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The Broken Estate

James Wood

THE BROKEN ESTATE

Essays in Literature and Belief

James Wood



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To C. D. M.
and to Leon Wieseltier

Just as Saul went out to look for his father's she-asses and found a kingdom, so the essayist who is really capable of looking for the truth will find at the end of his road the goal he was looking for: life.

- Lukács, *Soul and Form*

And in these books of mine, their distinctive character, as essays on art, is their bringing everything to a root in human passion or human hope.

- Ruskin, *Modern Painters*

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Introduction: The limits of not quite

The real is the atlas of fiction, over which all novelists thirst. The real is contour, aspiration, tyrant. The novel covers reality, runs away with it, and, as travellers will yearn to dirty their geography, runs from it, too. It is impossible to discuss the power of the novel without discussing the reality that fiction so powerfully discloses, which is why realism, in one form or another and often under different names, has been the novel's insistent preoccupation from the beginning of the form. Everything flows from the real, including the beautiful deformations of the real; realism is not a law, but a lenient tutor, for it schools its own truants. It is realism that *allows* surrealism, magic realism, fantasy, dream, and so on. 'All writers believe they are realists', writes Alain Robbe-Grillet in *Pour un nouveau roman*.

There are writers for whom reality is torn into existence, abruptly birthed, such as Céline, Dostoevsky; and there are others, such as Tolstoy and Proust, for whom reality seems to be born calmly, as it were, in an open ward, in white view. We respond, as readers of fiction, to a massive variety of realities. Yet in all fiction those moments when we are suddenly moved have to do with something we fumblingly call 'true' or 'real'. One such moment occurs in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, when Stephen Dedalus hears his father sing an old song ('the tender tremors with which his father's voice festooned the strange sad happy air'), and then his father exclaims: 'Ah, but you should have heard Mick Lacy sing it! Poor Mick Lacy! He had little turns for it, grace notes he used to put in that I haven't got.' This moves us – why? Because it is like life? Certainly, for although it

may not exactly resemble our lives, it brings to our heart a plausible loss; we have all felt our own version of 'You should have heard Mick Lacy sing it!' It is moving because an experience that Stephen Dedalus believes is original to him – wistfully hearing his father hear a sad air – is revealed, so gently, to be not original to him, and is revealed as actually a much fiercer and more complicated experience for his father. Behind one reality lies a deeper, more private reality, which is always lost.

But the moment is also *like Joyce* as well as like life; if we exclaim 'How real, how true', we do so because our idea of what is real and true has been partly constructed by Joyce. 'How true that a character in Joyce would feel like this', we say to ourselves. (Stephen hearing his father is like Gabriel hearing his wife speak of Michael Furey, her first love, in 'The Dead'.) In Christina Stead's novel, *The Man Who Loved Children*, we encounter this sentence about halfway through the book: 'Sam was always anxious for morning.' We delight at the truth of this observation only because it is absolutely 'true' about the character Sam, whose reality Stead has so powerfully furnished. Thus moments of truth in fiction may be only in small part related to the lifelike; rather, they flow toward and withdraw from the lifelike. In *The World As Will and Representation* Schopenhauer remarks that Dante got his fantasy of hell from the world. Readers of fiction should base their theories of realism on that remark. He means that Dante's hell is real, and feels real, not that it is 'realistic' or 'lifelike'. Indeed, Schopenhauer means that life is hell-like, that it resembles Dante's hell. Dante's reality is a maddened version, a black hypostasis of life. But our sense of this reality comes largely from Dante's capacity to convince us of this sense, rather than from the world.

Fiction is real when its readers validate its reality; and our power so to validate comes both from our sense of the actual real ('life') and from our sense of the fictional real (the reality of the novel). A lovely example of this occurs in

Joseph Roth's great novel of the Austro-Hungarian empire, *The Radetzky March*. The hero, a feckless young lieutenant named Trotta, is in debt. His loyal batman, a poor peasant named Onufrij, decides to give his master all his painfully earned savings. He goes to the piece of land where the money is buried in a cloth, and digs his savings out of the ground. Haltingly, he brings them to Trotta, and offers them. 'Herr Lieutenant, here is money!' Trotta takes one look at the money and declines it. 'It's against regulations, do you understand?' says Trotta. 'If I take money from you, I'll be demoted and drummed out of the army, do you understand?' He sends Onufrij away.

