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THE RETURN OF THE VIGILANTE: AN ESSAY ON THE POSSIBILITY OF POLITICAL JUDGMENT

BY BRADFORD LITTLEJOHN

PART 1

There was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes. —Judges 17:6

“The time is out of joint,” laments Prince Hamlet. “O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right.” In America today, we are apt to feel, more keenly and painfully than at any other time in our lives, the weight of these words. Preying upon the fragility of our body politic with the same relentless cruelty with which it preys upon the bodies of individuals, Covid-19 tore asunder the strained threads of our social fabric, exposing the depth of dishonesty, distrust, and injustice that we had sought to conceal from ourselves. In the midst of a crippling loss of confidence in both the truth and effectiveness of public judgment, a growing number of our citizens have taken matters into their own hands, through civil disobedience and anti-lockdown showdowns, through Black Lives Matter marches and anti-police violence, and finally in the appalling events of January 6. “Political judgment,” writes Oliver O’Donovan, “prevents the fragmentation of the public space into myriad private spaces,” and with the collapse of such judgment, the only justice left to us is that of the vigilante.

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Shakespeare’s masterpiece is a profound meditation on the lure of vigilantism, the sense that if falsehood has been enthroned in the seat of justice, then those who have been permitted an awful glimpse at the truths that lurk on the dark underside of power must take justice into their own hands. Vigilantism (and revolution, which is, after all, only vigilantism writ large) waits in the wings of every political system, anticipating the moment when the fragile truce which society makes with the imperfectability of human judgment breaks down. Trapped within his own fevered brain, the vigilante can no longer be sure whether he is acting to vindicate the corrupted order of public justice or merely to achieve some private catharsis. However, even when the vigilante achieves his end, as the irresolute Hamlet finally does, it turns out more often than not to be the end of the body politic that he sought to renew. The curtain falls to the tramping boots of an occupying army.

The modern-day masterworks of filmmaker Christopher Nolan wrestle with the same paradox: in a world of corrupt institutions and systemic deception, only private agents seem able to enact judgment;

and yet the result of such vengeance rarely seems to be justice after all. From Leonard Shelby in *Memento* to Robert Angier in the *Prestige* to a whole string of heroes and villains in the *Dark Knight* trilogy, Nolan's characters work in the shadows to uncover and avenge the wrongs that society can't be bothered to make right, but they never seem to be able to find their way back to the light. In this two-part essay, I propose to put Nolan's *oeuvre*, and particularly the *Dark Knight* trilogy, in conversation with the profound meditations of Christian ethicist Oliver O'Donovan on the conditions that make political judgment possible—and the tragedies that ensue when it comes out of joint.

Let us begin, however, with Nolan's first major film, *Memento* (2000).

JUSTICE AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

Memento (2000) tells the chilling tale of Leonard Shelby, a man who has short-term memory loss from a head injury inflicted by the man who raped and murdered his wife ("John G."), an injury sustained right after Leonard discovered his wife dead. Henceforth, he lives an existence haunted by this last memory, unable to form new memories and thus trapped in a world devoid of any order beyond what he can superimpose upon it. And superimpose he does, setting himself the task of tracking down and killing his wife's murderer, ostensibly in hopes of setting right this wrong, but in reality, merely to give meaning to his otherwise pointless life. He establishes a careful routine, writes himself notes, and tattoos records of key evidence on his body. Early in the film, one character asks him what the point is, since he won't even remember gaining vengeance: "But even if you get your revenge, you won't remember it. You won't remember it. You won't even know it's happened," she says. Leonard's immediate response is, "So I'll take a picture, get a tattoo"—he'll find a way to remember it. But no, he has a better answer—it's not about him. "The world doesn't disappear when you close your eyes, does it? My actions still have meaning, even if I can't remember them. My wife deserves vengeance, and it doesn't make any difference whether I know about it."

The rest of the film (which unfolds largely in reverse) mercilessly picks apart this assertion: that Leonard's private judgment will have objective meaning in the public world, that the world is out there beyond the confines of his mind. Instead, we are shown, in a cataclysmic reveal at the end, that all he has is the narrative he tells himself, which is a projection of his desire to create meaning for himself in a world that no longer holds any. The enactment of revenge, which will set Leonard's private world to rights, is the only means by which the world will hold any meaning for him. Unable to escape the confines of his own mind, he becomes subject to the manipulations of others, who may plant ideas in his head for their own purposes (a theme explored further in Nolan's *Inception*). So we find him throughout the film following a fabricated trail of evidence that leads to his friend Teddy as his wife's murderer; the film begins with him killing Teddy

and subsequently unfolds in reverse (treating its audience to the same ignorance about the past that would give meaning to the present that Leonard himself is forever doomed to). Only at the end, which is of course the beginning, do we learn that it was Leonard himself who fabricated the first evidence.

Teddy had revealed to him the terrible truth that Leonard has *already* taken vengeance; he tracked down and killed his wife's assailant months or years ago, and has now by mistake killed at least one innocent man as collateral damage. If this is true, how does he not remember? Teddy even took a picture to help him remember. But Leonard has long since cast away the picture, *wanting to forget*. Why? Teddy has the answer: "I gave you a reason to live and you were more than happy to help. You lie to yourself! You don't want the truth, the truth is a f***ing coward. So you make up your own truth." Leonard himself, Teddy charges, removed twelve pages from the police file that he is using to track down the murderer. "Why would I do that?" answers Leonard. "To set yourself a puzzle you won't ever be able to solve. . . . You just wander around playing detective. You're living a dream, kid. A dead wife to pine for and a sense of purpose to your life. A romantic quest which you wouldn't end even if I wasn't in the picture." Most damning of all is Teddy's claim (which the film leaves us unsure whether to believe) that the man Leonard was tracking was not in fact his wife's murderer, only her rapist. She survived the assault, and later committed suicide because of Leonard's condition. Leonard, he says, has created this whole narrative in order to escape his guilt (again, a theme that Nolan will later brilliantly develop in *Inception*).



In any case, Teddy is right. Leonard cannot handle the truth. He needs this quest for vengeance to give meaning to his world. So Leonard provides himself with evidence that he knows will lead him in pursuit of Teddy, and drives off to tattoo this lie to his body, knowing he will forget the conversation. As he drives, he says to himself, echoing his line earlier (later!) to Natalie: "I have to believe in the world outside my own mind. I have to believe that my actions still have meaning, even if I can't remember them. I have to believe that when my eyes are closed, the world's still there. . . . But do I? Do I believe the world's still there? Is it still out there? (*pause*) Yes." And then he ends, trying to reassure himself. "We all need mirrors to remind ourselves who we are. I'm no different." The mirror—the reflexive look back at oneself—is the only objectivity he can have. The world is only what he says it is.

Private justice, in short, is not judgment according to truth; it is the attempt to compensate for a deficit of truth. Gnawed by guilt and doubt, unable to verify the congruence between his perceptions and reality, Leonard turns to vengeance as the one thing that promises to bridge this gap and inject stable meaning back into the world. Deprived of assurance that it objectively correlates to reality, the enactment of judgment becomes a mere projection of will, a will-to-power, a will to create meaning in what is perceived as a vacuum of meaning.

The same themes can be found in Nolan's 2006 film *The Prestige*, similarly obsessed with the relationship between truth and illusion, the blinding quest for vengeance, and the gnawing doubt—the gap between perception and reality—that fuels this quest.¹ Nolan's most sustained and profound exploration of the dangerous ambiguities at the heart of the human pursuit of justice, however, comes in his acclaimed *Dark Knight* trilogy.

THE DARK KNIGHT AND THE FRAGILITY OF PUBLIC JUDGMENT

The trilogy begins with the young Bruce Wayne, early in *Batman Begins* (2005), unable to cope with the anger, guilt, and doubt stemming from his parents' murder at the hands of a desperate robber, Joe Chill. He hopes that taking vengeance on Chill will ease his doubt over his own imagined responsibility for their deaths, but is himself robbed of the opportunity for revenge. He then tries to channel his rage into a private campaign against the criminal underworld, before being recruited into a brotherhood of like-minded warriors for justice, the League of Shadows. His encounter with their fanatical mode of vigilantism, with its aspiration to enact cosmic justice in a world of corruption, jolts him into a renewed commitment to help restore the institutions of public justice in his native Gotham City.

