

## Commutation Across the Social Divide

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In this essay I shall record how, even in times of social inertia and repression, writers have found ways of redressing the inequalities of the status quo by plot devices or in mental exercise. Taken together, these add up to a motif of sorts—a moral and qualitative commutability between the privileged and the dispossessed, and of their narrative or actual commutation, as when a god disempowers himself to experience human life, or when a ruler sloughs the gown of office and enters the slums of his capital. This motif seems to have been nurtured in part by the radicalism lodged in the Christian gospels, even though the church establishment sought to efface it. For embedded in Christianity were several social propositions that the Roman authorities had to inoculate before they could embrace it as the religion of the empire. Take the canticle known as the *Magnificat*—

51 He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered  
the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

52 He hath put down the mighty from *their* seats, and  
exalted them of low degree.

53 He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich  
he hath sent empty away (Luke 1),

—which derives in turn from the song of Hannah in I Sam. 2:

7 The LORD maketh poor, and maketh rich: he bringeth  
low, and lifteth up.

8 He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, *and* lifteth up the  
beggar from the dunghill, to set *them* among princes, and to  
make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the

earth *are* the LORD's, and he hath set the world upon them.

Whereas the frequentative present tense gives no moral purpose to the reversals in Hannah's song—they read like the impersonal whirlings of the *rota Fortunae*—the *Magnificat* is couched in the perfect, implying that the conception of the messiah *necessarily* issued in social change:

[Mary] uses the past tense . . . not [to] describe God's past care for the down-trodden, but because God has already taken decisive action in the promised sending of his Son, and she foresees as an accomplished fact the result that will follow in his mission. If the *Magnificat* had been preserved as a separate psalm outside the present context, we might have taken it to be the manifesto of a political and economic revolution.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that we *don't* conceive it as such a 'manifesto' has less to do with questions of context than with the fuzziness of Jesus' actual teaching, and also with the expedient way in which the church chose to read it.

For a start, there are differing takes on its central tenet, 'The Kingdom of God.' Was this an imminent or a future event? To

the people of Galilee the coming of the 'kingdom' meant that the mighty of this world would be brought low and the poor and oppressed would be lifted up. Since most of those who heard Jesus came from the poor and lowly, it is no wonder that what he had to say aroused their interest and revived their hopes.<sup>2</sup>

The same commentators note on the other hand that there 'are numerous passages in the gospels where Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God in

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<sup>1</sup> G. B. Caird, *The Gospel of St Luke* (Harmondsworth, 1963), p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> Howard Clark Kee and Franklin W. Young, *The Living World of the New Testament* (London, 1960), p. 96. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

language that suggests it has not come' (p. 123). Also, the proto-radicalism of the *Magnificat* offers no programme for effecting social change. Inequality still obtains, but with the shoe on the other foot. Indeed the very idea of a 'kingdom' is a regressive one, though, as Kee and Young point out, Jesus 'rarely followed the analogy through to the point of speaking of king and subjects' (p. 119). Another exegete has suggested, furthermore, that Mark 10.31 ('But many *that are* first shall be last; and the last first') 'may simply have been a proverbial saying about the unpredictable mutability of the human lot.'<sup>3</sup> The tense has shifted from the actualizing perfect of the *Magnificat* to a vague post-mortem future so as to shore up the credibility of the church. After all, it was clear for all to see that the birth of Jesus had *not* produced any significant change in the status quo.

While they lacked specificity of process and timing, some of Jesus' pronouncements remained discomfiting even so. G. H. Wells has remarked that:

The doctrine of the Kingdom of Heaven . . . is certainly one of the most revolutionary doctrines that ever stirred and changed human thought. It is small wonder if the world of that time failed to grasp its full significance, and recoiled in dismay from even a half-apprehension of its tremendous challenges to the established habits and institutions of mankind.<sup>4</sup>

Christianity' derives from the Greek adjective 'christos' ('anointed'), which, translating the Hebrew 'masiah,' attached to Jesus the sacrificial purpose of that Judaic figure. This shifted focus from *what* he preached (moral tenets that ought properly to be called 'Jesuisism') to what subsequent commentators, Paul of Tarsus among them, made of his violent death. In Paul's redaction of Jesus' teaching, the praxis of good works was subordinated to justification by faith. At the same time, the Nazarene's express rejection of materialism ('Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?'—Matt 7.31); the despair of a 'certain ruler' over the intemperate demands of Jesuism ('And when Jesus

<sup>3</sup> D. E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St Mark* (Harmondsworth, 1963), p. 276.

<sup>4</sup> H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind* (1920; rev. and rpt. London, 1932), p. 526. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

saw that he was very sorrowful, he said, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!—Luke 18.24)—such uncompromising positions were simply ignored, because, in Wells’s words, his followers preferred to return ‘to the old familiar ideas of temple and altar, of fierce deity and propitiatory observance, of consecrated priest and magic blessing . . . to the dear old habitual life of hates and profits and competition and pride’ (p. 527). Paul was accordingly careful to preach a ‘Christian’ submission to the status quo—‘Servants, be obedient to them that are *your* masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling’ (Ephes. 6.5)—and the *kerygma* displaced ethical teaching with talk of sacrifice and atonement, directing the gaze of the faithful away from Jesus’ social mandates. Instead of advocating the *mundane* social change proclaimed by the *Magnificat*, Paul emphasized the doctrine of incarnation. Uninterested in having humans level with humans, he focused on the belief that a deity had levelled with humankind. Not that the idea of his slumming it on earth met with universal approval, for the Docetists resisted it altogether, and claimed that ‘Christ only *seemed* to be corporeal, but that he really was not’ (Kee and Young, p. 343).

