

Literature and Religion as Rivals

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Traditional Christianity often divides human nature into two opposing sides: dark and light, the fallen and the upright. We are all familiar with the Disney imagery of a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other. Conventional Christianity counsels us to turn a deaf ear to the dark voice and open our ears only to the light. Christianity is the light and the way, and human life, we are told, is a constant struggle against the dark forces within. If we maintain this struggle, traditional Christianity argues, we can eventually purify our tainted selves and rise above the dark impulses that plague us. As we gradually purge the darkness, we will emerge like beings of light, closer to heaven and less stained by the general grottness of earthly human existence. According to American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, this rise from dark to light, from earth to heaven, is all part of an extremely long Western religious, philosophical and literary tradition that she calls the tradition of ascent.¹

The trouble with this tradition, with this image of the purified, light-filled, reformed and corrected human being, at least for me, is threefold. Firstly, it is far too 'Flanders': the Flanders family of *The Simpsons* sitcom are so perfectly nice and permanently pious that they are virtually impossible to like. Most viewers prefer Homer Simpson with his vile habits, his self-centredness, his greed and his doughnut gluttony. There is something about the very flawedness of his character, his unrepressed human vanities and uncorrected behaviour, that we find immediately appealing. If we are focusing on the light and on the idea of ascending, we tend to forget that there is something very human, very comical and very lovable about the state of 'fallenness'.

Secondly, if we go along with the image of dark opposing light, angels against devils, there seems to be little hope for integration. We are led to understand that inner peace is achieved not through generous inclusion and careful balancing of human feelings and desires and

¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: the Intelligence of Emotions*, (Cambridge, 2001) p470.

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thoughts, but through a laborious and constant repression of the dark side. And this simplistic view has repercussions that are both political and global. It is the reason why so many people, such as George W. Bush at present, can divide the world so easily into good and evil, into light and dark... those who are 'with us' or 'against us' and speak so glibly about the need to crush the dark forces so that light and right can triumph. In other words, the dark versus light approach to inner peace is carried over to the approach to world peace with possibly catastrophic consequences.

Thirdly, the trouble with human beings who have been purged of the dark side is that they also seem to run the risk of being purged of creativity. It is probably a cliché to suggest that art and creativity need to draw on the dark side in order to flourish. But even so, if that is the case, how might an artist reconcile her genuine desire to apply Christian morality with her equally genuine desire to create? In fact, the phrase 'genuine desire to create' is probably too weak: in my experience, the creative impulse is much more than a desire; it is an absolute need, a drive, a compulsion. In essence it feels very much like those other very human, often overwhelming, sometimes unwelcome compulsions that Christianity counsels against such as lust and avarice. Is it possible to stay on the 'light side' and be creative? Can we distinguish between a 'good' creative compulsion – that which emanates from the light and a 'bad' one which emanates from the darkness? Is there such a thing as good creativity and bad creativity? Or is the creative impulse just too close to the demonic impulse to be distinguishable?

Within this context the word 'demonic' is significant: on the one hand, we have *demonic*, meaning 'evil', 'pertaining to demons', and, on the other, *daemonic*, meaning 'inspiring force' or 'muse'; is it merely a coincidence that these two words are linked? The origin and history of the word 'demon' is instructive. It began life as the Greek *daimon* (*δαίμων*) which meant 'divine power', 'god', or one's 'genius', one's 'fate', 'destiny',¹ and it was used in Greek myths as a term for a minor deity as well as being applied to a 'guiding spirit'. The English word 'daemon' – which is derived from the Greek – is

¹ Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, (Oxford, 1871 [1991 edition used]), p148.

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defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘a divinity or supernatural being of a nature between gods and humans which can manifest itself as an inner or attendant spirit or inspiring force’.¹ Up until the nineteenth century, the spelling for both ‘demon’, in the devilish sense, and ‘daemon’, in the inspirational sense, was the same. So, the issue for us then is: are they really the same (or at least so closely related as to be inseparable)? Is the ‘dark side’ in fact synonymous with the creative spirit? And, if so, does this mean that the Christian emphasis on light and goodness will always be at odds with the artist’s daemonic source of inspiration? If this is the case, then does this imply that if one is an artist then one cannot be a Christian as well?