Just when it seems he has nearly succeeded in *The Dark Knight* (2008), and can leave Gotham safely in the hands of its "White Knight," the elected District Attorney Harvey Dent, he is thwarted by "an agent of chaos," the Joker, who sets out to demonstrate just how fragile his accomplishment is. The Joker embarks on a campaign of seemingly random destruction to unmask Gotham City's quest for justice as merely a private will-to-power writ large, a vain attempt to hold at bay the chaos and meaninglessness that is the only truth in the world. "I hate plans. Yours, theirs, everyone's. Maroni has plans. Gordon has plans. Schemers trying to control their worlds. I'm not a schemer, I show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are. . . . Nobody panics when the *expected* people get killed." Gotham's justice, he charges, is not really concerned about stopping evil, merely about maintaining a sense of normalcy, of seeking to reinforce a rational structure to the world: "Nobody panics when things go according to plan, even if the plan is horrifying. If I tell the press that tomorrow a gangbanger will get shot, or a truckload of soldiers will be blown up, nobody panics. Because it's all part of the plan. But when I say that one little old mayor will die, everybody loses their minds! Introduce a little anarchy, you upset the established order



and everything becomes chaos." Justice, on this account, is nothing more than our desperate human effort to construct meaning and order in a world that seems to constantly slip through our fingers. Denying that this effort corresponds to any ordered structure of reality for justice, the Joker calls for Gotham to abandon the pretense of order and accept the justice of chaos: arbitrary, unbiased, and therefore *fair*.

When this campaign culminates in the death of Dent's love, Rachel, and the maiming of Dent himself, the Joker converts him to his gospel of nihilism, convincing Dent to abandon his public role in favor of a parody of the modern ideal of justice as fairness. "It's not about what I want. It's about what's *fair*. You thought we could be decent men in an indecent time. You thought we could lead by example. You thought the rules could be bent but not break... you were wrong. The world is cruel. And the only morality in a cruel world is chance. Unbiased. Unprejudiced. *Fair*." Dent's justice, in his new role as "Harvey Two-Face," is as fair as a coin flip, the *reductio ad absurdum* of the ideal of "blind justice"—justice that is not merely blind to any extrinsic particular considerations that would unfairly determine it one way rather than another, but to any extrinsic considerations whatsoever.

Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy thus represents a sustained and profound meditation on the necessity but fragility of political judgment. "Political judgment," writes Oliver O'Donovan,

prevents the fragmentation of the public space into myriad private spaces, each construed according to the differing perceptions and emotions of individual agents. This is necessary because the dissolution of the common world into mutual incomprehension is always possible.

The alternative to public judgment is not no judgment, but private judgments, multitudinous and conflicting, frustrating each other and denying everyone the space of freedom. "There was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 21:25). A private person acting only on his or her own behalf could not establish a new public context, and so could not perform an act of political judgment. The private act of vengeance, even if it is intended to serve the common good, is not done 'on behalf of' the community. There was a popular story-line used by more than one author in the heyday of the detective story, which concerned a public-spirited individual resolved, in a spirit of disinterested justice, to settle society's unpaid debts by killing off its unpunished murderers. The pleasing paradox in the idea was that the objects of this disinterested justice inevitably became victims rather than executed criminals. Such informal dealings could never give society what it needs in response to crime, which is judgment. (*The Ways of Judgment*, 23-24)

This "popular story-line" is one construal of Harvey Two-Face's determination to hunt down the corrupt cops who colluded with the Joker's schemes. Such a resort to private judgment, "construed accord-

1. In *The Prestige*, Angier's need for revenge against Borden for his wife's death is *intensified*, rather than weakened, by the ambiguity surrounding it, the doubt as to whether Borden was really at fault or it was a mere accident. Borden tells him, "How often I've fought with my self over that night...one half of me swearing blind that I tied a simple slip knot...the other half convinced that I tied the Langford double [a riskier knot, which Angier's wife was presumably unable to untie and thus drowned]. I suppose I'll never know for sure." It is this uncertainty that angers Angier more than a straightforward admission of guilt, as he cries repeatedly, "How can he not know?"

ing to the perceptions and emotions of an individual agent,” cannot in the end remain a judgment according to truth, as Nolan is keen to show us. Whereas Harvey begins by exacting or threatening vengeance on crime lord Maroni and on cops Wurtz and Ramirez, who led Rachel to her death, he then extends this vengeance to Gordon and to Batman, whose crime is simply not having been fast enough to save her. Indeed, he goes further than this, threatening to kill the family member Gordon loves most, simply so that Gordon will feel his pain, so that by the equal suffering of another, his own suffering may somehow be balanced. Twisted into the demands of fulfilling a private agenda, the public context, in which truth must be served, is quickly swallowed up in a solipsistic desire to establish some kind of meaning for the avenger’s dark and tortured inner world.

Thus Dent’s quest for private justice, while on the surface apparently quite different from the Joker’s indifference to any criteria for justice, resolves into much the same thing. Both have discarded as useless and arbitrary the idea of a publicly intelligible and objectively valid narrative of truth which establishes an ordered world of meaning and sustains the pursuit of public justice. In its place, what is true and hence what is just has no meaning beyond what each individual’s narrative gives it. Truth becomes mere projection, mere illusion.

Evil and death, argue Nolan’s films, turn the world upside down. They are the ultimate assertion of absurdity that shatters the meaningfully ordered reality that we all seek to cling to, leaving us tormented by doubt. The yearning for justice, then, is the yearning to restore order and meaning, the desire to regain certainty and to undo the absurdity that evil has thrown into the world. And the great danger is that our hunger for justice will become so fierce that it cannot possibly be satisfied by the corruptible, fallible, and finite instruments of human justice; it will seek instead to take God’s justice into its own hands, devouring human justice in the process. Again, O’Donovan speaks clearly to this hunger:

There is, however, something in the private yearning for vengeance that political judgment can never satisfy. The inner logic of grievance is to demand a *cosmic* reckoning. Wrong, as Hegel described it, is ‘infinite,’ and demands infinite judgment. The victim demands that the wrong should become the whole business of the universe. In confronting his adversary and striking him down he will command the world, which is reduced to that one event on which it appears to depend for its vindication. (*Ways of Judgment*, 26)

The abandonment of private justice and the acceptance of public judgment, therefore, must involve a renunciation of the quest for full satisfaction, for an infinite justice that will compensate for the deficit of meaning in the world. “The victim is required to accept a moment of renunciation, even disappointment, in allowing the community to give finite and limited recognition to the wrong by enacting judg-

ment on it” (26), says O’Donovan. But *can* the community achieve even this limited task? Or is it doomed to fall subject to the inertia of bureaucracy, the taint of corruption, the shortage of public willpower? Whereas *Memento* merely toys with this idea as the self-justification that Leonard offers himself for his pursuit of vengeance, the *Dark Knight* trilogy wrestles with the question with deadly seriousness.

RESISTING THE LURE OF COSMIC JUSTICE

Early in *Batman Begins*, after confessing his thwarted desire for revenge on Joe Chill, Bruce tells the horrified Rachel, “your system of justice is broken.” Rachel responds angrily, “Don’t you tell me the system’s broken, Bruce! I’m out here every day trying to fix it while you mope around using your grief as an excuse to do nothing. You care about justice? Look beyond your own pain, Bruce.” Although Bruce’s

resort to private vengeance is clearly wrong, Nolan’s trilogy will go on to reveal Rachel’s idealistic faith that she can fix the system as tragically naive in the face of the ever-resourceful forces of injustice. But her challenge to Bruce to take action, rather than merely wallowing in his own private grief, is heard, and he leaves Gotham on a quest to find a new meaning to his life and new means to fight injustice. Both seem to be provided in the form of the League of Shadows, which shares, he is told, his passion for justice.