In the struggle between these competing versions of the doctrine, the more concrete one gained ground and eventually solidified into orthodoxy. But even as that happened, the sense of condescension—a literal melding of deity and flesh (‘cum’), predicated on an equally literal descent from heaven (‘descendere’)—was treated as a once-off event, not as a pattern for human behaviour. When Paul formulated the doctrine of *kenosis* or self-emptying—‘And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. (Phil. 2.8)’—he presented it as something unique and inimitable. And whereas Jesus had called the very issue of servitude into question by degrading masters and exalting slaves, Paul embraced it as an unalterable fact of society. He was much more impressed with his idea that a *deity* had volunteered for servitude. Even so, the ‘Hymnus ambrosianus,’ also known as the ‘Te Deum,’ contains a hint of the unease that the doctrine generated during the early days of the church: ‘Tu, ad liberandum suscepturus hominem, non horruisti Virginis uterum’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Breviarium romanum ex decreto sancrosancti concilii tridentini restitutum S. Pii V pontificis maximi jussu editum aliorumque pontificum cur recognitum Pii papae XII jussu edita*, 4 vols. (Turin, 1949), 1:9. The translation in the *Book of Common*

Here the bristling horror of ‘horruisti’ all but overshadows the negative particle of the litotes—and this sense of compromised divinity would eventually lead theologians to refurbish and reconstitute that ‘uterus’ through the dogma of the ‘immaculate conception,’ making it worthy of its task by an ex post facto decree that Mary was ‘sine labe originale concepta.’<sup>6</sup> Even as they hedged it round with clauses and provisions, Christians still acknowledged that the incarnation amounted to a curtailment of divine power, a cloistering of immensity, in Donne’s phrase. But the acknowledgement had next to no impact on their social policy. A handful practised the extravagant sort of asceticism associated with Simeon Stylites, but few saw self-humiliation as the instrument of social change. Instead, as the epistles of Paul make clear, the church accepted the social model that obtained at the time of its dogmatic regulation. Whereas Jesus had feasted with publicans and sinners (Matt 9.11), Paul established instead a moral apartheid of redemption, segregating holy sheep from wicked goats: ‘every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; / Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God’ (1 Thess 4.4-5). And while Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, undoubtedly caked with the grime of Palestinian streets, the pope, his putative vicar on earth, turned this *human* kenosis into an empty rite, scarcely to be recognized in its sanitary decorativeness.

So much, then, for the dogmatic context for the motif I want to examine in this essay. Not that we should seek its clarification in terms of Christianity alone. However central the idea of social reversal and moral commutation might have been to Jesus’ teaching (the worldly great becoming insignificant and vice versa), it wasn’t unique. Paul’s doctrines of incarnation and kenosis had likewise been anticipated in Greek mythology, and even Jesus’ first/last/last/first pronouncement had analogues in the rites and festivities of the Roman world. One such was the triumphal procession of a conqueror. His chariot was occupied by a slave who kept repeating ‘*Respice post te; hominem te esse memento.*’<sup>7</sup> This practice wasn’t designed to *humble* the triumphant, but rather to preserve

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*Prayer* reads: ‘When thou tookest upon thee to deliver man: thou didst not abhor the Virgin’s womb.’

<sup>6</sup> ‘Conceived without original sin.’

<sup>7</sup> ‘Look behind you; remember you are [but] a man.’

him from the envious wrath of the gods: ‘Preceded by his lictors, he stood, richly dressed and wreathed in bay, on a four-horse chariot, a slave murmuring to him words to avert the possible ill consequence of outstanding success such as ‘remember you are mortal’.<sup>8</sup> Pliny the Elder gives additional information on what was, in conception at least, an apotropaic rite: ‘although a Tuscan crown of gold was held over the victor’s head from behind, nevertheless he wore an iron ring on his finger, just the same as the slave holding the crown in front of himself.’<sup>9</sup> Even though the presence of the slave was meant to avert the jealousy of the gods, the spectacle of a powerful and disempowered man alongside each other must, for the spectators at least, have hinted the fate that awaits us all. There is only a small semantic gap between the customary mantra of mortality, ‘memento mori’ (with its implied invitation to look ahead—‘respice *pro te*’) and ‘Respice post te; hominem te esse memento.’

But Roman society was also capable of more generous, disinterested kinds of levelling than we witness in the triumphator’s attempts to cheat the ‘evil eye.’ The feast of Saturnalia was as ineffectual and as emblematic as the chariot slave, but nonetheless entertained the idea, if only for day, of commuting the positions of the powerful and the dispossessed. During the Saturnalia, *magister* and *servus* swapped roles, and one can only hope that masters who otherwise lacked the empathy to participate in the lives of their ‘suffering servants’ took something lasting from this experience. Suffering servitude was, of course, one of the underpinning ideas of the Christian incarnation. Paul and his successors claimed that the deity had had to *experience* the misery of his creatures in order to effect their redemption. And so the early church appropriated Isaiah’s ‘suffering servant’ as a type of the incarnate saviour. This servant was simply a master in disguise, not unlike the servants-for-a-day of the Saturnalia, for the prophet’s imagery of persisted bruising and attempted quenching suggested once more that society hadn’t been transformed but only up-ended. From the Judaeo-Christian suffering servant on the one hand (with its pagan analogue, gods that go abegging), and from the holiday spirit of the Saturnalia, two distinct topoi came into being. The first was the *deus absconditus* or hidden god, and the

<sup>8</sup> M. C. Howatson, (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (London, 1989), p. 581.

