

READING AND BELIEF: OR CAN ONE STILL BE GOD-PROPPED ON MR SAMMLER'S PLANET?

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Artur Sammler, the central character of Saul Bellow's novel *Mr Sammler's Planet*, is a little at odds with the society in which he finds himself. It is America in the seventies. Sammler is in his seventies too. It is not just his age which is the problem. Everything about his background and experience makes it difficult for him to fit in: he is a Jew, he narrowly escaped death in World War II, his tastes are formed by his time spent in England in the twenties, his favourite reading is the medieval mystic Meister Eckhardt. It is no wonder he finds it difficult to cope with the response of a student audience he is invited to address. His attempts at reasonable argument are met with cries of, "That's a lot of shit" (p.42).

To do him justice, Sammler is not tied to any dated system of beliefs. He is aware of the problems raised by his favourite reading. Towards the end of the novel, he confesses that, in reading Meister Eckhardt, he "could not say that he literally believed what he was reading," but he adds, "he could, however, say that he cared to read nothing but this" (p.253).

Sammler's distinction between believing and reading is a reminder of the revolution that has taken place in our ways of perceiving the world. It is no longer possible to view a text as a series of dogmatic statements enshrining something called the "truth". We are far too conscious of the cultural origins of texts and far too conscious of the interpretive nature of language.

At this point it might be worth posing a very simple question: If the text is not conveying "truth" or material for "belief", what exactly is it conveying? Presumably enough to make people like Sammler care to read it! When Kenneth Branagh was discussing his filming of *Much Ado About Nothing*, he talked about what a contemporary audience might hope to gain from seeing a film based on a text from the 16th century. In attempting to formulate this, Branagh said: I'm not suggesting the play offers any bloody message. It's rather that it sends

the audience out with something. Branagh wasn't entirely coherent at this point and his comments admittedly lacked the density of a good deal of poststructuralist critical commentary. However, Branagh is reminding us that we we have learned a good deal about what texts cannot do, and are in the process of redefining what they can do.

Branagh noted the insights into human behaviour he himself had gained by participating in *Much Ado*. In *The Unauthorized Version*, a book about the lack of any factual basis for much of the Biblical material, the author Robin Lane Fox noted that, in reading Biblical stories, we recognise how it would have been for the characters in the stories and therefore how it might be for us now. This act of recognition of matters we ourselves are concerned with is brought out by Colin Falck in *Myth, Truth and Literature*:

What makes a story ... significant is that it gives us insight into, or that it reveals or discloses, something of importance about what human life ... is essentially like ... What it shows us is something which we can recognize only through the sense of a certain rightness ... which it gives us as we experience it (p.108).

An older traditional critic like C.S. Lewis, in discussing stories, could write: "we are always trying to catch in our net of successive moments something that is not successive" (*On Stories* p.19). I am not quoting this to suggest stories put us in touch with something fixed and permanent but as a reminder that, in turning to stories, we are trying to deal with the problem of time. This is the subject of Don Cupitt's latest book *The Time Being* where he writes towards the end:

culture makes the world thinkable and negotiable by partly alienating us from our own temporality, and by leading us to look on everything as being a lot more stable than it is ... (p.176).

Lewis had suggested that we caught "something" in our cultural nets. Is this the "something" Wordsworth found "far more deeply interfused" ("Tintern Abbey" line 97) with the life of the universe? Cupitt would deny any obvious connection between cultural constructions and the universe itself and called an earlier book of his *Creation out of Nothing*—but perhaps not even God creates out of nothing. It depends

of course on how you translate the opening sentence of *Genesis*. There is always something; and that, as Melville noted in *Moby Dick*, is what tantalises us. Melville's narrator Ishmael has this reaction to the painting in the entrance of the Spouter-Inn: "what most puzzled and confounded you was a long, limber black mass of something...". Like the world itself, the painting was "a boggy, soggy squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted" (p.13).

However cautious we may want to be ourselves, the word "truth" will still be bandied about when discussing matters of this kind. It has too long a history to be discarded that easily though it is often being used to indicate our acts of recognition and our attempts to transcend time. Let me take one example of the use of the word by the SF writer Ursula LeGuin where she is making a distinction between fact and truth by referring to the opening sentence of *The Hobbit* —"In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit" —and commenting that it is by recounting such beautiful non-facts that we may arrive in a peculiar fashion at the truth.

Le Guin's comment underlines what is essential about my references to Fox, Falck, Cupitt and Lewis and, for that matter, Branagh. Stories are important in terms of their effects, not in terms of their origins, something which Anglican ecclesiastics might have noted when, at Christmas time in England, they were debating the factual basis of the nativity stories. It is perhaps worth noting ourselves that in two science fiction stories, Wells' *The Time Machine* and Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet*, where the principal characters have the unenviable task of informing their sceptical acquaintances about events they have witnessed, in one case in the future and in the other on the planet Malacandra, these characters resort to story-telling. "Taking it as a story (says the time traveller) what do you think?" (p.79). The effect of the story on the reader is what is important. Hence Don Cupitt, in *The Long-Legged Fly*, talks about stories as opening up "new life-possibilities" (p.90).

Mr Sammler was obviously reading the text of Meister Eckhardt for the effect it had on him. It provides some sort of support for him as he sits reading in the Forty-Second Street Library, having just landed at Kennedy airport on the flight from Israel.