The League offers a way of transcending his merely private quest for vengeance, which lacks truth, but also the weak “system” in which Rachel puts her faith, which lacks effectiveness. The League promises to transcend any merely human justice and guarantee true, natural justice. “This world is run by tyrants and corrupt bureaucrats,” its leader, Ducard, says to Bruce. “Our code respects only the natural order of things—we’re not bound by their hypocrisy.” Later, before being permitted to join the League, Bruce is asked to “demonstrate his commitment to justice” by killing a local murderer whom they have captured. Bruce recoils, falling back ultimately on Rachel’s faith in the “system.” He protests, “I’m no executioner, this man should be tried.” “By whom? Corrupt bureaucrats?” Ducard spits back. “Criminals mock society’s laws.” Ducard in turn mocks him for his compassion. For the League’s justice according to “the natural order of things” is one that is without mercy. As such, it too falls short of truth, for it treats all the citizens of Gotham as equally guilty and deserving of destruction. Bruce is asked by the League to lead the force that will destroy Gotham, which is “beyond saving,” he is told. The “justice” of the League of Shadows, therefore, is *indiscriminate*, just as Harvey Two-Face’s become. Yet *discrimination* is central to the task of judgment. O’Donovan comments, “It is a sign of inadequate judgment to rest content with the superficial description, a hallmark of ‘summary’ justice” (*Ways of Judgment*, 18). The League’s justice shares with the quest for private justice the sense that justice must be infinite, complete, eschatological, that every evildoer must receive the full and final penalty—death—which evil deserves.

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So in becoming Batman, Bruce renounces the ways of both private justice and cosmic justice, both of which purport to be according to truth, to take seriously the evil of the world which public justice faces only halfheartedly, but which thus lie about the world by denying the possibility of redemption. In refusing this infinite justice, Wayne commits himself to accepting the “finite and limited” judgment that politics can enact.

Or does he? Unlike Rachel, he does not put his whole faith in Gotham’s system of public justice. And therein lies the central ambiguity of his vocation: it seems like Batman wants to have it both ways. He desires to work *with* Gotham’s formal structures of justice, yet *outside* them; he wants to have a free hand to beat up criminals who need it, but he draws the line there—he will not, like Ducard, take it upon himself to kill them. He remains masked and hidden, waging his fight against justice in the darkness, rather than in the light of public knowledge, where true judgment must be enacted. He wants to hang up the mask and cape² but is repeatedly forced to take them up again. He throws his support behind Harvey Dent because he is convinced that he is the hero that Gotham needs: “He locked up half the city’s criminals, and he did it without wearing a mask. Gotham needs a hero with a face.” Of course, this is somewhat disingenuous, as we know, because Harvey needed Batman’s help to do this. Can the public order of justice then be sustained without resorting to the tools of the vigilante? Can the private agent of justice genuinely serve the task of public judgment, or is he intrinsically in conflict with it? It is this tension which the Joker takes advantage of, seeking to turn Gotham against Batman, to force the agents of public justice to resort to private means, and to force Batman to break his self-imposed rules and embrace his vigilante role. “Don’t talk like one of them—you’re not, even if you’d like to be,” the Joker tells Batman. “To them you’re a freak like me. They just *need* you right now. But as soon as they don’t, they’ll cast you out like a leper.” Batman needs to drop the pretense: “You have these rules. And you think they’ll save you.” “I have one rule,” Batman responds—which is not to kill. The Joker answers: “Then that’s the one you’ll have to break. To know the truth. The only sensible way to live in this world is *without* rules. Tonight you’re going to break your one rule.”

As it turns out, this prediction of the Joker does not quite come true (although Batman is forced to bend his rules almost to the breaking point in his fight against the Joker, resorting to a city-wide surveillance system that disgusts his associate Lucius Fox). But it doesn’t really matter in the end, for with Harvey’s failure, Batman abandons the central aim of justice: that judgment must be according to truth: “Because sometimes the truth isn’t good enough. Sometimes people

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2. Or does he? Another recurrent tension is that, in embracing the role of the Batman, he has sublimated, but not renounced, the anger that first set him on the path of vengeance. The question is repeatedly asked, and not resolved until the end of *The Dark Knight Rises*, whether he can truly move on and let go of this alter-ego, or whether he needs it forever as an outlet for his childhood rage.

deserve more.” At this dizzying climax of *The Dark Knight*, we see Nolan wrestling with what O’Donovan identifies as the central tension of politics: the attempt to make truth appear effectively. Politics seems forever condemned to idealistically proclaim truth at the cost of effectiveness, or to embrace effectiveness, as a cynical realist, while sacrificing truth. Over and over in the *The Dark Knight*, the guardians of justice are forced to work in the dark—literally and figuratively—in order to be effective, and at its end, Batman concludes that only by shrouding Harvey’s fall in darkness can the city have any chance of regaining the light. He will be the Dark Knight, taking the sin on himself, so that Harvey can remain the White, and Gotham can sustain the faith she needs to conquer injustice.

Gotham thus thinks that Batman has broken his one last sacred rule, and the people accordingly turn on him—the ambiguity between vigilante and deliverer is gone now, and he is nothing but a vigilante.

Gotham loses the possibility of true justice—judgment according to truth. But, really, how could Batman have been anything other than a vigilante? How could he have ever been a genuine agent of public justice?

Private judgment is liable to lose its moorings to truth, twisting a would-be act of justice into a mere act of self-assertion, a will to impose meaning on an indecent world. But it is not self-deception alone that thwarts the ambition of the vigilante. Even where private judgment succeeds in its aspiration to judge according to truth, it cannot transcend its *privacy*. It remains hidden, obscure, unrecognized. It may possibly succeed, as Batman does repeatedly, in helping to enact justice *for the benefit of*

the community, but it cannot succeed in enacting judgement *on behalf of* the community, because the vigilante does not act as the *representative of* the community. Without an agency in which the community can see itself represented, every stroke on behalf of the oppressed, every would-be restoration of justice, remains a mere act of violence, not an exercise of judgment. If we, then, like Batman, are to find our way back into the light, it can only be through a renewed political imagination. It is to this that I will turn in the second installment of this essay.

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“GENEROUS SELF-ILLUSIONS”: REFORMED PROTESTANTS AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

BY MILES SMITH IV

In August 2020, *The New Criterion* ran an essay entitled “The Most Dangerous Place to Be.” It warned against the political utility of defensively allying with or being adjacent to certain totalitarian philosophies: “The most ruthless, radical fringes of all great revolutions,” cautioned the authors, “have drawn much of their initial support from more peaceful, moderate parties.” Revolutionaries were “unvaryingly efficient at eliminating their erstwhile allies once their purpose has been served.” The English Puritan Independents “ditched the Presbyterians, the French Jacobins guillotined the Girondins, the Russian Bolsheviks sent the Mensheviks to the gulag.” Ultimately, they warned, being “to the immediate right of the extreme left is often the most dangerous place to be.”

The aforementioned French Jacobins and their place in the French Revolution is well-trod in the narrative of the French history. What is less known is the place of Protestants in the Revolution. This essay is not a comprehensive history of Protestants and the French Revolution. My purpose is to address French Protestants’ initial interactions with the Revolution to illustrate a Gallican Reformed counterpart to the English and Scots Presbyterian tendency to trust the liberalizing influence of revolutions and revolutionaries. Unlike the Gallican Reformed, the English and Scots Presbyterians would realize only too late the dangers of the totalizing impulse towards “purification” which grips revolutions. This tendency to trust revolutions and their champions, it should be noted, was not Protestant or even Calvinist *per se*. To illustrate this point, I close this essay with a brief recounting of Protestantism in the Habsburg or Austrian Empire during the same era. In Austria and also in the German states, the Reformed and Lutherans remained intransigent towards the Revolution and were marked by their respective monarchs for their devotion and loyalty. This invest-

igation will enhance our understanding of Protestant political and social thought in modern Europe, and, for contemporary Western Christians, it is a welcome cautionary tale to those who would be adjacent to or engage in political brinkmanship or extremism to achieve desired political, social, or religious outcomes.¹



LOUIS XVI (R. 1774–92)
THE LAST KING BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

Protestant intransigence toward the Bourbon monarchy was perfectly understandable given the history of France in the Early Modern Era. Louis XIV’s Edict of Fontainebleau revoked the broad toleration that Protestants enjoyed since Henry IV—a Calvinist convert to Roman Catholicism—promulgated the Edict of Nantes in 1598. Immediately the French monarchy began tyrannizing French Protestants. Thousands emigrated; those who did not leave for Britain, the Low Countries, or Germany were hunted by French authorities. By the third decade of the eighteenth century, Louis XIV and his successor, Louis XV, used a series of stiff penalties to proscribe Protestant doctrine and worship—Calvinist and Lutheran—throughout France. Louis XVI’s reign began auspiciously, and the young king indicated his willingness to revisit the French state’s systematic oppression of Huguenots.