Roth remarks that Trotta had read about 'golden characters' like Onufrij in sentimental literature, and had never quite believed them. Yet, Roth assures us, such 'uncouth boys with noble hearts' do not just exist in sentimental books, they also 'exist in real life'. He reminds us that 'a lot of truths about the living world are recorded in bad books; they are just badly written.' The passage is very moving, because it seems true, real, lifelike – not least in its comical pointlessness: the money excavated, proudly donated by Onufrij, and then proudly refused by Trotta. But one notices the movement here: Roth assures us that such people as Onufrij exist in real life. And we believe him. But why? Only because we have just encountered him in such reality in the novel. We have no sense of Onufrij in real life; only a sense from the novel. The character is thus the best proof of the authenticity of the technique that just created him. Onufrij is the ombudsman of his own production. We are the jury. Roth asks us to validate the reality of his writing by believing it. In this sense, fiction is proved by what it discloses, and is thus always a running test-case of itself. Like a travelling assizes, moving from county to county, a novel always brings its own criteria for judgment with it. Every novel is its own reality and its own realism. It is its own evidence and its own court.

Nevertheless, the reality of fiction must also draw its power from the reality of the world. The real, in fiction, is always a matter of belief, and is therefore a kind of discretionary magic: it is a magic whose existence it is up to us, as readers, to validate and confirm. It is for this reason that many readers dislike actual magic or fantasy in novels. As I write in my discussion of Toni Morrison's fiction, 'the creation of characters out of nothing, their placement in an invented world, is chimerical; and for this reason one rarely wants the novelist further to ripen these chimeras in a false heat . . . Fiction demands belief from us, and this request is demanding in part because we can choose not to believe. But magic – impossible happenings, ghoulish returns – dismantles belief, forcing on us apparitions which, because they are beyond belief, we cannot choose not to believe. Belief is a mere appendix to magic, its unused organ . . . This is why most fiction is not magical, and why the great writers of magical tales – E.T.A. Hoffmann, Gogol, Kafka – are so densely realistic.'

The gentle *request* to believe is what makes fiction so moving. Joyce requests that we believe that Mick Lacy could sing the tune better than Stephen's father. Joseph Roth requests that we believe him when he remarks that Onufrij was a real person, not the character in a bad book. It is a belief that is requested, that we can refuse at any time, that is under our constant surveillance. This is surely the true secularism of fiction – why, despite its being a kind of magic, it is actually the enemy of superstition, the slayer of religions, the scrutineer of falsity. Fiction moves *in the shadow of doubt*, knows itself to be a true lie, knows that at any moment it might fail to make its case. Belief in fiction is always belief 'as if'. Our belief is itself metaphorical – it only *resembles* actual belief, and is therefore never wholly belief. In his essay 'Sufferings and Greatness of Richard Wagner', Thomas Mann writes that fiction is always a matter of 'not quite': 'To the artist new experiences of "truth" are new

incentives to the game, new possibilities of expression, no more. He believes in them, he takes them seriously, just so far as he needs to in order to give them the fullest and profoundest expression. In all that he is very serious, serious even to tears – but yet *not quite* – and by consequence, not at all. His artistic seriousness is of an absolute nature, it is “dead-earnest playing”.’

Fiction, being the game of not quite, is the place of not-quite-belief. Precisely what is a danger in religion is the very fabric of fiction. In religion, a belief that is only ‘as if’ is either the prelude to a loss of faith, or an instance of bad faith (in both senses of the phrase). If religion is true, one must believe absolutely. And if one chooses not to believe, one’s choice is marked under the category of a refusal, and is thus never really free: it is the duress of a recoil. Once religion has revealed itself to you, you are never free. In fiction, by contrast, one is always free to choose not to believe, and this very freedom, this shadow of doubt, is what helps to constitute fiction’s reality. Furthermore, even when one is believing fiction, one is ‘not quite’ believing, one is believing ‘as if’. (One can always close the book, go outside, and kick a stone.) Fiction asks us to judge its reality; religion asserts its reality. And this is all a way of saying that fiction is a special realm of freedom.

The essays in this volume pace the limits of the ‘not quite’, in both fiction and religion. It will become clear that I believe that distinctions between literary belief and religious belief are important, and it is because I believe in that importance that I am attracted to writers who struggle with those distinctions. Around the middle of the nineteenth century, those distinctions became much harder to maintain, and we have lived in the shadow of their blurring ever since. This was when the old estate broke. I would define the old estate as the supposition that religion was a set of divine truth-claims, and that the Gospel narratives were supernatural reports; fiction might be supernatural,