The kind of support Sammler is getting from his reading will not be enough to satisfy all ecclesiastical authorities. They will be made nervous by the freedom of interpretation that is implied by what we have been saying. If church authorities wish to limit the range of interpretation, they can only do this by the exercises of power, a good

example of which can be found in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* where part of the United States has become the Republic of Gilead in which the Old Testament, as interpreted by the authorities, has become state law. It was one of the Elizabethan Richard Hooker's main criticisms of Puritanism that the Puritans fashioned their reading of scripture to advance their own ecclesiastical discipline and, whether he intended it or not, Hooker is (according to Andrew Delbanco) anticipating the modern position that even scripture has "no recoverable pure meaning apart from the contingent meanings that its readers bring to it" (*The Puritan Ordeal* p.30).

One of the ironies of the invention of printing in the 15th century is that it turned Christianity into a text. Instead of being seen as the foundation document of a religious institution, it could be seen as one text among a whole number of freely available texts that could be used for the reader's private purposes. Mr Sammler even concedes the bible is one of the few books he still likes to read now he is in his seventies. I have at home a volume entitled *The Reader's Bible*, making very clear whose bible it is. It is a reprinting of the King James version and contains the original preface, "The Translators to the Reader". The preface contains the intriguing sentence: "we desire that the Scripture may speak like itself." That sentence certainly opens a can of poststructuralist worms but at least it is clear that the text is already separated from the institution that produced it.

Perhaps one of the most dramatic acknowledgements that attention has shifted to the reader is made in a sermon preached in Boston in 1841 by Theodore Parker. He told his congregation: "If Christianity were true, we should still think it was so, not because its record was written by infallible pens, nor because it was lived out by an infallible teacher... [but because it is] tried by the oracle God places in the breast" (*The American Transcendentalists* p.123). One must acknowledge these as typical Romantic sentiments, but this does not obscure the point we are making.

Parker's contemporaries were alive to the dangerous implications of such statements but that is because some people experience what the American poet Wallace Stevens calls "the blessed rage for order" in his poem, "The Idea of Order at Key West". The subject of that particular poem is a woman singing beside the ocean. She sings a song about the sea but, to be truthful, the song does not tell us anything about the sea itself. It only tells us about her: "it was she and not the sea we heard" (line 14). The sea has no clear meaning in itself. She, and not the sea, is "the maker of the song she sang" (line 15). The sea is merely "the

place by which she walked to sing" (line 17).

Traditionally it has been assumed that the sea is what is important but, for Stevens, it is only important in so far as it invites the opportunity for song. The importance of the singing rather than the sea is related to Stevens' understanding of the function of poetry: "poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption", (quoted in Jones) the poet being "the necessary angel" who provides us with new ways of viewing earth. Sammler's concern with reading rather than believing is an acknowledgement that the song is what is of most importance to those who listen.

We can look at this matter in another way if we pause by another stretch of water and return to the year 1841 in which Parker was preaching his sermon in Boston. The transcendentalist Henry Thoreau is writing the journal he kept at Walden Pond. Composing a story about the scene in front of him, he writes: "The trees have come down to the bank to see the river go by." They haven't of course, but that is the way he chooses to see them. Thoreau, like the trees according to his imagination, is profoundly affected by the scene. "I am God-propped," he wrote (*Walden* ed. Thomas, p.247). Like all Thoreau's jokes, this one is deadly serious. He is not reciting a creed but he is delighting in reading the landscape, and it has a comparable effect.

I make no suggestion that Thoreau is deriving any truths from the landscape. We have already noted the problems inherent in the word "truth". It is now time, in any case, to accept that we have been preoccupied with the wrong word. In *Mr Sammler's Planet* a journey has been taking place. Throughout the novel Sammler has been making his way to the bedside of his dying friend Elya Gruner. If there is any value in Sammler's reading, then it is to aid him in his journey.

It might not be inappropriate at this point to note the secondary position Jesus of Nazareth gave to the word "truth". When asked by his disciples for spiritual directions, he replied, according to John, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:5). He gives priority to the word "way". Like Sammler, we are all looking for directions. Truth, and this certainly applies to Sammler, is best seen as a resting-place along the way while we look for fresh directions. A significant portion of modern theology (following one might suggest in Kierkegaard's footsteps) has identified religion with making choices and commitments rather than picturing reality (Falck p.125).

In order to avoid ending on a generalisation, let us look at how a story might work for us, perhaps aiding our own journey, or suggesting possibilities of renewal. Towards the end of the second volume of *The*

Lord of the Rings the hobbits Frodo and Sam have reached the borders of Mordor, the land of the dark lord Sauron. The land around Mordor has been laid waste by Sauron's orc armies. It is the end of the day, and the last rays of the sun are falling on the remains of the stone statue of a long dead king. The head has been struck off and the statue is covered with orc graffiti. Just as it is about to get dark, the last sunlight of the day lights up the king's head and Frodo notices that a coronal of flowers has grown around the battered head. "Look!" he says, "The king has got a crown again!". Frodo pauses and then, just as the sun disappears altogether, he murmurs, "They cannot conquer forever!" (*The Two Towers* p.311).

I feel like Mr Sammler at this moment. I do not believe any of this stuff but I do rather like reading it.

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