There are many writers, poets and commentators who have written about this friction between art and religion, particularly between poetry and religion. In his *Language and Silence*, George Steiner refers to the ‘notion of the god-rivalling [and] therefore potentially sacrilegious character of the act of the poet’.² Now, ‘god-rivalling’ is a serious accusation: could all poets and writers really be trying to rival or equal God’s authority? Anthony Burgess certainly thought so, commenting that

The fundamental purpose of any work of art is to impose order on the chaos of life... in imparting a vision of order the artist is doing what the religious teacher also does... [but] the religious teacher’s revelation is less a creation than a discovery, whereas the artist feels that – God rather than God’s servant – he is the author of order.³

In his meditation on poetry, *The Bow and the Lyre*, the Mexican poet and Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz states that

On the one hand, I believe that poetry and religion spring from the same source... [but] on the other hand, I believe that the Promethean thrust of modern poetry consists in its belligerence

¹ *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 5th edition used, (Oxford, 1964) p324.

² George Steiner, *Language and Silence*, (Harmondsworth, 1979), p60

³ Anthony Burgess, *Here Comes Everybody: An Introduction To James Joyce For The Ordinary Reader*, (London, 1965) p87.

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toward religion, the source of its deliberate will to create a new 'sacred', in contradistinction to the one that churches offer us today.¹

One of the writers who was perhaps most belligerent toward religion in his attempts to establish a new sacred was James Joyce. Joyce was against the dogma of the church authority because he thought it stood between humans and the acceptance of their humanity. In contrast to the long literary 'tradition of ascent', Joyce creates what might be called the literature of descent which rejects the notion that the sacred can only be found within certain prescribed religious structures.

James Joyce's new conception of the sacred could be found everywhere, even in the most mundane places. Whereas the tradition of ascent claims that there is something low about how and where we usually live and counsels us to transcend our ordinariness, the literature of descent embraces our everyday lives and allows the sacred and the profane, the philosophical and the trivial, the sensual and spiritual to overlap and co-exist. Nussbaum describes Joyce's approach as an attempt to transfigure everyday life.² Burgess contends that

without blasphemy [that is: 'without attempting to be blasphemous'], Joyce saw his function as priest-like – the solemnisation of drab days and the sanctification of the ordinary.³

Whereas the tradition of ascent attempts to transcend the body, rejecting the general messiness of bodily functions in an effort to rise up and beyond, the tradition of descent embraces the physical and celebrates the body. The last chapter of *Ulysses*, narrated by Molly Bloom, is a hymn to the body, a monologue of sexual yearnings, skin and clothes, secret liaisons and illicit touching, vaginas and menstrual bleeding. At one point Molly reflects on a woman who is 'a great 'touch-me-not'⁴ and accuses her of being 'afraid of her life'.⁵ The

¹ Octavio Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre*, trans. Ruth L. C. Simms, (Austin, 1973) p102.

² Nussbaum, *op cit*, p679.

³ Burgess, *op cit*, p25.

⁴ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, Oxford University Press edition, (Oxford, 1993) p717.

⁵ *Loc cit*.

suggestion is that someone who rejects their own body, who cannot touch or is in fear of being touched, is someone who is afraid of their own life: when one denies the body, one denies one's own existence. Such a person is saying 'no' to life instead of Molly's life-affirming final word that ends *Ulysses*, 'Yes'.

The Christian tradition has always emphasized the superiority of the mind and soul over the body. The mind-body duality creates an inner war in every would-be Christian as she attempts to repress her physical impulses and focus exclusively on her spiritual and moral development. The accounts of Catholic saints and mystics repeatedly express repulsion at the human body and a desire to escape the physical self. Even a modern, educated woman like Simone Weil (although never a confirmed Catholic, she can easily be considered a product of the Catholic mystic tradition) maintained the Christian rejection of the body.¹

In Joyce's work, however, there is not just an acceptance of the body, there is a positive embracing of the world occasioned by the Fall. This is not to say, of course, that Joyce rejoices in hatred or revenge, but that he can see the potential for beauty, light and laughter in even the darkest recesses of the human condition. The fact that human beings are flawed and full of error and that ordinary life involves indignities and ugliness, was, for Joyce, not necessarily a black tragedy; it was, in fact, a source of comedy. *Ulysses* constantly presents the reader with comic juxtapositions reflecting the contradictions of the human condition: true love amid chamber pots and semen stains; philosophy from within lavatories; joy and nobility alongside death and sin. In other words, the tradition of descent is a serious attempt to reconcile the dark and the light, to integrate the heavenly and the earthly and to cross the age-old division between mind and body.