too, but fiction was always fictional, it was not in the same order of truth as the Gospel narratives. During the nineteenth century, these two positions began to soften and merge. At the high-point of the novel's triumph, when people felt it could do anything, the Gospels began to be read, by both writers and theologians, as a set of fictional tales – as a kind of novel. Simultaneously, fiction became an almost religious activity (though not, of course, with religion's former truth-value, for this was no longer believed in). Flaubert, a pivotal figure here, began to turn literary style into a religion while Ernest Renan, in his *Vie de Jésus*, began to turn religion into a kind of style, a poetry. It became no longer possible to believe that Jesus was who he claimed to be; he was now a 'character', almost the hero of a novel. Of course, the seeds of this shift lay in earlier times, in the deism of the eighteenth century especially. Gotthold Lessing, for instance, was both a theologian and an aesthete, and in the 1780s was reading the Gospels as historical narratives. He distinguished sharply between what he called 'the religion of Christ' and what he called 'the Christian religion'; the first was a set of claims made by a man in an historical text; the second was the 1700-year accretion of dogma. Lessing passed into English thought through Coleridge, whose posthumous book, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (1840) paraphrased – and emblazoned – the German theologian. Coleridge strove to be one of those readers who might 'take up the Bible as they do other books, and apply to it the same rules of interpretation'. Just as fiction supplies, and constitutes, the only evidence for our belief, so Coleridge felt that 'the Bible and Christianity are their own sufficient evidence'. If we are to believe the Scriptures, Coleridge seems to argue, it will be because of the novel-like effect those writings have on our hearts, and not because the Church has simply asserted that they are supernatural and infallible. For Coleridge, like Lessing, the Scriptures were writings, or as we would say now, texts, and

susceptible to our individual torque. It is a mark of how literary – how novelistic – such thinking had become, that Coleridge used the Book of Job as his clinching argument for the fallibility of the Scriptures. God could not have written a story that was such an argument against Himself, says Coleridge. Only a human being could do that. In other words, Coleridge might have added, God is not a novelist, he does not have negative capability.

For some of the writers discussed in this book – Melville, Gogol, Renan, Arnold, Flaubert – the difference between literary belief and religious belief was not always clear, and was often an excruciation. It is no surprise that this happened at the high moment of the European novel. For it was not just science, but the novel itself, which helped to kill Jesus's divinity, when it gave us a new sense of the real, a new sense of how the real disposes itself in a narrative – and then in turn a new scepticism towards the real as we encounter it in narrative. Ultimately, this 'break' was good neither for religion nor perhaps for the novel, although it was perhaps a beneficial moment in our progress from superstition. For Christianity, instead of disappearing, merely surrendered its truth-claims, and turned itself into a comforting poetry on the one hand, or an empty moralism on the other. Truth slipped away. (The heirs of Renan and Arnold are everywhere in contemporary Christianity.) And the novel, as I suggest in my discussion of Flaubert, having founded the religion of itself, relaxed too gently into aestheticism.

Nevertheless, there have always been writers great enough to move between the religious impulse and the novelistic impulse, to distinguish between them and yet, miraculously, to draw on both. Melville and Flaubert were such novelists, and so were Joyce and Woolf. For Virginia Woolf, fifty or so years after the convulsions of the nineteenth century, and the daughter of a celebrated agnostic, there was no formal agony of religious withdrawal.

The hard work had been done. For her, a kind of religious or mystical belief and a literary belief softly consorted – and yet, for her, the novel still retained its sceptical, inquisitorial function. In her writing, the novel acts mystically, only to show that we cannot reach the godhead, for the godhead has disappeared. For her the novel acts religiously but performs sceptically.

I hope that these essays may do something similar.

Sir Thomas More: A man for one season

It may be better to be a John Knox than an Alcibiades,
but it is better to be a Pericles than either.

- Mill, 'On Liberty'

Thomas More, the scrupulous martyr, is the complete English saint. But no man can ever be a saint in God's eyes, and no man should be one in ours, and certainly not Thomas More. His image has been warmed by different breaths. He is seen as a Catholic martyr because he died opposing Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine of Aragon and the King's robbery from the Pope of the leadership of the English Church. But he is also seen as a lawyer-layman caught in the mesh of presumptuous ecclesiology, an English Cicero of the pre-Reformation who nobly gave his head to forces beyond his control. Most absurdly, because of Robert Bolt's screenplay, this barrister of Catholic repression is widely envisioned as modernity's diapason: the clear, strong note of individual conscience, the note of the self, sounding against the authoritarian intolerance of the Early Modern state. Thomas More died in defence of an authoritarian intolerance much more powerful than a mere king's, however, for he died believing in God and in the authority of the Pope and the Catholic Church. As Lord Chancellor, he had imprisoned and interrogated Lutherans, sometimes in his own house, and sent six reformers to be burned at the stake, and he did not do this so that he might die for slender modern scruple; for anything as naked as the naked self. This drained, contemporary view of More, which admires not what he believed but how he believed - his 'certainty', only - is thinly secular, and represents nothing more than the retired religious yearning of a non-religious age.

