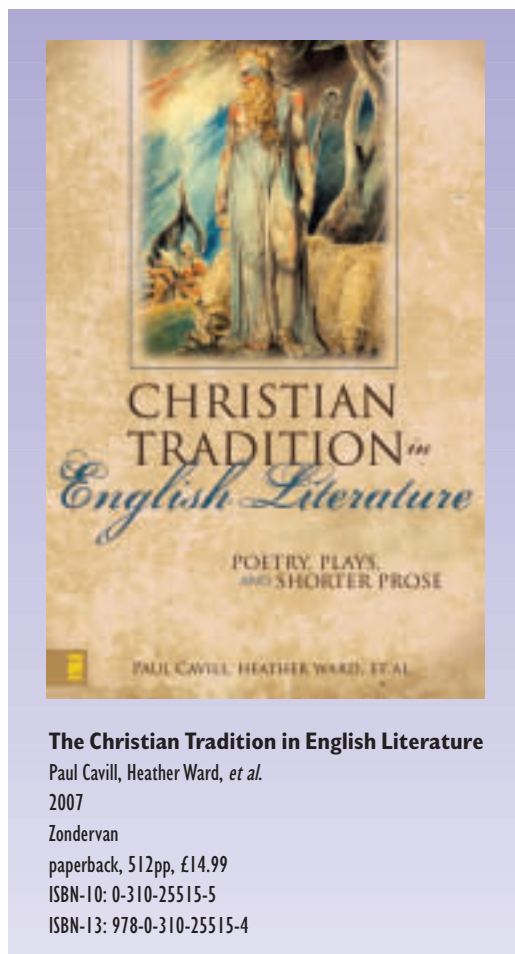


The Christian tradition in English literature



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Wide open spaces

After years tending the garden of philology, I have recently returned to walking the wide open spaces of English literature. My excuse has been that I have been researching and writing a book on the Christian tradition in English. But no excuse is necessary. The view is truly splendid: work upon work to delight and challenge the enquiring Christian mind.

Reading and writing about literature can be very different from teaching it, though. Every Christian teacher of literature will at some stage have wondered how to get across the meaning and context of biblical allusions in a play, poem or novel to students who, through no fault of their own, have never even learnt that Jesus wants them for a sunbeam. While struggling with this problem, English teachers may well have been depressed to find that they have been blamed in at least one recent Christian book (Marcus Honeysett, *Meltdown*, Leicester: IVP, 2002, p106), for unleashing the evils of postmodernism on the world in general and on students in particular.

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I'm not pretending there is any easy answer to these issues. The Bible does not loom large in most students' reading, and literature often explores the realities, feelings and philosophies of life of the 'post-Christian' contemporary world. Intellectual and Christian integrity demands that these matters be explored as fully as possible in interpreting literature. But the ebb and flow of critical interpretation over the years has left us as Christians in a curious position. English literary criticism began to flourish as a discipline particularly in the Victorian period, when the Christian tradition was part of the intellectual furniture. Furniture was useful, but it didn't do to comment too much on it. Some breakdown of the Christian consensus followed with two world wars and growing multi-culturalism: many writers abandoned Christianity, and critics found 'more interesting' things to talk about when reviewing literature. Nowadays some critics do not see Christianity as significant *at all*. Or alternatively they may regard it as wholly negative. *Paradise Lost*

is 'anti-feminist' and *The Merchant of Venice* is 'racist' today.

God and the gaps

This leaves some gaps where a Christian tradition of criticism might have run in parallel with literature. There are notable exceptions to this observation about gaps, and one of the joys of research is coming across the incisive and thoughtful criticism of scholars fully alive to the Christian nuances of the works they write about. But it is true to say, I think, that the mainstream criticism of today has tended to overlook or minimise the importance of Christianity. Christianity has become a specialised minority interest. This, coinciding with the diminishing impact of the Bible and Christian understanding of life at large, is leading to the loss of a coherent Christian perspective on literature, and the loss of a whole tradition of interpretation.

There are, of course, gaps in the literature itself. Exploring the gaps is a technique beloved of postmodern critics because gaps reveal the paradoxes, the aporias, central to the readings of texts. Where literature does not mention issues of race, gender, sexuality or class, it is nevertheless still assuming something about these things. So it is with Christianity, which is notably missing in detail from texts as far apart as *Beowulf*, *King Lear* and Philip Larkin's *Church Going*. What are we to make of this? Can these gaps tell us something about the meanings of the texts or help us to interpret them? Indeed, can such a postmodern idea be used for Christian purposes? I think so.