<sup>9</sup> Pliny, *Natural History with an English Translation*, trans. W. H. S. Jones, 10 vols. (London, 1943), 9:11

second the rococo pastorale, exemplified in the hameau that Marie Antoinette built at the Petit Trianon. In the former, we witness a ‘purposeful’ sloughing of divine privilege (to investigate or try society at large), in the latter, an escape from the ‘oppressiveness’ of high society.

Let’s begin with the *deus absconditus*. In Greek and Roman mythology, the gods take human form to pursue their lusts, but also to see how the ‘other half’ lives. When the motive is erotic, human flesh provides a lead suit *avant la lettre* against the dangers of divine radiation, as the fate of Semele attests. But by damping down its ‘numen,’ incarnation also *disguises* godhead, and makes it possible for the *deus absconditus* to go about his business without a fanfare. Thus degoddified in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Jupiter and Mercury descend to earth and visit Philemon and Baucis, an old couple rewarded for their hospitality. Their cottage changes into a temple, lifting the humble to heaven in the same way that the heavenly had descended to humbleness: ‘marble columns took the place of its wooden supports, the thatch grew yellow, till the roof seemed to be made of gold, the doors appeared magnificently adorned with carvings, and marble paved the earthen floor.’<sup>10</sup> The *Nachleben* of such probative incarnations can be found in the popular legends attached to Haroun al Raschid and Joseph II of Austria who, ‘donning a smock,’ would walk ‘behind the plough-tail,’ and, ‘wearing the dress of an ordinary citizen . . . would mingle with the crowd.’<sup>11</sup> In the background we sense not only the Philemon and Baucis myth but also that of Christopher, its Christian derivative: ‘one night he was carrying a child across the river when the child became so heavy that Christopher could hardly get across. “No wonder!” said the child. “You have been carrying the whole world. I am Jesus Christ, the king you seek.”’<sup>11</sup> Meyerbeer’s *L’Étoile du nord* contains a similar *coup de foudre* when Peter Mikhailov, an obscure carpenter in Wyborg, stands forth as Peter the Great, ‘et vera incesso patuit deus.’ At this point, like the cottage of Philemon and Baucis, his workshop in Wyborg transforms to his palace in St Petersburg, his ‘Olympus’ so to speak.

Since kenosis allows self-disempowered deities to gather first-hand knowledge of their creatures, moral shortcomings are just as likely to be

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<sup>10</sup> Ovid, *The Metmorphoses of Ovid*, trans. Mary Innes (Harmondsworth, 1955), p. 214.

<sup>11</sup> Donald Attwater, *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints* (Harmondsworth, 1965), p. 85.

punished as virtue rewarded. In *Measure for Measure*, the Duke of Vienna uses his disguise to reveal Angelo as a moral fraud and also threatens Lucio with the gallows. Far from receiving kindness from his subjects, he finds himself maligned:

*Duke.* Sir, the Duke is marvellous little beholding to your reports; but the best is, he lives not in them.

*Lucio.* Friar, thou knowest not the Duke so well as I do. He's a better woodman than thou tak'st him for.

*Duke.* Well! you'll answer this one day. Fare ye well.  
(4.3.158-62)

Judgement comes when he stands forth and arraigns his slanderer, a moment that serves only to reinforce the status quo. The Duke has never questioned his prerogatives, but simply put them in abeyance in order to renew and reinforce them.

A rather different purpose is served by King Lear's *involuntary* banishment, and by the anagnorisis made possible by his loss of privilege. Here 'godhead' has been surrendered, not put on hold, and gives rise to a *deus victus* rather than *absconditus*. As if to illustrate the medieval posy 'When Adam delved and Eve span, / Who was then the gentleman?', Lear turns into a primordial being when he loses power. Unlike Paul, he is worried by the injustice of the world as he finds it, and moots a social remedy that would direct excess wealth toward the poor. Here Shakespeare hints at a *mechanism* for change, something absent from the reversal paradigm in the gospels. Lear's ideal society isn't inverted but levelled:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these? O! I have ta'en  
Too little care of this. Take physic, Pomp;  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,  
And show the Heavens more just. (3.4.28-36)

In *Measure for Measure*, the surrender of privilege entails only a mild element of pain when the Duke hears himself traduced, but in *King Lear* privilege speaks evil *of itself*, reminding us that power is no guarantee of virtue. It's all a game of chance or 'handy-dandy':

*Lear*. Look with thine ears: see how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear: change places, and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, and which is the thief? Thou has seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?

*Glou*. Ay, Sir.

*Lear*. And the creature run from the cur? There thou might'st behold The great image of Authority:

A dog's obey'd in office.

Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand!

Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thy own back;

Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind

For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener.