Peter Ackroyd's dignified biography offers a picture of More which is a combination of Catholic admiration and modern scholarly determinism. Ackroyd soaked himself in late medieval history; happily, he does not pretend to conduct a historical séance, as he has in earlier work. (He does not walk down the Old Kent Road arm in arm with 'cockney More'.) He gives a reliable, indeed moving, account of ordinary religion in sixteenth-century England, and synthesizes a vast body of material. But his book is partial, merciful and sentimental where it should be total, unforgiving and grave. Ackroyd is evasive about More's evasions. He invariably gives him the benefit of the doubt in his battle with the Lutheran heretics, and is dreamily naive about More's Machiavellianism at court. He is gentle with the incoherent and frantic tattoos that More beat out in the enormous anti-Lutheran tracts of the 1520s. At no point does he properly examine the justice of the Protestant case, either doctrinally or politically, preferring to see its progress deterministically, in high doom, as the inevitable 'birth of the modern age'. His book is mild Catholic elegy. This not only clothes More in stolen righteousness, but delays once again a truly secular judgment of More (as opposed to the drained secular view), in which the zealous legalist might be seen for what he was, in all his itchy finesse of cruelty.

More's life, in particular its quick, morbid promotion towards martyrdom, is as compelling here as elsewhere: Ackroyd narrates it with royal fatalism. Here is the gentle house in Bucklersbury, where Erasmus, More's 'darling', wrote *In Praise of Folly* in 1509. We encounter again More's hairshirt, worn quietly underneath his public vestments so that only his daughter discovered it by chance, and the knotted straps with which he flagellated himself. His extended family, as Holbein's sketch reveals, existed as a *collegium* for the new humanism. More taught his children to read Greek and Latin by affixing letters to an archery-board and encouraging his pupils to fire arrows at them. The

prosecutor of later years could bear to chastise his children only with a peacock-feather. He and his wife, Alice, played the lute together, like ideal woodcut spouses. More was one of a number of humanists who believed that the liberal arts, especially the study of Greek and Latin literature, needed renovation. With Erasmus he translated the satirical and highly irreligious writer, Lucian, from Greek to Latin. He wrote, in 1518, that one should 'build a path to theology' through the great secular authors. He believed that the Church needed to be reformed, and was not obscure about the clerical abuse that was turning the people against the priesthood. Out of this world came his beautiful lament, *Utopia* (1516), whose lovely ironies would come to seem self-ironies, and whose playful negatives would curdle into the mean calculations of More's later years. For in the inverted island world of Utopia, divorce is permissible, and the inhabitants can follow any religion they like; these would become the two determinants of More's later fixity. The founder of Utopia, writes More, could see that religious differences sowed discord. Thus he allowed freedom of worship. He himself 'might do the best he could to bring others to his opinion, so that he did it peacably, gently, quietly and soberly . . . If he could not by fair and gentle speech induce them unto his opinions, yet he should use no kind of violence and refrain from displeasing and seditious words.' This was not, alas, portable wisdom; More would punish religious dissent not only with 'displeasing' words, but with state violence, and would come to say that he would rather not have written *Utopia* than see one heretic prosper.

Utopia is Saturnalian. It satirically turns custom upside down, so that in our own world we see the pompous altitude of custom, in its arbitrariness. The inhabitants of Utopia, for instance, make their meanest objects out of gold and silver, and give precious gems to their children as toys. In a beautiful jest, More writes that ambassadors, unaware of

Utopian customs, once arrived at the island finely dressed in gold chains. The islanders took the visitors to be slaves, and assumed that their simply dressed servants were the actual emissaries. This kind of inversion is the rocker-switch of all moral satire; it is there in Lucian, in Montaigne's *Utopia*-like essay 'On Cannibals', and in Swift. In Lucian's *Menippus*, which More translated, the hero travels to Hades to find that death has undone all the pointless hierarchies of life: Philip of Macedon is stitching rotten sandals to earn money, Xerxes is begging, and so on. But the point of Lucian's lesson is made clear earlier on, when Menippus tells us that *on earth* things have already become sadly inverted: 'On observation I found these same people practising the very opposite of what they preached. I saw those who advocated despising money clinging to it tooth and nail . . . and those who would have us reject fame doing and saying everything for just that, and again pretty well all of them speaking out against pleasure, but in private clinging to it alone.' In this light, Hades corrects these inversions by reinverting them, and in the same way, the island of Utopia is the comic inversion of the uncomic inversion of rectitude we practise in life. Accordingly. Utopia is not an ideal society so much as a comic one. More did not intend us to live in Utopia, so much as to be logically mocked by it: the Shakespearean Fool is the near equivalent.