Beowulf

Now available in a fine translation by Seamus Heaney, and in increasingly sophisticated film versions, *Beowulf* focuses on pagan heroes before Christianity was preached to the Germanic peoples. Yet it was written by a Christian scribe and is full of recognisably biblical references (for example, to Cain and the Flood). Recent criticism has tended to suggest (to parody only a very little) that the poem is a pagan pudding lightly spiced with meaningless religious jargon so as not to offend the taste of the ecclesiastical censors.

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In other words, the gap where Christianity might have been is accidental and inconsequential. But one of the overriding concerns of the early Germanic peoples was loyalty to others and one's ancestors, and here the gap is crucial. How should Christians think of their pagan ancestors? If their forebears were good according to their lights, would that be enough to save them from hell? Persistent echoes of Romans 1 and 2 early on in the poem alert the Christian reader to this subtext, as might the praise of Beowulf at the end as *monna mildust* 'the kindest and meekest of men', echoing the judgement on Moses in Numbers 12:3.

King Lear

Shakespeare rigorously excludes explicit Christian and biblical references – as well as hope – from *King Lear*. Yet Christian themes and ideas jostle at the periphery of the text. The play is framed around negatives, 'nothing' at the beginning in Cordelia's speech, 'never' five times repeated at the end in Lear's, along with 'no' thrice repeated as Cordelia dies in Lear's arms.

Another persistent theme in the play is words and speech, used to create and explore deception, illusion and madness. A Christian inevitably thinks

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of the Word through whom all things were made from nothing in the Prologue to John's Gospel. Here is Lear trying to create something from nothing by eliciting false and flattering words at the beginning; and here is a repentant Lear looking (arguably) to hear the true word which signifies life and meaning from Cordelia's lips at the end. Lear creates and strives with nothing in 'his little world of man' without God; what we don't know is whether the word has created something from nothing for Lear. It unquestionably has for the audience.

Church Going

There are gaps, too, in Larkin's *Church Going*. The persona visiting the church makes sure it is empty before he goes in, and goes through empty rituals – taking off cycle clips 'in awkward reverence', pronouncing 'Here endeth' to the snigger of the echoes, and donating a valueless Irish sixpence. In

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more serious reflection he weighs up what the value of the church might be: not, he savagely thinks, the peculiar features of architecture and popular festivals enjoyed by those 'randy for antique' and the 'Christmas-addict'. Rather, because this 'special shell' housed and held together 'marriage, and birth / And death, and thoughts of these.'

Larkin concludes that there is something 'serious' about it, it is somewhere wisdom was developed 'If only that so many dead lie around'. So the poem starts with emptiness and ends with the dead: absence is thus at the very core. And that highlights the fact that in a Christian reading, this 'church' which is 'going' according to the title, is not what we mean and what the Bible means by 'church': the church as the Christian tradition understands it is not an empty shell (not even a building), but people; and it is not especially about seriousness and the dead, but rather about joy and hope in the Living One.

A Christian approach

Gaps can be useful, then, and they open up questions which can be very stimulating for readers and teachers. It is evident that even when texts do not mention Christianity, a Christian approach to them is still possible and indeed necessary. But much of English literature is teeming with Christian and biblical reference, not all of which gets a fair hearing as was mentioned in relation to *Paradise Lost* above. Space forbids more

examples of Christian readings here. Instead, I want to outline briefly what my book (written in collaboration with excellent colleagues) tries to do.

The Christian Tradition in English Literature, published in May 2007 by Zondervan, is aimed at predominantly Sixth Form and undergraduate students and teachers. It deals with texts and issues found on school curricula and in the major anthologies of English literature published by Norton, Oxford and Blackwell. There are 100 or so brief essays on texts from *Beowulf* to Edna O'Brien and Patrick Kavanagh, each aiming to treat Christian themes, references and images in the text or texts, and to frame some sort of response. Following the essay, there is a brief bibliography and questions for discussion.

A separate section of the book takes the reader through the storyline of the Bible, Christian history and the influence of hymns. Throughout the book, Bible narratives (creation, crucifixion), Christian themes (the Lamb, love), and Christian terms (apocalyptic, Calvinism) are flagged and explained in a glossarial section at the back.

The book aims to be a resource. The brevity of even this big a book (over 500 pages) will make it evident that a complete and definitive Christian review of literature has not been attempted. We wanted to write a book that would be enjoyable, accurate, accessible, and valuable to anyone who takes their faith and study in literature seriously. Getting this book into the hands of students and into libraries might make a real difference in this important area of Christian discipleship.

■ Paul Cavill

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