Protestants, it should be noted, did not participate in the street violence against the Bourbon regime that occurred in the 1780s. Most Calvinists in the cities formed an important part of the property-owning middle class and were unwilling to engage in more radical forms of civil protest. In 1788, Louis XVI made Jacques Necker, a Swiss Calvinist, his chief minister. Reform lay on the horizon. Protestants might have chosen to publicly demonstrate loyalty to the absolute regime in the hopes that Louis XVI might become a self-conscious protector of Protestants like his brother-in-law, Habsburg

1. Julia Friedman and David Hawkes, “The Most Dangerous Place to Be,” *New Criterion*, Aug 2020.

Emperor Joseph II. Instead, Protestants become conservative revolutionists, hoping that the revolutionary moment would end in a constitutional monarchy.

French Protestants participated enthusiastically when the King called for a meeting of the Estates General to mitigate social unrest in 1789. Two years earlier, Louis XVI lifted most civil sanctions against Huguenots, and their lot in French society improved quickly. While they did not delight in absolute monarchy, unlike their American co-religionists, most saw the king as an ally in need of limited guardrails provided by relatively narrow constitutional measures. Many, like Antoine Barnave, simply wanted the King to accede to the relatively restrained demands of Necker. And after the Revolution in the summer of 1789, French Protestants hoped for a constitutional monarchy. Indeed, Republicanism held no special meaning for French Protestants. Calvinists who participated in the National Assembly between 1789 and the instigation of the Terror all remained committed to the conservative cause of maintaining or restoring the monarchy on constitutional grounds. Their conspicuous refusal to participate in radical politics made them particular targets for the increasingly secular leaders of Revolutionary France.²

By 1793, a number of former Roman Catholic priests, seminarians, and occasionally even bishops who had turned on the Roman hierarchy led a movement to de-Christianize France; there would be—could be—no middle ground between the secular republic and religious toleration. The few Protestants who placed their hopes in a pluralistic secular republic saw those same hopes dashed in the Spring of 1793 when the leaders of the Revolution unleashed the Cult of Reason on French society. The Cult immediately erased every gain made by Protestants during three years of Louis XVI's constitutional rule. The first batch of churches closed by the regime included Paris's main Protestant congregation.

The dean of nineteenth-century French historians, the politician and writer François Guizot, argued that the initial constitutional revolution of 1789/90 enjoyed warm Protestant support but rejected the common Roman Catholic and Counterrevolutionary polemic that Protestants overthrew societal order in the name of *en masse* liberalization. Guizot's father died by the guillotine during the Terror, and Guizot despised the accusation that the Revolution and Protestantism were synonymous, a common refrain from some conservative Roman Catholics. Johann Georg Heinzmann, a German writer, traveled through France in 1799 and wrote that "French counter-revolutionaries say that the Protestants are the cause of the Revolution and that

they degraded the clergy and disseminated free ideas, which are those of foreigners, not the French." The Republican French, Heinzmann remarked, valued Protestants and gave "them credit for the first victory of light over dark. The true revolutionary... is a friend of the Protestants." Guizot, by contrast, spent his life arguing for and eventually serving constitutional monarchy. Although he rejected absolutism, he sneered at the idea that the revolution owed its trajectory to Protestantism. French Huguenots, Guizot mourned, had been ultimately fooled by the promises of the early days of the French Revolution. "The Protestants, who had long bent under a painful yoke which years had scarcely alleviated, found themselves delivered by the dawn of the French Revolution, which they hailed with transport." But their enthusiasm quickly turned to horror. A "certain number of the constitutionals"—Protestants committed to the Constitutional monarchy of 1789–91—"paid, on the scaffold of 'The Terror,' for their generous self-illusions in 1789."³



THE 1793 "FESTIVAL OF REASON" IN PARIS, ASSOCIATED WITH THE BEGINNING OF DE-CHRISTIANIZATION

The Catholic association of French Protestantism with the revolutionary causes sustained the perceptions that Huguenots were particularly devoted to the French Revolution. This led to sectarian conflicts between Protestants and Roman Catholics in some locales during the early years of the Revolution. Rural Catholic peasants viewed the revolutionary upheavals as largely benefitting urban Protestant merchants at their expense. Somewhat ironically, however, the French Revolution ultimately mitigated sectarian differences between Catholics and Protestants: successive revolutionary governments culminating in the Terror, instigated by Robespierre and the Parisian Committee of Public Safety, grew more violent and totalitarian in their rejection of religion. Tragically, Protestants realized only too late that their natural allies in the Revolution were Catholics who remained publicly devout. Nigel Aston noted that "once members of the Reformed faith felt their dearly won legal status was secure, they were ready to look more kindly on their Catholic neighbors, especially after the Revolution began to turn away from any version of Christianity at all." Unfortunately for the Reformed, the Revolution's turn away from Christianity would be murderous, and it set back French Protestantism for a generation.⁴

Between 1790 and 1794 the baneful effects of the Revolution on Christianity broadly and on Protestantism specifically became clearer to Huguenots both in Paris and the provinces. Late-nineteenth cen-

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3. Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 77–83; Johann Georg Heinzmann, *Voyage d'un Allemand à Paris et retour par la Suisse* (Lausanne, 1800), 158, 172–3; François Guizot, *France* Vol. VIII (New York: Peter Fenelon Collier, 1898), 213.

4. Nigel Aston, *Religion and Revolution in France, 1780–1804* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 2000), 247.

2. Ian Davidson, *The French Revolution: From Enlightenment to Tyranny* (New York and London: Pegasus Books, 2016), 72.

tury historian William Milligan Sloane lamented that, “of the pastors who had seen the opening of the Revolution, but a handful of exhausted, discouraged men” were left by 1800. “The ranks of the laity had been continuously decimated by shameful apostacies, for the deism of England and Germany had reacted on them and sapped their faith.” Still, Sloane argued, Huguenots did not experience the *en masse* and high-profile defections that rent Roman Catholicism in France. “The Reformed Church,” Sloane noted, “knew nothing of the throes which shook Roman Catholicism.”

While most French Protestants lived in the countryside, the most prominent and visible Huguenots lived prosperously as merchants in France’s Atlantic port cities. Protestants experienced the coercive power of the secular French state when the Republic obliterated all laws protecting merchants from having to do business on Sundays in 1791. The prominence of Protestants among France’s merchant class meant they could be easily targeted by Republican officials eager to prosecute the enemies of the Revolution. Protestantism’s minority status also meant that they also represented relatively helpless victims. Protestants often outnumbered Roman Catholics among the targets of Revolutionary murder, especially in southern France. During the Terror, Revolutionaries guillotined 150 men and women in the district of Gard; 117 of them were Protestants.⁵ The Terror’s grotesque extremes ultimately created an ecumenism of blood between France’s Catholics and Protestants. Like all Christians, Sloane noted, Protestants “were persecuted and terrorized. Many abandoned their faith and cause. The organization of the church was substantially destroyed.”⁶

Even if Reformed churchmen fared better than their Catholic brethren, their relatively small numbers and massive emigration during the Terror meant that “almost the only faithful were...the plain people in towns like Nimes and Montauban, who retorted on the violence of radicals and Catholics with blow for blow.” The Protestant middle class opted for less violent means of survival and “nourished their faith in secret and took refuge from trouble behind an outward conformity.”⁷ Occasional efforts to “reconstitute the Protestant congregations were made under the Directory, and in some cases they met with success,” but the enervated French Protestantism sustained by the initial enthusiasm of the French Revolution in 1789 died with the judicial murder of Louis XVI and the end of the Constitutional monarchy. Although the French Protestant church endured until its

5. John G. Lorimer, *An Historical Sketch of the Protestant Church of France: From Its Origin to the Present Times* (Edinburgh: John Johnstone, 1841), 531.

6. William Milligan Sloane, *The French Revolution and Religious Reform* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901), 239–243.