It is difficult to reconcile the author of *Utopia* with the heretic-hunter of the mid-1520s, who personally broke into Lutherans' homes and sent men to the stake. It is true that Luther's challenge, from 1519 onwards, and Henry's proposed divorce, menaced More with visions of schism, and that the literal defence of the realm became More's necessary objective as Lord Chancellor. (He likened the fight against heretics to the fight against the Ottoman Empire.) But certainly, the shift from Utopian to prosecutor, in the space of ten years, is a bewildering one. Perhaps we should read *Utopia*, despite its play, more tragically – as not only

Lucianic satire, but as a darkly ironic vision of the impossible. The Utopians are pagans, and thus live without knowledge of original sin. It is impossible, so More would have thought, for Christians to get back to this Eden, and indeed we should not attempt to, because we have Christ's plan to save us, not Utopia's. Yet what would a world without the *need* of Christ's rescue look like? Perhaps it would resemble Utopia. The tiniest flickering of a tragic blasphemy, a yearning to be other than we are, is what enriches *Utopia* and gives it its air of mournful surmise. Whatever the explanation, the spirit of *Utopia*, whether comic or tragic, was left behind by More. At times, he seems to have known exactly what lay ahead. In his *History of King Richard III* (1513), he wrote that 'kings' games . . . were stage plays, and for the more part played upon scaffolds.' The 'More part', indeed. At other times, only we, in the harness of retrospect, can see how the ironies of this life buckle. Who could have invented, for instance, the irony of a line which blares at the reader from More's *Responsio ad Lutherum*, a tract written against Luther and in support of Henry VIII's own anti-Lutheran treatise, *An Assertion of the Seven Sacraments*? The sentence issues triumphantly from More as he traps Luther in argument: 'the King has you cornered.' As the 1520s progress, the dance of king and subject becomes emblematic, almost stagy. We watch as More and Henry circle around each other, exuding deadly perfumes: on the first day of January 1532, More presented Henry 'with a walking stick inlaid in gold leaf and in turn he was given a great golden bowl'. (The stick would strike, and the bowl would break.) And the final months are deeply moving; the loyal public servant, confined in the Tower for seven months, now selflessly bearded and long-haired, the body dying but also unconstrainedly living, become something natural. More was returning to spiritual childishness; his last words to his daughter are especially

lovely: 'God maketh me a wanton, and setteth me on His lap and dandleth me.'

The darker More eclipses the saint, however. More was drawn into the defence of the Catholic realm early in the 1520s, while still a royal counsellor. He wrote the *Responsio ad Lutherum* in 1523, and from then until his death in 1535, the battle against reform was his obsession. In 1526, Tyndale published his pocket-sized English translation of the New Testament. Heretical books were being imported from the continent. An English tendency towards anti-clericalism seemed in danger of fattening into the grossest Lutheranism and rebelliousness. Thomas More struck. A series of vicious arguments and counter-arguments streamed from his pen. Tyndale was 'the beste', and Luther and his wife were 'Friar Tuck and Maid Marion'. Unlike the twilit *Utopia*, these were written not in Latin but in brazen English: the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* in 1528, *The Supplication of Souls* in 1529, the massive *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* in 1532 and 1533, among whose half-million words can be found More's promise that if anyone translate into English *In Praise of Folly*, or works 'that I have myself written', he would burn them with his own hands 'rather than folk would . . . take any harm of them, seeing them likely in these days to do'.

As Lord Chancellor, which he became in October 1529, More, though a layman, was soon the Church's most eager agent. With the help of John Stokesley, the Bishop of London, More personally broke into the houses of suspected heretics, arresting them on the spot and sometimes interrogating them in his own home. He imprisoned one man in the porter's lodge of his house, and had him put in the stocks. He raided the home of a businessman called John Petyt who was suspected of financing Tyndale; Petyt died in the Tower. Six rebellious Oxford students were kept for months in a fish cellar; three of them died in prison. More was now a spiritual detective, a policeman in a hairshirt, engaged in 'what would now be called surveillance and

entrapment among the leather-sellers, tailors, fishmongers and drapers of London'. Six protesters were burned under More's chancellorship, and perhaps forty were imprisoned. Ackroyd is admirably detailed about these activities. But he resides in the sympathetic assumption that 'it might be argued that his severe stance was a reaction to the menaces of the period', and so he barely examines the compromised intellectual foundations of More's defence, and too often treats the anti-heretical tracts as just the grapes of heady sixteenth-century rhetoric.