Thorough tatter'd clothes small vices do appear;

Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,

And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;

Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it. (4.6.149-65)

While this speech bears a superficial resemblance to the reversals promised by the *Magnificat*, the flattening is actually effected by Juvenalian disgust. The cozener doesn't triumph morally over the usurer; he simply trumps him.

Social privilege had its own attendant pains, however. 'Robes and furr'd gowns' might deflect searching criticism, but could offer no defence against Angst and insomnia, nor indeed against the pain of marital compulsions placed upon monarch and serf alike. In Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, the nurse's experience as a feudal bride differs little from that of a dynastic queen:

'But you were married, nurse,' said Tanya,

'How was it?' 'By God's will, my Vanya

Was but a boy, if truth were told,

And I was just thirteen years old.

The marriage-broker kept on pressing

The matter for a fortnight; oh,  
 What tears I shed you do not know,  
 The day my father gave his blessing;  
 They loosed my braids, and singing low,  
 Led me to church. I had to go.<sup>12</sup>

Even so, the ‘uncomplicated’ lives of peasants, as rendered by rococo pastorales, often attracted the wistful gaze of the crown-weary. Shakespeare presents this view *de haut en bas* in *King Henry IV Part II*:

Why rather, sleep, liest thou in smoky cribs,  
 Upon uneasy pallets stretching thee,  
 And husht with buzzing night-flies to thy slumber,  
 Than in the perfum'd chambers of the great,  
 Under the canopies of costly state,  
 And lull'd with sound of sweetest melody?  
 (3.1.9-14)

If, as Henry concludes, ‘Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown’ (3.1.31), it’s hardly surprising that some monarchs chose to set them aside for a day or two, taking due precaution against smoky cribs and night-flies before they did. This was certainly the impulse behind the sanitized peasant dwellings that Marie Antoinette erected at the Petit Trianon, though we can be sure that their launderers and cheese-makers conformed to the dress code of rococo pastorale, and that any patches or smutches on their garments were organized by the same artistic hand that had weathered the buildings in which they lived: ‘Hubert Robert painted cracks in the woodwork, so that it might seem touched by the hand of time; and the chimneys were carefully smoked’.<sup>13</sup>

The Petit Trianon trivialized Rousseau in the manner of Mrs Merdle in *Little Dorrit*—‘We know [society] is hollow and conventional and worldly and very shocking, but unless we are Savages in the Tropic seas (I should have been charmed to be one myself—most delightful life and perfect

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<sup>12</sup> Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, trans. Babette Deutsch, ed. and intro. Avrahm Yarmolinsky (Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 77.

<sup>13</sup> Stefan Zweig, *Marie Antoinette: The Portrait of an Average Woman* (1933; rpt. London, 1988), p. 111.

climate I am told), we must consult it'<sup>14</sup>—and Marie Antoinette's knowledge of hameaux, like the society woman's of Polynesian huts, was simply a drawing-room pleasantry, a moral argument reduced to a travel poster. It was only in these controlled circumstances that the faux *di absconditi* of the first estate left their Olympus, spawning a recognizable narrative topos as they did so. Different from the divine condescension examined so far, it found embodiment, *inter alia*, in the ballet *Lady Henriette*, and in the opera—*Martha*—that Flotow subsequently made of it. In both, members of Queen Anne's court hire themselves out as servants, but 'soon tire of the drudgery of a servant's life and make their escape from the farm.'<sup>15</sup> Just as Marie Antoinette returned to Versailles at any time she chose, so do Lady Harriet and Nancy to Hampton Court. This kind of social commutation doesn't seek to investigate humanity, or to place it on trial, or to correct social inequalities—it simply escapes from boredom, the boredom of too little activity and, when that has been addressed, the boredom of too much. The social hierarchy doesn't change, nor, in essence, do those who make their escape. It is a ladder kept at hand for a quick getaway. That unchanging hierarchy also provided a ladder of escape for those few who were ambitious enough to claw a passage up from peasant cottages. In Beaumarchais' *The Marriage of Figaro*, the servant taunts the nobleman with the undistinction of his distinguished birth—'What have *you* done to deserve such advantages? Put yourself to the trouble of being born—nothing more'<sup>16</sup>—and counterposes his own energy and resourcefulness against the count's inertia: '

Whereas I, lost among the obscure crowd, have had to deploy more knowledge, more calculation and skill merely to survive than has sufficed to rule all the provinces of Spain for a century! Yet you would measure yourself against me.

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, intro. Lionel Trilling (London, 1953), p. 238.

<sup>15</sup> Ivor Guest, *The Romantic Ballet in Paris* (1966; rev. and rpt. London, 1980), p. 227. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, *The Barber of Seville and The Marriage of Figaro*, trans. and intro. John Wood (Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 199. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

As in the first/last sayings of the gospels, this doesn't amount to an argument for social equality. The count should ideally become a valet, and the valet step into his shoes in turn. Earlier on, Almaviva had grumbled that 'The servants in this house take longer to dress than their masters,' and Figaro retorted that that's 'Because they have no servants to assist them' (p. 159). If a nobleman's life's achievement were the mere fact of his nativity, the upwardly mobile servant could draw level by the sheer fact of his activity. Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* demonstrates how resourceful employees could, on occasion at least, commute their social positioning by force of will. Serpina secures the change through a stratagem of contrariness. Like Figaro after her, she matches the activity of her service against the passive comfort of her master: 'Per aver di voi cura, io sventurata debbo esser maltrattata.'<sup>17</sup> Her *consoeur*, Richardson's Pamela, also has to contend with the *droit du seigneur*, but secures her apotheosis through passive resistance (oiled with unction and sycophancy) rather than through action:

Upon the whole, therefore, I conclude, that Mr. B is almost the only gentleman, who excels every lady that I have seen; so greatly excels, that even the emanations of his excellence irradiate a low cottage-born girl, and make her pass among ladies of birth and education for somebody.