7. Sloane, *The French Revolution and Religious Reform*, 239–243.

rescue by Napoleon and the Empire, “it could barely maintain itself, and played no decisive rôle in religious affairs. Its seminaries were closed, its people disheartened, its pastors dismayed, its voice almost hushed.”⁸ In sum, then, French Protestants flirted with revolution but ultimately broke with the revolutionaries once it became clear that a secular democratic republic, not a constitutional monarchy, was the final goal of revolutionary leaders.

The actions of French Protestants stand in stark contrast to those Protestants in Habsburg dominions, however, who were enthusiastically committed to defending their Roman Catholic sovereigns and societal order from revolutionary doctrines at the outset of the upheavals of 1789. They had good reason for their loyalties. Emperor Joseph II ended the *en masse* civil persecution of Protestants in the 1780s and his successors gave Protestants comprehensive civil rights and even basic political rights. Holy Roman Emperor Francis II—later Emperor Francis I of Austria—assumed the throne in 1792 and went considerably further than French monarchs when he stopped coerced conversions and removed the ability of Catholic activists to act with impunity towards Protestants. Scott Berg noted that Habsburg monarchs seemed keen on bringing Protestants into fuller civil and social participation in what was still a Catholic monarchy. Calvinists—a sizable population especially in Hungary—and Lutherans “enjoyed Habsburg

patronage by the 1790s, as the state enforced laws that were fair (or even favorable) to Protestantism, provided assistance to build Protestant churches, and standardized the organization of Protestant communities.” Francis I also allowed Protestant princes to secularize church property outside Habsburg domains in return for continued loyalty against France, a loyalty that would have been given even without the gains from church property. Secularizing church property allowed local Calvinist and Lutheran princes to solidify their own temporal rule without having to compete with the local Roman Catholic hierarchy on questions of land title, distribution, and use. Permitting Calvinist and Lutheran princes to seize church property benefitted the Habsburg emperors as much as it did the Protestants, since the former would no longer have to maintain far-flung garrisons to protect various prince-bishops and other ecclesiastical rulers outside of the Austrian monarchy’s heartland of Austria proper and Hungary. Protestants rejected French propaganda and trumpeted their commitment to the emperor in his fight against the forces of revolution. One Protestant newspaper declared that it “knew of no suppression and



A FORMER CHURCH IN IVRY-LA-BATAILLE, MARKED DURING THE REVOLUTION WITH THE INSCRIPTION “TEMPLE OF REASON AND PHILOSOPHY.”

8. Sloane, *The French Revolution and Religious Reform*, 239–243; Burdette C. Poland, *French Protestantism and the French Revolution: Church and State, Thought, and Religion 1685–1815* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 193–228.

burdensome restriction. We enjoy the protection of the government to its fullest extent.”⁹

French military successes spurred the Austrian Emperors to greater religious inclusiveness, especially for German and Magyar-speaking Protestants. Maintaining a polyglot empire flung across Western and Central Europe hampered the Monarchy’s ability to fight the Revolutionary armies effectively. From the reign of Joseph II, German-speaking leaders of Austria wanted to retrench and build the Empire around its German and Magyar core. Protestant participation in Hungary and in Austria proper, therefore, became a necessity for the Monarchy’s very survival. The emperors and their Protestant subjects recognized this, and the milieu created by the French Revolution in Austria allowed the Austrian monarchs and their Protestant subjects to enjoy a cooperative relationship that kept the Habsburg Empire from suffering any serious sectarian disputes until its dissolution in 1918. It also allowed Protestants a measure of political and religious flourishing that outpaced all other Catholic monarchies on the continent during the nineteenth century.

Contemporary conservative Protestants active in politics have been quick to view disruption as a political benefit; too often they adopt the position, at least rhetorically, that any government or societal arrangement can be better than the one that preceded it. Bradford Littlejohn noted this tendency toward brinkmanship recently in *Breaking Ground*. Christians in the twenty-first century “hunger for eschato-

9. Scott Berg, “The Lord Has Done Great Things for Us’: The 1817 Reformation Celebrations and the End of the Counter-Reformation in the Habsburg Lands,” *Central European History* 49 (2016): 69–92; Pieter M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 66–68.

logical judgment. And rightly so; it is this hunger that drives us to fight corruption and seek reform rather than throwing up our hands in complacency or despair.” Littlejohn noted that Christians “must fight racism, tyranny, and fraud wherever they rear their heads. But we must do so as a public, not as vigilantes, and that means we must enact justice with sometimes maddening imperfection.” The lesson

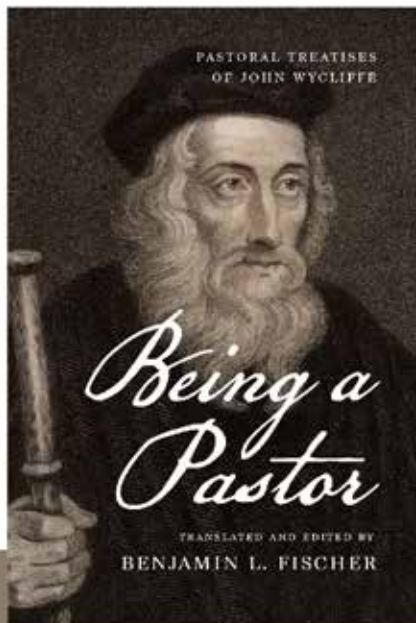
for Christians in the twenty-first century West is not dissimilar to that for French Protestants at the end of the eighteenth. Surely the Bourbon monarchy qualified as a government as maddeningly imperfect as the neoliberal American republic. And certainly, Christians have every right to hope for reform. But slipping from the desire for reform into a desire for revolution leads to the unfulfilled nihilism that comes when the earthly eschaton

is either disappointing or incomplete. The ecclesiastical or doctrinal decimation that always attends modern revolutions leaves communities worse off than they were before. In 1788, French Protestants were able to live with modest restrictions upon their religion; in 1798, they were hunted. Christians in the West might understandably complain about their lot in 2021. Still, prudent living as Christian citizens and members of the public means we must rely even on maddening imperfection.¹⁰

—————
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10. Brad Littlejohn, “Justice in a Time out of Joint,” *Breaking Ground*, January 13, 2021, <https://breakingground.us/justice-in-a-time-out-of-joint/>.

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 POLITICS HAVE BEEN QUICK
 TO VIEW DISRUPTION AS A
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LA VITA NUOVA

BY JOHN AHERN

I didn't like Dante in high school. I took a kind of pride in being able to differ with the authorities who had, on one or two points, been a little more liberal than I would have been in bestowing canonical status. To be fair to my old self, behind the hubris and impertinence lay a real objection to the *Divine Comedy*: it was just too specific. Why should I be expected to know the social circles of late thirteenth-century Florence to understand half the references in Hell or Purgatory? It was like Eliot's *Wasteland*: a cascade of private allusions, Shibboleths, inside jokes. Readers of the *Divine Comedy*, ceaselessly glancing down to the critical commentary for context, were basically like Michael Scott from *The Office*: "I love inside jokes. I'd love to be a part of one some day."

This is all wrong, of course, and thank goodness I've changed my mind. I still have trouble getting excited about parts of *Paradise*, but I think that will come. What reconciled me to the *Divine Comedy* was reading Dante's earlier works, such as *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, a bizarre and comical Latin treatise on vernacular poetry, and *La Vita Nuova*, Dante's handbook on composing love poems and the story of his romance with Beatrice Portinari, who would later become his guide through Paradise. It was *La Vita Nuova* that truly made me excited to return to the *Divine Comedy*.

Unusual among poetry manuals, *La Vita Nuova* is something of a page-turner. (Although *Western Wind* by John Fredrick Nims or Perrine's *Sound and Sense* come to mind, and of course Sidney's *Defense of Poetry*.) But *La Vita Nuova* is not a typical manual of poetry. Dante is giving specific explanations of how he wrote his love poems to one Beatrice Portinari, a woman whom he loved his whole life. Between his descriptions of making this or that sonnet or ballata, he tells the story of his life since meeting Beatrice, his "new life." But where, exactly, does this mystery come from? What kind of romance is this?