Luther wanted to reorient theological certainty so that it could be grounded in Scripture. He regarded many of the practices of the Church as no more than human inventions, now subject to gross abuse by clergy and laypeople alike. For example, Luther felt that the Eucharist, which commemorates Christ's last supper, had become a superstition. Early sixteenth-century worshippers consumed the Host (the communion bread) only once or twice a year. For the rest of the time, it was sufficient simply to gaze on the Host as the priest elevated it above his head, at daily or weekly masses. To look upon the Host sufficed because the bread had become a crude visual proof of Christ's existence; it *was* the body of Christ, and diligent worshippers might boast that 'I see my Maker once a day.' This was one of the Church sacraments that Luther attacked. He felt that a partial biblical truth had been humanly corrupted. He could find no evidence in the New Testament for the doctrine of the transubstantiation. He concluded that people only believed such a thing because the Church told them to. Instead, Luther saw this sacrament as a divine promise, a symbol rather than a proof. Elsewhere in the Church, Luther found similar reifications of the spiritual. More had been in favour of reform as a young man. But time was now drawing in. Reform was not the same in the age of Luther as in the age of Erasmus. More truly believed that Luther presaged the arrival of the Anti-Christ; Suleiman the Magnificent and

the Ottoman hordes were grazing the edges of Europe. The King's divorce threatened the unity of the Church. Now the heretics had to be crushed. More's essential defence was traditional. In the *Responsio* (1523), he used Augustine's argument that the Church, and not only Scripture, has authority. We accept the Gospels themselves only because the Church tells us to; why then, he complained to Luther, is it not 'reasonable to believe certain truths only on the authority of the Church'? More's idea of the Church was like his idea of the customary law, a body of continuous and exercised truths. Like the early Church Fathers, he appealed to 'what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all'. He trusted in the accumulated wisdom of 'the whole corps of Christendom', and it can be fairly said that he died not in blind defence of the sovereignty of the Pope, but in reasoned defence of the primacy of the common Church and its ancient head.

Yet into this traditional argument he squeezed tinctures of rage and untruth. Ackroyd largely ignores this, providing extracts from More's works which are too small to allow proper judgment. In fact, More was unscrupulous, greasy, quibblingly legalistic. In the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* he blamed the sack of Rome, and the attendant atrocities, on Luther's followers. Ackroyd repeats this, forgetting to mention that Rome was in fact taken by mercenaries of the Catholic emperor Charles V. More was astonishingly disingenuous. Throughout the late 1520s, he claimed that anticlericalism was identical with heresy, when he, an early anticlerical, knew this to be untrue. In reply to one Simon Fish, who had argued that England's travails had to do with the greed and idleness of the clergy, More claimed that things were much the same in the country as they had always been, and then appealed to Henry VIII's vanity as defender of the faith to stamp out the unpatriotic anticlerical heretics. When More was not lying, he was dissembling. Two examples will be sufficient. (Neither is

quoted by Ackroyd.) In the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, More attempted to answer the charge of the reformers that it was not Christian for the Church to burn heretics. The Church did not burn people, replied More; the state burned them. This was strictly true, because the ecclesiastical courts tried heretics and the state courts sentenced them. But More's language is disingenuous. The Church, he writes, would never want to kill anyone. 'It is not the clergy that laboreth to have them punished to death.' The 'spiritual law' is 'good, reasonable, piteous, and charitable, and nothing desiring the death of any therein'. The Church asks the heretic to repent; if he does not, the Church excommunicates him, at which point 'the clergy giveth knowledge to the temporality, not exhorting the prince, or any man else, either, to kill him or to punish him.' The Church does not urge anyone to punish the heretic; it 'leaveth him to the secular hand, and forsaketh him . . .'

Ackroyd remarks at one point, fairly perhaps, that More was 'no different from most of his contemporaries' in supporting burning. But More's wriggling in this passage is unseemly. First, if he is so keen to absolve the Church of this punishment, then he cannot hold the practice in very high moral esteem, and it is simply legalistic to argue that it ceases to be repulsive once the state performs it. But moreover, More knew perfectly well that though formally Church and state dealt separately with the heretic, practically both sides worked together. He knew this because this was his own working experience. The Church, said More, never 'exhorted' a prince to burn anyone. Perhaps not in so many words, except that the Church performed the equivalent of exhortation every time it excommunicated and 'forsook' heretics. (Three hundred years later, in *The Idea of a University* [1852], Cardinal Newman would employ a similar argument, that the Spanish Inquisition 'in no proper sense belonged to the Church. It was simply and entirely a State institution . . .') And it

should be remembered that the defender of the Church in this passage was not a clergyman but a politician – a representative of the very ‘temporality’ to which he neutrally transfers the blame of burning. This is More the lawyer, truthful only in letter. It is the same More who told Thomas Cromwell in 1534 that he had ‘written nothing’ since 1527 against the King’s divorce; again, precisely true perhaps, except that More was one of the leaders, behind the scenes, of Catherine of Aragon’s faction. Ackroyd rather meaninglessly comments, on More’s duplicity at court, that it was ‘a difficult as well as an ambiguous role and More was the only man in the kingdom who could have played it’. But a more cold-eyed scholar, Alistair Fox, has written that it ‘gives evidence of a political endeavour in More so subtle and devious as to set not only Machiavelli, but also Richard III and Iago to school.’