To an extent, both *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* are retellings of the tale of *felix culpa*, literally the 'happy fault' which can also be translated as 'fortunate fall' or 'blessed sin'. The concept suggests, as does Joyce, that being fallen, being in error, may not be all that bad and may even be something to celebrate. In contrast to the traditional Christian impulse to correct and purify all that is 'wrong' in a person,

¹ See especially Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, (London, 1963).

Joyce saw great potential in errors, in slips of the pen and lip, in mispronunciations and even in typographical misprints. The potential in error, as far as he was concerned, was also the potential for play. After all, double-meanings and puns, the hallmarks of Joyce's writing, are born of misunderstanding and ambiguity. Instead of negating meaning, error offers the possibility for the extension of meaning. Indeed, Joyce suggests that in error, as well as finding humour, we might find wisdom, by learning things that we might not have learnt otherwise. Stephen Dedalus, at one point, refers to errors as 'portals of discovery',¹ and in her introduction to *Ulysses*, Jeri Johnson suggests that in recognising the 'inevitability of error... [Joyce] happily embraces the new world occasioned by the fall, the lapses'.² Imperfection, in other words, is the human condition, and our task is to embrace that condition, learn from our fallenness, laugh and enjoy its contradictions, and learn to love the imperfect human world as it is.

Jonathan Franzen is a contemporary writer who is also concerned with the impulse to correct our fallen, flawed humanity. His hugely popular novel *The Corrections*³ takes the idea of correction as a theme; he writes about parents correcting children, manuscript corrections, 'Corecktail' laxative, correcting the market economy, corrective surgery, corrective lenses and corrective facilities. Franzen implicitly criticizes the modern American way of life by detailing the frenzied rush for therapeutics, the self-improvement industry and the obsession with remedy. Every American, Franzen seems to suggest, feels as though they are in need of cosmetic surgery or psychotherapy (or both). He also reminds us of all the people whose job it is to correct others: parents, teachers, priests, editors, judges; however, correction, he contends, is *not* the role of the writer. For 'while Franzen may forgive a few characters', writes John Leonard in his review of the book, 'he won't fix them'.⁴ Whereas the teacher, and the religious instructor in particular, seeks ways to make us good and righteous, the

¹ Joyce, *op cit*, p182.

² Jeri Johnson, *Introduction* to the Oxford University Press edition of *Ulysses* (Oxford, 1993) pxxx.

³ Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*, (London, 2001).

⁴ John Leonard, 'Nuclear Fission' *The New York Review of Books*, September 21, 2001. Accessed 30/9/02 online at http://www.nybooks.com/articles/article-preview?article_id=14503

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writer seeks to explore and report on the humanity as it is, in its natural, uncorrected condition. Redemption, for Franzen, is not gained through penance and good works. For Franzen, to write truthfully is redemption in itself: '[t]o write sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them. Isn't this enough? Isn't it a lot?'.¹

Franzen and Joyce refuse to believe in a world that is neatly divided into good and evil, dark and light or any other easily listed dichotomies with deep roots in Christian theology. It is precisely their refusal to believe in this established order that makes them subversive, or, as Paz puts it, 'belligerent'.² By offering an alternative view, one that attempts, through the act of creativity, to reconcile and integrate the dark and the light, they are threatening to undermine the status quo based on such conventional dichotomies. By daring to embrace the Fall and the fallen, they acknowledge the dark and destructive power within humanity, as well as within creativity and creation. They may be suggesting that it is only through a creative dialogue between our divided selves, our divided families, our divided countries that stories and narratives are made. Perhaps, ironically enough, they are even suggesting that the Fall *is* Creation. Now, some might consider this idea subversive to the point of absurdity, but if it is a choice between engaging with a dark, unstable, potentially destructive creativity and an established order that is determined to drive out the dark side at any cost, it would seem that our survival may depend upon undoing our long history of dichotomizing and, like Joyce and Franzen, embracing an imperfect world.

¹ Jonathan Franzen, *How to be Alone*, (London, 2002) p84.

² Paz, *op cit*, p102.