It is certainly not a hot and heavy romance, gripping only insofar as it is lurid. Actually, nothing could be further from the contents of *La Vita Nuova*: Dante records his life from the first meeting with Beatrice to the aftermath of her death, during which time he interacts with her—get this—twice. Given how little Dante and Beatrice interacted in the real world, a modern reader would likely consider

Dante's romance repressed or even pathological. But "repressed" and "pathological" don't even begin to capture the complexity of it. At one point, he considers in rapturous detail Beatrice's mouth and then feels the need to clarify, in case your mind was in the gutter, that he wasn't talking about kissing. He was talking about her mouth as a source of virtuous words. Dante is serious: this book is *not* about kissing. Whatever sort of "love" this is, modern readers likely have no category for it.

But it's that asymmetry that is so fascinating—on the one hand, it is a Platonic love, never consummated, always focused on the metaphysical, but, on the other hand, Dante's own manifestations of love are so fervent, bodily, visceral (but never, on his own insistence, sexual). Dante is always falling sick, or throwing up, or weeping the instant he makes eye contact with Beatrice. These paroxysms are brought about by almost nothing. Yet there is no pay-off, no torrid consummation of the sort found in the *Lais* of Marie de France or Chretien de Troyes's *Lancelot* or any number of other courtly loves from medieval literature.

Nor is "plot," in any contemporary sense, what drives the interest. In fact, as Barbara Reynolds points out, Dante seems embarrassed to even be including the details of the romance with Beatrice in what should be talk of prosody. When Dante describes the aftermath of Beatrice saying hello to him (which shatters his world), it is, "in his view, a digression, for he feels it necessary to justify, almost apologize for, its inclusion."¹ *La Vita Nuova* is, first and foremost, a manual of poetry.



STATUE OF DANTE ALIGHIERI

UNUSUAL AMONG POETRY
MANUALS, *LA VITA NUOVA* IS
SOMETHING OF A PAGE-TURNER.

1. Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova: Poems of Youth*, trans. Barbara Reynolds (New York: Penguin, 1980), 12.

Instead, what keeps the pages turning are the understated ways that Dante creates tension. Dante's method is simple: he scatters moments of pure aporia which grip the reader with the unfulfilled mystery. Dante includes recurring motifs, seemingly unrelated to the romance, but never bothers to explain them. He contradicts himself but never resolves the contradiction.

The opening paragraph, one of the most famous openings in Medieval literature, is a good example of a motif that is never fully explained: the book of memory, a metaphorical volume, distinct from and governing *La Vita Nuova* itself. "In the book of my memory, after the first pages, which are almost blank, there is a section headed *Incipit vita nova*." This Latin phrase probably would have been understood to mean "Here begins the period of my boyhood," but the Latin literally says, "Here begins a new life." This wording, redolent of the language of salvation, is prompted by his first encounter with Beatrice. Dante continues: "Beneath this heading I find the words which it is my intention to copy into this smaller book..." Now we have two books: one is Dante's own memory, which, as Mary Carruthers points out, Dante portrays as a physical book, a "work in visual form, written in his memory as pages with text, rubrics, and paraphs."² The other book is the literal book, *La Vita Nuova*, into which Dante is copying from his metaphorical book of memory. Dante conceives of his life as separated into distinct chapters. Since he was nine, he has lived a new life—one single chapter under the heading "Beatrice."

This metaphor may be odd to a modern audience only because we are unfamiliar with the role memory played in the Middle Ages and the distinct ways, as Carruthers as shown, that ancient Greco-Roman and Medieval theories of mind portrayed the memory as a book and, conversely, structured the technological innovations of the codex around their paradigms of mind. So whatever strangeness is evident in this opening paragraph may be a symptom of what Medievalist Laura Kendrick calls the "alterity of the medieval, setting it within a kind of magic circle, defining it as definitely *not* our ordinary life."³ In fact, every page of *La Vita Nuova* elicits that sense of alterity in its modern readers, but there are mysteries therein which, I suspect, would have befuddled and intrigued fellow Medieval readers as well.

Just such a mystery is the number nine. It is everywhere, like Hurley's numbers in *Lost*. In an almost novelistic way, Dante omits to explain but continues to repeat the motif again and again: nine months, the ninth year, nine days after. It becomes obvious that not even Dante

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 2. Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 279.
 3. Laura Kendrick, "Games Medievalists Play: How to Make Earnest of Game and Still Enjoy It," *New Literary History* 40, no. 1 (2009): 44.

can make sense of the numerology that haunts his romance with Beatrice—indicating that his contemporary readers would have also wondered about the nine-ness of *La Vita Nuova*. It is only after Beatrice's death ("in the ninth hour of the ninth day of the month...in the ninth month of the year") that he submits some hypotheses for consideration. He considers Beatrice to have been so connected with the number nine because, first, she was born the year the nine spheres were aligned (1265). But more profoundly, Beatrice *is* the number nine. She, a miracle, was the square of the root miracle of the Trinity: "if the sole factor of miracles is three, that is, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, who are three and one, then this lady was accompanied by the number nine to convey that she was a nine, that is, a miracle, of which the root...is nothing other than the miraculous Trinity itself." He seems

genuinely befuddled by the nine-ness of her life, because he concludes by saying, "Perhaps a more subtle mind could find a still more subtle reason for it,"⁴ but that this is the explanation which pleases him the most.

What makes such a device so effective and so modern is the fact that Dante can provide no sure explanation himself, subtly lending plausibility to the actual events in question. Had he been able to tie the number nine neatly into the rest of the fabric of his narrative, it would undoubtedly strike us as a literary or structural device, too convenient to be taken as an event that literally befell Dante. Yet Dante is not structuring the account of his life with the number nine; he brilliantly gives the impression that it is the number nine that structures *his* life.

Another moment of this proto-realism appears in perhaps the most mysterious and least explained scene of all. Early on in his romance with Beatrice, "a young

man dressed in whitest garments" appears before Dante in a dream. It is the personification of Love. He is inexplicably sorrowful, and, when asked why, replies: *Ego tamquam centrum circuli, cui simili modo se habent circumferentiae partes; tu autem non sic*, which Barbara Reynolds translates "I am like the center of a circle, to which the parts of the circumference are related in similar manner; you, however, are not." Dante, as if reassuring his readers that they have not missed something, observes that this is a pretty opaque oracle, and so he presses Love to explain himself. Love replies, in the vernacular: "Do not ask more than is useful for you!"⁵

Readers can expect to wait a long time for an explanation of this incident, because Dante never gives one. This is all the more surprising, because the anecdote contradicts the straightforward explanation of Love which Dante later gives as an "accident occurring in a substance." This important phrase encapsulates the Aristotelian underpinnings of late Medieval allegory: Dante's Love is nothing more than Dante's

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 4. Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 80-81.
 5. Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, 42.



Beata Beatrix, BY DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI, c. 1864-70
 (INSPIRED BY LA VITA NUOVA)

own emotions of love (an accident) personified as some outside person (a substance). So then how can Love be in possession of some knowledge Dante is not? It's a bit like that part of *Ratatouille* where Remy the Rat asks the ghost of the chef Gusteau, "How can you not know you have a son?" and Gusteau replies, "I am a figment of your imagination. You did not know, how could I?" Yet, Love, an accident of Dante's substance, a figment of his imagination, does seem to know something Dante does not.

There are several potential explanations for this. A Freudian or Lacanian reading might say that this personification of Love was a way of dealing with those excesses or traces left by the unconscious alienated onto some allegorical figure, or, as Slavoj Žižek drolly calls it, "unknown knows," that which "we don't know we know."⁶ Thus Love can both be a part of Dante and yet know something Dante's conscious mind cannot admit or comprehend. Curiously, Lewis's own interpretation in the *Allegory of Love* is similar, except that he considers medieval allegories like Dante's to be not an unconscious but conscious technique: "if we could be free," he says, "of our own *Zeitgeist*, we might confess that [allegory] is not very much more abstract than that 'self' or 'personality' on whose rock-bottom unity we rest so secure and of which we would so much rather hear [the poet] talk."⁷ Psychoanalysts and Medieval allegorists are, it seems, both unconvinced of the unitary and epistemically fixed nature of the human "self."

If not the unconscious, another explanation could also make sense of the content of Love's statement about the circle and circumference. Love is an accident of Dante's heart, not a substance in itself. Yet Love is an accident that is shared by all humans, which might imply to the Platonically minded that there is some perfect, ideal Love toward which all accidental Loves within each human heart tend. What visits Dante in a dream is, yes, his own accidental love for Beatrice, but this Love also partakes in something beyond Dante. Dante is, perhaps, one of these parts of the circumference, whom Love, not merely his ectypeic Love but the archetype Love, has to show an equal disposition toward as Love does toward all other lovers.