Forgive my pride, dear Sir; but it would be almost a crime in your Pamela not to exult in the mild benignity of those rays, by which her beloved Mr. B. endeavours to make her look up to his own sunny sphere: while she, by the advantage only of his reflected glory, in *his* absence, which makes a dark night to her, glides along with her paler and fainter beaminess, and makes a distinguishing figure among such lesser planets, as can only poorly twinkle and glimmer, for want of the aid she boasts of.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> 'In looking after you, I, unfortunate woman, have to be mistreated?'—Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, *La serva padrona* (*From Maid to Mistress*): *Libretto* by G. A. Federico (*English Version* by Hamilton Benz) (New York, no date), p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*, intro. M. Kinkead-Weekes, 2 vols. (London, 1962), 2:416.

Pamela is an eighteenth-century allotrope of Baucis, raised to Olympian heights by the masterful *fiat* of a sun god, for the baroque ‘beamingness’ of Mr. B recalls the solar imagery appropriated by Louis XIV.

For as long as the social hierarchy remained intact (while at the same time tolerating the mobility essential for social ascent) it could be used for fantasies of punishment as well as reward. The plot device of *punitive* social transition was almost as popular as that of the *deus absconditus*, as witness the 1686 comedy entitled *The Devil of a Wife, or A Comical Transformation*, ‘attributed to Thomas Jevon but possibly written by T. Shadwell and first performed at the Dorset Gardens Theatre, London’ (Guest, p. 300). This underwent operatic adaptations by Gluck, Philidor and Solie, and eventually became a ballet in 1845. The plot of *Le Diable à quatre*, its final avatar, centred on a ‘blind fiddler . . ., whose violin the Countess breaks in a fit of ill temper.’ He ‘turns out to be a magician, and to punish the Countess he causes her and Mazourka to change places for a day. The countess is soon chastened by the rough manners of Mazourki, while Mazourka astonishes the Countess’s servants by her gentle disposition’ (Guest, p. 246). Something of the same Schadenfreude at the discomfiture of refinement figures in the treatment that Marie Antoinette received at the Temple and at the Conciergerie, and in *Wuthering Heights* when the cosseted Isabella Linton encounters necessity in all its bareness:

‘I’m tired with my journey, and want to go to bed! Where is the maid-servant? Direct me to her, as she won’t come to me!’

‘We have none,’ he answered; ‘you must wait on yourself!’

‘Where must I sleep, then?’ I sobbed—I was beyond regarding self-respect, weighed down by fatigue and wretchedness.<sup>19</sup>

All of which has taken us some distance from our starting point—the stimulus that the unrealized social teachings of the gospels provided for alternatives to the status quo. It is to this issue that we must now return. As we have seen, Paul and the gospel editors thought it wise to defer the Kingdom of Heaven to a point post mortem, and while the former

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<sup>19</sup> Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. David Daiches (Harmondsworth, 1965), p. 176.

*proclaimed* that distinctions between the faithful had been abolished ('There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are one in Christ Jesus'—Gal 3.28), he also took care to reinscribe them in other edicts and obiter dicta: 'Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so *let* the wives *be* to their own husbands in every thing' (Eph 5.24). If the equality of the 'kingdom of heaven' couldn't be distinguished from the equality of the necropolis (at least as far as its practical implementation went), it must be said that other minds than Paul's had grasped this fact and had articulated it with greater eloquence—that of Horace for one:

pallida Mors aequo pulsat pede pauperum tabernas  
regumque turres.<sup>20</sup>

And Lucian's too. In the latter's *Conversations in the Underworld*, Hermes does a carnal 'baggage check' on the entrants into Dis:

*Hermes*: [To the next man in the queue.] And who may you be, with your crown and purple robes and disagreeable expression?

*Next Man*: I am Lampichus, King of Georgia.

*Hermes*: Well, Lampichus, what do you think you're doing with all that paraphernalia?

*Lampichus*: You can hardly expect a king to travel in the nude.

*Hermes*: If he's a dead king—certainly I do. Take it all off.<sup>21</sup>

When the socially powerful clash with the greater power of the grave, something's got to give. Oriental potentates must, as chimney sweepers, come to dust.

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<sup>20</sup> 'Pale Death with foot impartial knocks at the poor man's cottage and at princes' palaces'—Horace, *The Odes and Epodes*, trans. C. E. Bennett (1914; rpt and rev. London, 1927), pp. 16-17.

<sup>21</sup> Lucian, *Satirical Sketches*, trans. and intro. Paul Turner (Harmondsworth, 1961), p. 66.

