this sort, if they be the work of a Christian novelist, Oldmeadow’s

²⁰ Frances Donaldson, *Evelyn Waugh, Portrait of a Country Neighbour*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1968, pp. 20-21.

²¹ I make a detailed defence of this claim in *Natural Law Conservatism*.

‘maladorousness’ would appear disturbingly out of place and gratuitous. Thus far there is no argument with my critic and those who share his views. *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* are good examples of works following the literary prescriptions flowing from Burke’s case against the theorists of revolution. I need not dwell on this. On the other hand, a novel which is a satire is something different, and it is here that the question of limits is validly raised.

Professor Patey provides a compelling analysis of Waugh’s ideas about writing, his satirical intent and the structure of his satires. For my purposes I want take two points in his analysis. The Hastings quotation above has already laid before us Waugh’s precise ideas about the task of writing. But (fiction) writing was also about ‘techniques’ and the ‘exercise in the use of language’ (Patey p. 36). To this we add a second element.

Early in 1929 [Waugh] praised Ronald Firbank for having solved ‘the aesthetic problem of representation in fiction’ without adopting a merely ‘subjective attitude to his material.’ Portraying his characters ‘objectively’, from the outside, Firbank avoided what Waugh later called the ‘presumption and exorbitance’ of examining character only in terms of individual psychology, not in relation to the larger systems that give it meaning. (Patey p.52)

The crucial point is viewing the character ‘from the outside’. We as the reader see and feel the character acting within external moral and social systems that give meaning to his actions. The contrast is with a subjectivist view of character – letting the subjective views of a character warp the reality of his connections with the moral and social systems within which he is acting. What the systems actually are and how a particular person may see them are two different things. In Waugh’s external world of larger systems all warping subjectivist or relativist ideas are driven from the scheme of things.

I am not sure at this stage how much formal study Waugh undertook of metaphysical and epistemological questions. Patey says that Waugh on one of his early overseas trips (1932), after the release of *Black Mischief*, took Thomist Jacques Maritain’s *Introduction to Philosophy* to read. He wanted ‘to be an intellectual for a bit’ (p.105). Whatever the case, Waugh’s prescriptions about technique and the context of larger moral systems clearly presuppose the same metaphysical and epistemological framework as Burke’s writings: classical realism. When we understand that the essential doctrine of classical realism is that the mind recognises in the particulars of sense perception an ‘intelligible order of abstract essences and necessary relations ontologically prior to particular things and contingent events’, the philosophical implications become stark. We are dealing with a real objective world governed by order, both moral and physical. The ‘larger systems’ give meaning simply because they have meaning given them. The actions of characters will be judged in reference to that implicit moral order. A novelist who chooses Waugh’s way will produce literature starkly different from the subjectivist mode of, say, Virginia Woolf.²² Clearly, Waugh’s framework of writing is ideally suited to the Christian novelist. This brings us to a crucial point. The literary form most suited to this approach to storytelling, Patey says, is satire.

²² Patey contrasts Waugh’s approach with Woolf’s. ‘Such “exorbitant” subjectivism was for instance what Virginia Woolf had called for in a famous essay on “Modern Fiction”.’ (p. 52)

Satire typically defines characters through their roles (teacher, lawyer, doctor); behavioural rules follow from roles, but characters do not live up to them. Through just such structural irony the satirist is able to teach without preaching – without making his standards of judgment tediously explicit; no commentary beyond the assignment of role is necessary to point up indecorum, leaving the narrator free to pretend neutrality or even admiration... As Waugh often said, such irony depends on a fund of unspoken agreement between writer and reader about how characters inhabiting roles *should* act. Calling on antecedently shared values, satire is thus a fundamentally conservative literary form, one that usually ratifies moral and social norms. Like Austen's or Pope's, Waugh's mockery of the rich and titled... constitutes not an attack on hierarchy but on individuals' failure to live up to their rank. (Patey pp. 62/63)