Whatever the case may be, Dante is not inclined to reveal the meaning of Love's statement, which both increases the narrative tension throughout the book and lends some plausibility to the vision. It is as if not even Dante knew the answer to the question.

6. Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, 1st American ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007), 52.

7. C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1936), 61.

He is merely reporting what happened to him, and he is thus not responsible for explaining every aspect of it; so he doesn't. Indeed, it becomes clear, Dante cannot hope to explain every aspect of his "new life" defined by Beatrice, because Beatrice's existence exceeds his capacity to explain altogether. She is an event of cosmological significance whose meaning neither *La Vita Nuova* nor even the later *Divine Comedy* can exhaust.



ARNO RIVER, FLORENCE, ITALY

LA VITA NUOVA INSISTS THAT, IF I MAY ABUSE
ONCE AGAIN AN OFT-ABUSED EXPRESSION, THE
PERSONAL IS THE METAPHYSICAL.

But the theological explication of a random thirteenth-century woman named Beatrice Portinari hardly ameliorates my initial hesitations about Dante. It was in fact precisely the intimate and personal character of the references that turned me away. But my misstep is one common to a more modern aesthetic of literature that seeks some generalizable principle of the human spirit latent in every offering of poetic imagination. Whatever specific details tether a great work to its historical moment are valuable only insofar as they capture some insight into human nature, the Vichian notion that poetry is "the realization of the infinite

variety of the divine spirit, manifesting itself through the genius of the various peoples and periods."⁸ But Dante will have none of it. *La Vita Nuova* insists that, if I may abuse once again an oft-abused expression, the personal is the metaphysical. This is no sentimental peroration that we can find Beatrices in our own lives if we only have Dante's imagination to look for them—no, Beatrice's whole life was *sui generis*, an abstract type for nothing and for nobody but, perhaps, the Blessed Trinity. Dante masterfully portrays the entire world as if Beatrice's birth is of metaphysical consequence and he happens to be lucky enough to be caught in the orbit of a huge divine conspiracy centering on her person. The nine spheres have converged on her birth, and he therefore lives in a new era, a "new life" as the book's title describes it. The insistent immediacy in Dante's work bridges the immense gulf separating modern and Medieval, inviting us into the quotidian details of Dante's life which he has so elegantly transmuted into fantastical significance.

John Ahern is a PhD candidate at Princeton University studying the history of Medieval music. His writings have appeared in Eidolon, First Things and the Theopolis Institute blog.

8. Erich Auerbach, "Vico and Aesthetic Historism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 8, no. 2 (1949): 111.

THE DECLINE OF THE NOVEL

BY JOSEPH BOTTUM, (SOUTH BEND, IN: ST. AUGUSTINE'S PRESS, 2019),
150 PAGES, \$25.00 (HARDCOVER).

REVIEWED BY BY RHYS LAVERTY

What was the last *new* novel you would be embarrassed not to have read if you turned up at a get-together of writers and intellectuals?

For Joseph Bottum, it was Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, written over a quarter of a century ago. Ronald Reagan was president. The Berlin Wall was standing. The World Wide Web did not exist.

In *The Decline of the Novel*, Bottum (a conservative Catholic critic and writer and former editor of *First Things*) calls this “the Cocktail Party Test” (42). It's a worthwhile and amusing exercise—maybe one to try out at a cocktail party (though their prevalence, too, has declined since 1987). Now, the latest Netflix show probably occupies the cultural space once dominated by the novel.

How did we get here? That's Bottum's question. But it's a bigger question than it first appears. And it has everything to do with the decline of Protestantism in the West.

“HOW-WE-GOT-HERE” NARRATIVES

There is no shortage of “*how-we-got-here*” narratives among conservative Christians—“here” being the loss of a shared moral or metaphysical universe in the West. Alasdair MacIntyre, Philip Rieff, Charles Taylor, Carl Trueman, and others have made the genre a commonplace.

The Decline of the Novel might be best understood as an applied stress-test of these narratives. And, if nothing else, it is a wildly informative and entertaining one. At just 152 pages, the book sits somewhere between scholarly and popular. Bottum's novelistic expertise is encyclopedic. His lively prose has the Chestertonian twinkle of a writer who knows he is taking liberties, but the right ones (consider his sweeping aphorism early on: “The novel didn't fail us. We failed the novel” is swiftly followed by “Except, of course, that we didn't. Not exactly”) (10).

PROTESTANTISM AND THE RISE OF THE NOVEL

So what does Protestantism have to do with the novel? Bottum summarizes:

“So, here's a proposition. The novel was an art form—the art form—of the modern Protestant West, and as the main strength of established Protestantism began to fail in Europe and the United States in recent decades, so did the cultural importance of the novel.” (14)

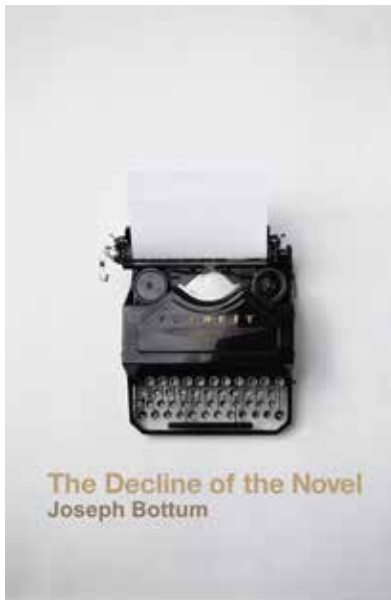
We should be clear what Bottum is *not* arguing.

He is not, as a Catholic, indicting Protestantism wholesale for modernity's ills. In *The Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America* (2014), Bottum argued that the greatest (yet most unremarked) sociological change in America in the previous fifty years was the collapse of the Mainline Protestant churches. He basically views this as A Bad Thing. Bottum is also not, as a literary critic, offering an elitist lament on the state of literature. For example, he does not dispute that the world is still full of

great writers, enthusing that we are in a golden age of genre fiction and children's literature (126–149).

Neither polemic nor jeremiad, Bottum's book considers rather why our great creatives no longer consider the novel to be *the* form by which to do great work.

To make sense of its decline, Bottum first charts the novel's rise—yet this, he contends, already contained its fall. For Bottum, the novel is an inevitable product of Protestantism. The Reformation triggered a “turn to the interior” (1), illuminating our inner lives like never before, and the “loose, baggy monster” of the novel (a definition from Henry James, quoted more than once) was the only literary form capacious enough to contain our multitudes. Yet by reifying the interior self, Protestantism disenchanting the external world, “erasing the medieval



sense of a world filled with living symbols. Together, they stripped the altars of reality.” Eventually, “all the weight of metaphysical significance in the world was transferred to the individual self” (47).

This post-Reformation self struggled to reconcile itself to a cosmos devoid of meaning, and so invented the novel: “book-length modern stories with a sense of spiritual development over the plot’s timeline, characters who have interior selves, a drive toward artistic unity, and an ambition for the book to be a revelatory commentary on the human condition” (18).

The novel then began a self-perpetuating cycle: birthed from Protestantism’s modern self, it became “one of the key ways in which people learned to *have* modern selves” in a disenchanted world (4; emphasis added). This was its fatal flaw, for “by exposing the problem so successfully, the novel exacerbated the problem’s effect. Readers learned to notice their troubled modern selves by reading novels aimed at solving the troubles” (44). Such troubled readers then wrote *more* novels to alleviate the problem, and so on.

This is not to say modernity produced hordes of distinctly Protestant novelists. Here, Bottum’s disenchantment narrative oddly echoes Peter Leithart’s half-serious remarks that Protestants can’t write and Zwingli is to blame.¹ Both note a dearth of truly “Protestant” writers. Yet Bottum argues that, even if Protestants can’t write, Protestantism can—it is “the genus of the novel itself, rather than something identifying a particular species of novels” (27). Bottum repeatedly calls this a “Protestantism of the Air” that affected the whole modern world, including Catholic and Orthodox countries (accounting for the great French and Russian literary traditions).

So, in summary: Protestantism created the problematic modern self, produced the novel as an attempted cure, but simply made the problem worse.