There were dress rehearsals for this stripping bare. The centralization of power in the hands of the emperor sometimes levelled the social ranks below him. Severus, for example, had much in common with Lucian's Hermes:

In the administration of justice, the judgments of the emperor were characterised by attention, discernment, and impartiality; and, whenever he deviated from the strict line of equity, it was generally in favour of the poor and oppressed; not so much indeed from any sense of humanity, as from the natural propensity of a despot to humble the pride of greatness, and to sink all his subjects to the same common level of absolute dependence.<sup>22</sup>

A social equality based on the disablement of competitors is hardly generous, nor is it very thorough-going, for even patricians in quasi-egalitarian thrall to a dictator would have continued to sneer at the plebs and the slaves below them. And so too did the first and second estates of the *ancien regime*, except on those limited occasions when the precepts of Jesuist radicalism and the Roman Saturnalia were fleetingly realized, and, at the feast of Mardi gras, mooted the social equivalence of a bishop and a boy. Victor Hugo implicitly links this ritual with issues of social justice in *Notre Dame de Paris*:

This procession [of the Fool's Pope], which our readers have seen take its departure from the Palais, had organized itself on the way, and been recruited with all the ragamuffins, the unemployed thieves and disposable vagabonds in Paris, so when it reached the Grève it presented a most respectable aspect.

A history of vagabondism, beggary, and thievery, could it be faithfully and sagaciously written, would form neither one of the least entertaining nor least instructive chapters in the great history of mankind, and especially in that of all such old governments as have been established

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<sup>22</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline & Fall of the Roman Empire*, 8 vols. (London, 1903), 1:140-41.

originally by violence and brigandage (commonly called conquest), and for the benefit of the invading and armed minority and their descendants, at the expense of the unarmed, peaceful, and laborious majority . . .<sup>23</sup>

In this reading, the powerful entrench their power in a graded pyramid, criminalizing as ‘vagabonds’—as ‘wanderers’ rather than perchers—all those unable to mount it.

The history of Europe was punctuated by other flickerings and flarings of the same radical spirit, fuelled in part by those precepts of Jesus that Paul had rendered inert. Take, for example, the Anabaptist uprising. Governments established ‘by violence and brigandage (commonly called conquest)’ persecuted the ‘heresy’ of equal rights with as much brutality as they could command:

For the Anabaptists no penalties were esteemed too terrible. These poor sectaries, whose revolutionary beliefs were for the most part the fruit of social misery, were drowned, roasted by slow fire, burned alive, or put to other forms of exquisite torture. The scaffold or stake which sufficed for the Lutherans was held to be an inadequate reward for desperadoes who dared to denounce property as well as priesthood.<sup>24</sup>

Given, therefore, the fates reserved for the architects of the Peasants’ Revolt and the Anabaptist uprising (which had, after all, been the fate of Jesus too), social criticism or indeed any intimation of discontent with the status quo had to be aired with caution. But just as a cat can look at a king, so a proto-radical sensibility could survey injustice and, without expressly advocating revolution, hold it up for inspection. Two literary procedures came to hand in this regard. The first was to establish common denominators between castes and classes, expunging difference through the solvent of humanity. Shylock’s speech in *The Merchant of Venice* is the locus classicus of this sort of appeal:

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<sup>23</sup> Victor Hugo, *Notre Dame de Paris* (London, no date), p. 80.

<sup>24</sup> H. A. L. Fisher, *A History of Europe*, 2 vols (1935; rpt. London, 1960), 1:536.

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands,  
organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with  
the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the  
same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and  
cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian  
is?—if you prick us do we not bleed? (3.1.52-58)

Shylock here implicitly indicts the disconnect between official Christianity and the more challenging Jesuism preserved within it, and which calls it to account. It was also possible to see patterns of *social* equivalence (rather than a mere human continuity) between the base and the summit of the pyramid. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare took a ruler from his palace and dumped him in a squalid corner of his realm so that his social commutation could bear moral and (theoretically, at least) practical fruit. How different, on the other hand, the tableau of before and after, of grandeur and sordidness, in Pope's 'Epistle to Bathurst':

In the worst inn's worst room, with mat half-hung  
The floors of plaister, and the walls of dung,  
On once a flock-bed, but repair'd with straw,  
With tape-ty'd curtains, never meant to draw,  
The George and Garter dangling from that bed  
Where tawdry yellow strove with dirty red,  
Great Villers lies—alas! how chang'd from him,  
That life of pleasure, and that soul of whim!  
Gallant and gay, in Cliveden's proud alcove,  
The bow'r of wanton Shrewsbury and love;<sup>25</sup>

The apparently elegiac stance seems to take its cue from Hamlet's lament for Yorick:

Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how  
oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs,

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<sup>25</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope: A One-Volume Edition of the Twickenham Text with Selected Annotations*, ed. John Butt (London, 1963), p. 583.

your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table  
 on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning?  
 Quite chop-fallen? (5.1.182-86)

But it isn't long before one senses that this isn't a lament at all, but rather of a piece with the *Schadenfreude* that greets Isabella at Wuthering Heights, and which greeted Marie Antoinette at the Conciergerie. Pope evokes the crimson and gold of opulence in the parodic strife of 'tawdry yellow' and 'dirty red' and plays the secrecy of alcoves against the exposure enforced by tape-tied curtains—curtains that also debase and mock the focusing drapery of baroque portraiture. Revulsion is compounded with exultant delight. The 'Epistle to Bathurst' was written at the same time that Hogarth was painting *The Harlot's Progress*; a graphically judgemental moralism is common to both.