When More could not win an argument, he slid into puerility. For example, in his tract *The Supplication of Souls* (1529), More tries to beat the reformers (‘this lewd sect’) with a flurry of numbers: ‘if ye consider how late this lewd sect began . . . and how few always’ they have been, ‘and then if ye consider on the other side how full and whole the great corps of all Christian countries’. And not only numbers are on our side, continues More, but quality: ‘match them man for man, then have we . . . Saint Austin against Friar Luther, Saint Jerome against Friar Lambert, Saint Ambrose against Friar Huskin, Saint Gregory against priest Pomerane, Saint Chrysostom against Tyndale.’ If these heretics include their wives in the battle, then they might seem to have an advantage; but we have ‘blessed women against these friars’ wives’. For we have ‘Saint Anastasia against Friar Luther’s wife, Saint Hildergaarde against Friar Huskin’s wife . . .’, and so on.

Ackroyd reads the tracts as rhetorical dressage rather than as doctrinal ordnance. For him, More is a Londoner, a man of the people defending popular tradition, who used

vernacular English and earthy taunts to defeat his opponents. Of one tract, he writes warmly: 'he uses the language of London as a way of refuting the more impersonal objections of his opponent.' Of the *Dialogue*, he comments: 'The whole theme and purpose of his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* had been to celebrate that common culture which was under threat.' And near the end of his book, he provides us with a mournful reminder of that 'common culture' which was about to pass: 'a time, soon to come, when there would be no more lights and images, no more pilgrimages and processions, no guild plays and no ringing for the dead, no maypoles or Masses or holy water, no birch at midsummer and no roses at Corpus Christi.'

This is very hazy. To begin with, in what sense was More a man of the people? His very defence of Catholicism rested on the rejection, in part, of the politics of the people. The so-called new humanism had always espoused a somewhat stoppered radicalism, in which elites reformed elites. Luther, by contrast, wanted to aerate the elite. Erasmus complained to Justus Jonus in 1521 that Luther 'is making even cobblers aware of things which used to be discussed only amongst the learned, as mysteries and forbidden knowledge . . . above all I would urge that one avoid disorder.' Like Erasmus, the More of the 1520s and 1530s was against disorder. In 1533, in his *Apology*, he wrote that it would be better to have no reform at all, even 'though the change might be to the better', if it involved public complaint against the law. Although, in 1528, he wrote in favour of translating the Bible into English, by 1530 he had decided against it. And even in 1528, in the *Dialogue*, he warned that an English Bible must not get into the wrong hands. It is especially dangerous when 'men unlearned . . . ensearch and dispute the secret mysteries of Scripture'. Things should be as they were in the Book of Exodus, writes More, when Moses ascended Mount Sinai and talked to God. The people, unlike Moses, 'ought to be content to tarry beneath,

and meddle none higher than is meet for them'. The priest on the hill, privy to mysteries, and the people beneath, coddled in obscurity – there might be no better image of the old Catholic curtain, the antique Scholastic protectorate.

On one issue, More was right: Luther's belief that faith alone, without good works, justified one in the eyes of God, was a cruelty that not only demanded an inhuman mental loyalty, but which, brought to its logical end, abolished the purpose of Christian conduct on earth. Yet because More had so sternly set himself against the essential plea of Lutheranism, he could never see that Luther's type of fideism did not arrive out of nothing, but owed its hard extremity to the Church's superstitions of corporeality. Luther was opposing grey with white, in overreaction. For although the Reformation did indeed end a common calendar of feast-days and processions, as Ackroyd charges, the religious share of that calendar had become a bullied almanac of rote and rite, the codification of mass ignorance. The evil lay not just in the pagan animism of certain corruptions – of believing that a pardon from the Pope might speed a soul from purgatory to heaven, or that the sprinkle of holy water, like that of salt, banished demons. It lay in the systematic withdrawal of Scripture from the people: psalms had been reduced to one or two verse extracts; at the Eucharist, the canticles had been starved to only one; priests were preaching fewer sermons; the amount of Scripture read publicly was in decline. More would not admit this. He refused to examine the proposition that if the Church acts merely humanly, then its authority is merely human, not divine. Despite the thousands of words he wrote against Luther, he turned his eyes from the awful challenge of Luther, which was to move God back from the visible while simultaneously expanding our invisible encounter with God. It was this challenge of absence, an admittedly cold challenge, which received its formal English statement when Latimer, in 1536, ordained that religious images were 'only

to represent things absent'. But More also turned his eyes from the political petition of the reformers, which was that the Church, again in Latimer's words, had 'deluded the people'. (The 1549 book of Common Prayer stated, as one of its expressed aims, the edification of the people.)