Bottum’s disenchantment narrative is the weakest element of the book, built on passing references to Protestant sacramentology (29), the stripping of the altars (47), and moralizing Protestant piety (48). For one thing, Bottum tars all Protestantism with the same brush, eliding both Protestant differences over sacramentalology and the magisterial Protestant view of creation as the “Book of Nature” that is rich with meaning. Bottum’s “Protestantism” comes off as either the most austere Presbyterianism or low-brow non-conformism. Yet England (where he places the novel’s origins) was dominated by neither of these in the novel’s heyday. Bottum credits the Glorious Revolution of 1688 as providing the secure Protestant context in which the novel could flourish, but he gives the impression that the Protestantism of William and Mary was the same as that of the Puritans.

1. Peter Leithart, “Why Protestants Can’t Write, I,” Patheos, January 28, 2016, https://www.patheos.com/blogs/leithart/2016/01/why-protestants-cant-write-i/?permalink=blogs&blog=leithart&year=2016&month=01&entry_permalink=why-protestants-cant-write-i.

Similarly, Bottum uses “Protestantism” and “modernity” interchangeably. No one denies the two are related. Yet they are not identical. He claims that, once Protestantism emptied the Medieval world of “saints and demons, angels and devils, ghosts, monsters, prophecies, and signs,” the modern Protestant self could not bear having “all supernatural reality other than God packed down into the individual soul” (48). Yet the Enlightenment parallels the golden age of the novel far more closely than does the Protestant era. Admittedly, we all get bored of seeing the Enlightenment used as a whipping boy in Christian intellectual histories, but it should at least be in the room whilst Protestantism is getting a good dressing down.

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Also scandalously absent is Augustine, given the unprecedented interiority of his *Confessions*. Granted, Bottum’s narrative must start *somewhere*, but any account of the modern self which doesn’t at least acknowledge the impossibility of such a thing without Augustine’s influence is at best lopsided. Even if Bottum regards Protestantism as having taken Augustine’s development of the self to an extreme, it’s hard to justify omitting him entirely.

Underlying these historical omissions, however, we can sense a deeper problem:

Bottum’s assessment fundamentally misunderstands Protestantism (“of the Air” or otherwise). There is a strong case to be made that it was in fact the late Medieval era which suffered from a damaging interior turn, and the Reformation was its corrective. Worship in the pre-Reformation era was intensely individualistic—intentionally darkened knaves obscured fellow worshipers from view; tailored penances encouraged fixation upon one’s personal merit and purgatorial fate; incomprehensible liturgy made worshipers not an active congregation but a collection of passive individual observers. Recently, writers such as Philip Cary have reminded us that Protestantism enacted a fundamental turn to the *exterior*, directing us to the “external word” of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.² This then rightly orders our external relationship to neighbour (as one whom we serve)³ and creation (as a theater of God’s glory).⁴

This disenchantment narrative is nothing new and is being increasingly refuted by retrieval-minded Protestants today. Yet even if the informed Protestant reader will attribute it to causes other than Protestantism *per se*, they will likely share Bottum’s assessment that the modern self is overburdened with a metaphysical weight it was not designed to bear.

THE DECLINE OF THE NOVEL

So if this was the novel’s rise, what was its decline?

2. Philip Cary, “The Meaning of Protestant Theology,” August 12, 2019, <https://afkimel.wordpress.com/2019/08/12/the-meaning-of-protestant-theology/>. This post is a short summary of Cary’s book of the same name, which expounds this point at length.

3. As articulated by Luther in *The Freedom of a Christian*: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

4. John Calvin is credited with describing creation as a “theater of God’s glory.” He never used that exact phrase, but used the image repeatedly (e.g. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.5.8)

“No-one feels bad any more for not reading novels,” Bottum quips. They are no longer works of great public, moral, or political significance. This side of Bottum’s argument is where the book really takes flight; he describes the novel’s decline as signalling “a kind of failure of nerve, an end of confidence about the past values and future goals of what conceived itself as Western culture” (8).

Within a Protestantism of the Air, the novel was the space in which great writers tried to reunite the modern interior self with some greater exterior, something of which it knew it fell short. In the novel, Western culture could criticize itself with sincere moral outrage, “because few readers doubted that Western culture was called to something higher” (9). Yet the collapse of this Protestantism of the Air into secularism has left us with no future and a checkered past. Western culture is now little more than the sum of its crimes, and novelists turn in on themselves to lick the wounds of the self and indict the past. These are the novels of a culture with “a lack of belief in itself” (10).

With this established, the rest of the book consists of case studies of great novelists attempting (with diminishing returns) to solve the crisis of the self. Here, Bottum excels.

Walter Scott (along with historical fiction in general) attempted to solve the crisis in *Waverley* (1814) by winding back the clock: Edward Waverley absconds with the enchanting pre-modern Highlanders supporting Bonnie Prince Charlie’s doomed attempt to restore Catholic rule to England. Defeated, Waverley hopes a romantic *feeling* of historical memory will preserve him in modernity—an unconvincing conclusion, to say the least.

Dickens attempted a metaphysical rescue through naming. His characters’ names accord (in one way or another) with some external truth about them, because “beneath the jokes and lies and abused language, there is for Dickens an order of reality that is finally moral and true” (90). Bottum’s chapter on Dickens is primarily a close reading of *David Copperfield* (1850), and he clearly regards Dickens as the most successful of his case studies.

Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* (1947) represented the High Modernist ambition to make the novel *itself* a solution to the crisis, as if the sheer event of writing and ruminating at length on the self would help. Yet this faith in form rather than content was fruitless, since Mann was “that weakest and most delicate of all things: the non-religious social conservative, digging in his heels at each new cultural decline...all the while trying to explain the last” (99). That line might be worth the price of the book.

Inevitably following is Tom Wolfe, who famously lamented a failure of nerve among novelists to hit the road and discover that “wild, bizarre, unpredictable hog-stomping Baroque country” called America.⁵ Yet while Wolfe had the nerve, he lacked the metaphysics. Wolfe novels usually end horribly “because the resources necessary to conclude a story of justification and sanctification simply do not exist for him. He does not see them in the culture and he does not see them in himself” (117). With no Protestantism of the Air, Wolfe had nothing with which to bring his beloved America into accord.

The final chapter is given over to the aforementioned rise of children’s and genre fiction, almost as replacement for the novel. Whilst

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5. Tom Wolfe, “Stalking the Billion Footed Beast,” *Harper’s Magazine*, November 1989, accessed February 3, 2020, <https://harpers.org/archive/1989/11/stalking-the-billion-footed-beast/>.



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not disputing their quality or value, Bottum notes this change signals that unironic portrayals of good, evil, and virtue are outsourced here, no longer suiting the self-exploration of the novel (128). Such ideas simply cannot be taken seriously there.

HOW SHOULD WE THEN READ?

In a brief conclusion, and in the true vein of any “*how-we-got-here*” narrative, Bottum offers up no solutions. He has made a coherent, well-evidenced case for the diminishing returns of the novel and its impotence against the problem of the modern self. Western Culture has lost confidence not only that the problem *can* be solved but that there is a problem at all. Stumped, Bottum concludes with an open question: “What ought we to do with ourselves?” (152)

It is a stark question, especially for those remaining faithful to Protestantism when a Protestantism of the Air has collapsed.

We should certainly be attuned to our culture’s newly preferred forms of storytelling. There may not be much we can do about a lack of great novels, but we can pay attention to what *is* being produced and why. And we should watch for any signs of the novel’s return. Its decline has been a canary in the coal mine; we should keep an eye out in case

it springs back to life. That’s not to say this would signal a resurgence of Protestantism, but it may indicate a return to something like a Protestantism of the Air—an atmosphere in which it is no longer ridiculous to suggest that the inner self should bring itself into accord with some greater, self-evident external reality.

Bottum’s book should also serve as a spur to rediscover the riches of the age of the novel. Despite their declining cultural importance, great novels still loom over our cultural imagination, remnants of a forgotten civilization. As modernity continues to disintegrate, such reference points on the landscape might serve as apologetics of truth, beauty, and goodness which, as a first step, can reintroduce moderns to a Protestantism of the Air. From there, perhaps we can begin to lead them to the thicker, richer doctrines of Protestantism itself.

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