Dickens, on the other hand, organizes the before-and-after tableaux of *Bleak House* in a different spirit. Here it's Lady Dedlock's social *ascent* that becomes the subject of mockery, and not her decline. One senses the presence of all the *Assumptions* the author had encountered on the continent in her 'miraculous' upward wafting:

Indeed, he married her for love. A whisper still goes about, that she had not even family; howbeit, Sir Leicester had so much family that perhaps he had enough, and could dispense with any more. But she had beauty, pride, ambition, insolent resolve, and sense enough to portion out a load of fine ladies. Wealth and station, added to these, soon floated her upward; and for years, now, my Lady Dedlock has been at the centre of the fashionable intelligence, and at the top of the fashionable tree.<sup>26</sup>

But how different the plangency and *Miteinfühlung* when that 'assumption' is reversed, and Lady Dedlock begins her pilgrimage to Captain Nemo's

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<sup>26</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, intro. Osbert Sitwell (London, 1948), p. 10. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

grave. Nothing could be further from Pope's 'Quomodo ceciderunt robusti' stance with respect to Villiers:

On the waste, where the brick-kilns are burning with a pale blue flare; where the straw-roofs of wretched huts in which the bricks are made, are being scattered by the wind, where the clay and water are hard frozen, and the mill in which the gaunt blind horse goes round all day, looks like an instrument of human torture;—traversing this deserted blighted spot, there is a lonely figure with the sad world to itself, pelted by the snow and driven by the wind, and cast out, it would seem, from all companionship. It is the figure of a woman, too; but it is miserably dressed, and no such clothes ever came through the hall, and out at the great door, of the Dedlock mansion. (p. 767)

Pope had used the 'George and Garter' as a foil to the rags of a Yorkshire inn; Dickens suggests that the George and Garter are rags in and of themselves. The crucial point is that while the *clothes* Lady Dedlock is wearing would never have come 'through the hall, and out at the great door, of the Dedlock mansion,' the *person* who wears them most certainly would. This is the storm scene from *King Lear* set in a different key. And it's also *Paradise Lost* at a remove. Lady Dedlock is Eve divested even of her Adam:

The World was all before them, where to choose  
Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:  
They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,  
Through *Eden* took thir solitary way.<sup>27</sup>

Such graphically *enacted* reversals are comparatively rare, however. For the most part, encouraged by the church, people accepted social inequity as something ordained by providence, a *donnée* that it would be impious to question. But even if Peasants' Revolts were few and far between, the

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<sup>27</sup> John Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merrit Y. Hughes (New York, 1957), p. 469.

Jesuit radicalism of its war cry ('When Adam delved and Eve span, / Who was then the gentleman?') could still pose its question to the mind, and minds properly attuned to its implication could effect whatever social commutations they chose—within their own confines, at least. Marie Antoinette took refuge in her hameau with frivolous holiday motives; Lady Dedlock renounces her 'ascended' state in deadly earnest; but the narrator of Dickens's *Doctor Marigold* contents himself simply with parallels and equations between the privileged and dispossessed. This might seem an empty rhetorical exercise, but there can be little doubt that mental commutations such as these eventually paved the way for actual change. The Second Reform Bill was on the horizon at the very point that Dickens wrote *Doctor Marigold* in 1865. Here equality is effected not by the indifferent knockings of Horace's 'pallida Mors,' but rather through some shrewd conversions—theoretical only, but still in the here and now:

I have measured myself against other public speakers,—Members of Parliament, Platforms, Pulpits, Counsel learned in the law,—and where I have found 'em good, I have took a bit of imagination from 'em, and where I have found 'em bad, I have let 'em alone. Now I'll tell you what. I mean to go down into my grave declaring that of all the callings ill used in Great Britain, the Cheap Jack calling is the worst used. Why ain't we a profession? Why ain't we endowed with privileges? Why are we forced to take out a hawkers's license, when no such thing is expected of political hawkers? Where's the difference between us? Except that we are Cheap Jacks, and they are Dear Jacks, I don't see any difference but what's in our favour.<sup>28</sup>

It's usual for moralists to brandish a CV before they start pronouncing—the speaker of Ecclesiastes, for example, asserts that he has 'seen all the works that are done under the sun; and behold, all *is* vanity and vexation of spirit' (1.14)—and Doctor Marigold is no exception. After carefully measuring himself against politicians, he concludes that they are nothing more than

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Dickens, *Christmas Stories*, intro. Margaret Lane (London, 1956), p. 438. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

vendors, and rather shady vendors at that. Here, once again, is King Lear's attempt at levelling (as opposed to Jesuist reversal), and here again a desire to expunge the superflux of power if not of wealth:

'For look here! Say it's election time. I am on the footboard of my cart in the market-place, on a Saturday night. I put up a general miscellaneous lot. I say: 'Now here, my free and independent woters, I'm a going to give you such a chance as you never had in all your born days, nor yet the days preceding. Now I'll show you what I am going to do with you. Here's a pair of razors that'll shave you closer than the Board of Guardians; here's a flat-iron worth its weight in gold; here's a frying-pan artificially flavoured with essence of beefsteaks to that degree that you've only got for the rest of your lives to fry bread and dripping in it and there you are replete with animal food ...' (p. 438)