Yet the Protestant case against More, for all its power, is too easily made in the late twentieth century, and represents a rather blank triumph. One should avoid sounding like such propagandists of the Renaissance as Jacob Burckhardt, who writes, in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*: 'That religion should again become an affair of the individual and of his own personal feeling was inevitable when the Church became corrupt in doctrine and tyrannous in practice, and is a proof that the European mind was still alive.' One will make Protestantism sound like a modern secret that More was simply too old to catch, and thus make More a doomed historical villain, because he could not have acted differently - or a hero, if one is approaching this inevitability from the side of Peter Ackroyd's velvet reaction. This idea of More's entrapment by history or by the inevitable forward march of 'the European mind' must then represent the point at which Catholic admiration joins hands both with Protestant excoriation and with modern, secular admiration. Indeed, it represents the point at which Protestant criticism of More becomes identical with Protestant admiration. For if More is doomed, then he is always something of a hero, from any vantage.

But More could have acted differently, and it is on this presumption that a secular case against him should be made. Yet what does it mean to say that he could have acted differently? What are these belated assizes that could possibly convict More almost five hundred years after the time? Would that not be meaningless? The secular case is not acutely an argument with More the historical actor so much as with the category of sainthood. To argue that Napoleon could have acted differently at Borodino is a

meaningless wrestle with a *fait accompli*, and was properly mocked by Tolstoy. But to argue that a saint could have acted differently is always to argue that he *should* have acted differently; it is to argue with the Church that blesses his actions as deeds outside history and beyond the *fait accompli*. The Catholic claim for More as a saint is transhistorical and universal; More was saintly then, and is saintly now and for all time; for the Church, it is calendrically trivial that More happened to be canonized only in 1935. The secular argument against More can only match the religious argument for More if it too deploys transhistorical and universal categories. The Church says, in effect: this is how More should have acted, and we are well pleased with him, and we can pronounce this blessing at any moment in providential history because our values are timeless; the secularist must parry: this is not how he should have acted, and we must be able to say this at any moment in profane history because the only ground on which we can denounce More is on the ground that he betrayed certain timeless and universal ideals of secular human conduct. That is to say, the religious defence of More issues from one belief-system, and the secular argument against issues from another, and these two systems of thought are still at war. There is hardly any need to describe these two systems; a detail is offered by two books which appeared within five years of each other: Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864) and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859). Newman's position is hardly different from More's, three hundred years earlier. Newman argues that the Church should control what is known and discussed, because the Church has final authority over truth. Earlier, Newman wrote in *The Idea of a University* that 'Liberal Knowledge' can be allowed slightly to prosper precisely because religious truth can never be assailed: 'truth never can really be contrary to truth . . . error may flourish for a time, but Truth will prevail in the end.' Mill's essay, which wrestles incessantly with

Christianity, argues that truth is only tested, and is actually constituted and proved, by its 'collision with error', and that all opinions must thus be admissible. In a sense, Mill had already 'won' politically at the time of writing, and Newman never had the political power that More possessed. But the struggle between Newman's idea of sanctioned truth and Mill's idea of released error has not finished, and is never finished as long as Christianity, or any other system of sanctioned truth, exists.

The secular argument against More, then, is both premised on the infinity of this battle and is another episode in it. To this end, the secularist is bound to remark that a system of sanctioned truth has three defects germane to a criticism of Thomas More's conduct. First, it tends to deprive people of the means by which they might censure, and then adjust, their own behaviour, because it does not believe in correction by error; it is a circular system - 'if we would solve new questions, it must be by consulting old answers', writes Newman, adding that the notion of new doctrinal knowledge 'is intolerable to Catholic ears'. Second, and flowing from this, if error is neither extended the possibility of occasionally being true, nor allowed to express itself when merely untrue, then a system of sanctioned truth must inevitably produce a category of punishable heresy, a category which might as easily imprison Jesus or Thomas More as Tyndale or Cranmer. Third, sanctioned truth must imply the dominance of the Church's truths over the state's, and the Church's struggle to maintain its authority over the state. These three characteristics of Catholic belief, and not merely More's 'integrity', imprisoned him; just as, three hundred years later, that same circularity mentally imprisoned Cardinal Newman. Later in the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Newman writes icily in defence of sanctioned truth, that there is a correct time for everything, and that sometimes a protester against the Church who might seem to a later age 'a bold champion for the truth and a martyr to