What is not mentioned here – and it is paramount – is that the roles are functions in a larger concrete system (educational, legal and health) which are in turn placed in an objective moral order (an order ontologically prior) whose governance and judgment oversees all concrete circumstances and arrangements. At this point we remind ourselves that Waugh, like Burke, saw European/Christian civilisation in an increasing state of decay and chaos. How was he going to deal with this state of affairs in satire? Patey tells us that in Waugh's first novel *Decline and Fall* '[s]cene after scene evokes indulgence in the form of drinking, drug-taking, theft, promiscuous sex and simple self-serving hypocrisy (p.63/64).' The surprising feature of the account of this chaos of aimless self-indulgence is that for many readers it is amusing and entrancing – as it was seventy years ago. This becomes a test for the reader. Patey follows with: 'Meanwhile, carefully placed parallels suggest that all these varying manifestations of indulgence are at the root the same.' What same?

Perhaps the most amusing character in *Decline and Fall* is Captain Grimes, pederast and teacher in a boys' grammar school. He is totally unrepentant of the action his pederasty leads him into. In a truly stunning passage in *Decline and Fall* Grimes says:

When you've been in the soup as often as I have, it gives you a sort of feeling that everything's for the best, really. You know, God's in His heaven; all's right with the world. I can't quite explain it, but I don't believe one can ever be unhappy for long provided one does just exactly what one wants to and when one wants to.

In the context of the story the reader is inclined to be amused at this unabashed reflection, despite the sordidness of the act referred to and the complete lack of moral consciousness. And this is the point: the reader is (or should be) rendered uncomfortable by being amused with action that in reference to the 'larger system' (the school and the responsibility of a teacher) and the prior moral law could not be more corrupt. Moral feeling is in operation here as with *Bleak House*, but with the difference that it is being challenged. It is in a way the challenge of temptation, the wavering inclination that temptation brings on. It is something of a paradox that remaining on the outside of the character looking on provokes a greater motion of the moral feeling than in a story like

Bleak House, where we remain with the feelings of the characters who suffer at the hands of evil people and evil structures. The motion of the moral feeling is heightened with the realisation that the root cause Patey is referring to is the abandonment of traditions and other guides of behaviour that grew out of Christian civilisation. Grimes is acting out in a decaying moral environment. An appreciation of Waugh's motivations and his approach to novel writing is not only necessary to understand what his novels are about. It is also necessary to understand their considerable literary power and success. A vital element of that success is taking the reader into the 'maladorousness' of a civilisation that is in decay.

This brings me back to the point of this essay. Where are the limits for a Christian novelist? For me, Waugh remains within the limits and I wonder whether or not Oldmeadow would have thought differently had he truly understood what Waugh was doing. I disagree with my critic's view that 'a different approach has to be taken in regard to exposing the perversions so common in society – an approach that will not portray sexual sins vividly.' Waugh's achievement demonstrates that it can be done – and should be done, with one being fully mindful of the epistemological role of moral feeling as derived from Burke's writings. Satire, the way Waugh uses it, is a powerful weapon in the hands of a Christian novelist, and it would be foolish to ignore it. But this does not mean a free-for-all in describing the sordidness of modern life.

The context of my novel, to which my critic was responding, is the hypocritical way the media, specialist commentators and sundry agitators have dealt with clerical sexual abuse in a society of almost unrestrained sexual licence. Such a story following Waugh's use of satire will portray some sordid behaviour – the habitual behaviour and mentality of many people in what pleases them to call postmodernist society. It is unavoidable – and legitimate. Nevertheless, there is a limit. Where that limit is exactly is hard to prescribe. I suggest it is somewhere between vivid suggestion and explicitness. If I have failed and gone beyond the limit, it is my fault and not that of the literary vehicle. Adam Mitchell Bond, a young fellow writer, read an early draft of the novel, understood the purpose, and made this accurate comment.

...while [the story] depicts a people comfortable in their sin, there is something beneath the surface which communicates to the reader how very disordered the whole sequence of events is. It is in the absurd hypocrisy and the seeming inability of the various characters to connect the dots, as it were, between their own failings and the supposed failings of the Church that resounds with a message wholly at variance with the gross abominations perpetrated within. And this is — I should think — the goal of satire, to render absurd that which takes itself so very seriously...the author has certainly achieved this.