This mocks the patter of a mountebank and also the *adunata* of romance, those impossible missions to catch a falling star and get with child a mandrake root. The cheapjack's world is a world of lies, but attractive ones; the politician's, equally mendacious, seems drab and cynical:

'This is me, the Cheap Jack. But on the Monday morning, in the same market-place, comes the Dear Jack on the hustings—*his* cart—and what does *he* say? "Now my free and independent woters, I am going to give you such a chance" (he begins just like me) "as you never had in all your born days, and that's the chance of sending Myself to Parliament. Now I'll tell you what I am a going to do for you. Here's the interests of this magnificent town promoted above the rest of the civilised and uncivilised earth. Here's your railways carried, and your neighbours' railways jockeyed. Here's all your sons in the Post office. Here's Britannia smiling on you. Here's the eyes of Europe on you. Here's uniwersal prosperity for you, repletion of animal food, golden cornfields,

gladsome homesteads, and rounds of applause from your own hearts, all in one lot, and that's myself.'" (p. 439)

Through the common denominator of 'animal food,' which links the two discourses and equates their improbabilities, Dickens reminds us that politicians catch votes and then discard their voters once the tallies have been made, just as unscrupulous vendors leave town before their false guarantees can be exposed. This recalls Lear's beadle and whore, except that here the beadle is *both* the whore *and* the lecher.

While Dickens suggests a moral and social parity between cheapjacks and the denizens of Westminster, Gilbert's Pirate King goes further still when explaining the paradox of his title. Seeing little to choose between monarchs and buccaneers, he all but paraphrases Hugo's tirade against governments 'established originally by violence and brigandage (commonly called conquest)':

When I sally forth to seek my prey  
I help myself in a royal way:  
I sink a few more ships, it's true,  
Than a well-bred monarch ought to do:  
But many a king on a first-class throne,  
If he wants to call his throne his own,  
Must manage somehow to get through  
More dirty work than ever *I* do,  
Though I am a Pirate King.<sup>29</sup>

While the philosophy of the Pirate King owes something to Hugo, it owes more still to Byron. Gilbert's joke (like Dickens's when Mrs Merdle pretends to admire Polynesian culture) centres on the clash of polite Victorian chit-chat ('well bred') with activities that it ordinarily wouldn't cover ('I sink a few more ships'). In Byron's *Corsair*, however, the language isn't at odds with the sentiment. Conrad voices identical ideas, but with the plangent inflection of a Romantic isolato, not the bounce of a comic song:

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<sup>29</sup> W. S. Gilbert, *The Savoy Operas Being the Complete Text of the Gilbert and Sullivan Operas as Originally Produced in the Years 1875-1896* (London, 1962), p. 448.

Fear'd, shunn'd, belied, ere youth had lost her force,  
 He hated man too much to feel remorse,  
 And thought the voice of wrath a sacred call,  
 To pay the injuries of some on all.  
 He knew himself a villain, but he deem'd  
 The rest no better than the thing he seem'd;  
 And scorn'd the best as hypocrites who hid  
 Those deeds the bolder spirit plainly did.<sup>30</sup>

Like Doctor Marigold's politicians, the 'best' of society of *The Corsair* sin flagrantly, but sin under cover, opening themselves to a notional commutation with the pirate outcast. The cheapjack penetrates the moral disguise of 'Expensive Jacks' from below; Conrad from without. And that connects him in turn with Robin Hood, the figure on whom all concerns of this essay might be said to converge. Leigh Hunt's ballad, 'How Robin and His Outlaws Lived in the Woods,' sets out his formula for undoing excess by distribution, the 'fines of equity' a jab at Norman administrative prowess, which his efficient 'proletarian appropriations' seem to mock:

Only upon the Normans proud,  
 And on their unjust store,  
 He'd lay his fines of equity  
 For his merry men and the poor.<sup>31</sup>

There, once again, is government established by 'violence and brigandage (commonly called conquest),' and there once again a Mardi gras figure to effect the change. Traditionally viewed as an outlawed nobleman, Robin Hood retires to the forest and lives there in all the unreality of a rococo pastorate. To quote Leigh Hunt again

ROBIN HOOD is an outlaw bold,  
 Under the greenwood tree;  
 Bird, nor stag, nor morning air,

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<sup>30</sup> Lord George Byron, *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, Reprinted from Original Editions, with Life, Explanatory Notes, &c.* (London, no date), p. 241.

<sup>31</sup> Leigh Hunt, *The Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt*, ed. H. S. Milford (London, 1923), p. 109. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page reference.

Is more at large than he. (p. 107)

Even so, this is not the Petit Trianon; it's a version of the society mooted by the Peasants' Revolt, and by King Lear in extremis. And from the vantage of that Edenic alternative, it views the institutions of society at large, and collapses its hierarchical distinctions. Being outlawed by lawless rule of might, the band of merry men is paradoxically redeemed. It's Robin Hood and not the friars (those hypocritical *soi-disant* 'mendicants') who inherits the first place that radical Jesuism had traditionally reserved for the last:

And not a soul in Locksley town  
Would speak him an ill word;  
The friars raged; but no man's tongue,  
Nor even feature stirred. (p. 107)

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