



Causing Little Ones to Stumble: Paul Bailey and the Millstone of Religion

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Abstract

In *Sugar Cane* the novelist Paul Bailey describes what happens when someone is exposed at an impressionable age to religion in a brutally corrupt or merely stupid form and has to come to terms with that exposure: whether healing might be possible and what that healing might look like. Bailey suggests an alternative narrative, where, despite the suffering of his characters, the word 'religion' means more to him than it does to Irvin Yalom, who wrote of his belief after his own childhood exposure to the authoritarianism of his parents' Jewish orthodoxy, that 'faith, like so many other early irrational beliefs and fears, is a burden'.¹

Keywords

Paul Bailey, *Sugar Cane*, healing, oppressive religion, Irvin Yalom

The religion to which Stephen is exposed in the course of *Sugar Cane*, other than that of the Methodist chapel to which he and his mother went at Christmas when he was a small child, consists of his 'descent into hell'.² Stephen's story is that of innumerable throw-away children all over the globe – one more story of a child born to a single mother and a father whom the child never knew, physical and mental cruelty inflicted by a sadistic stepfather, flight to the capital city, induction to prostitution and then vanishing from the view of the person to whom he told his story. In Bailey's hands, however, this story becomes not just one more of poverty, casual cruelty, and neglect: it is the record of a deliberate attempt by one man, (whom he calls Alec Morrison, the self-styled 'Bishop of Wandle'), to corrupt

¹ Irvin D. Yalom, 'Religion and Psychiatry', Acceptance speech delivered at his award of the Oscar Pfister prize, American Psychiatric Association annual meeting, May 2000. www.yalom.com/pfiser.html. Accessed 10 October 2005.

² Paul Bailey, *Sugar Cane* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 148. All subsequent page references are to this edition.

this child as he has corrupted many others. Bailey, at the end of the novel, gives Morrison an obituary, where he describes him as

born in 1917, the only son of the Right Reverend Percival Morrison and his wife Irene. He was educated at a London grammar school, since demolished, and at Oxford, where he attained a First Class degree, with honours, in medieval history and religion. After distinguished wartime service in the Royal Air Force, he became a journalist. Writing as Alec Wandle, he expressed fiercely reactionary views in a weekly column that earned him a large number of prominent enemies. His assumed stance was that of a man of the highest moral principles. In the early seventies, he made frequent appearances on the television religious affairs programme *Questions of Faith*.

In reality Alec Morrison, alias Alec Wandle, was a pimp and a black-mailer (221).

The parallel world Morrison invents mimics religious practice in the real world at various points. Thus Morrison preaches to Stephen and the other lost boys – all refugees from parental brutality and neglect – in full bishop's regalia from a pulpit in the converted warehouse to which he brings them; refers, in high Anglican camp, to his wine, which he drinks in vast quantities, as 'communion wine' ('Yum, yum Anthony. My taste buds inform me that a glass or two of our red communion wine would accompany such delicious fare most agreeably' (167)); and listens to their confessions in a purpose-built confessional ('The bishop squeezes himself inside – it's a tight fit for His Grace with that great gut of his – and we sit on the outside, one at a time, and talk to him through the grille' (159)). The 'confessions', from which the 'bishop' receives much salacious pleasure, consist of the boys retelling to him their activities as homosexual prostitutes. Bailey's investigation into Morrison's motivation goes no further than the establishment of the salient fact of his father's occupation – but it is enough to suggest the shadowy presence of another darker figure behind Morrison – the archetypal bullying father/God the Father, whose presence in his undescribed childhood might lead the reader to attribute to that figure Morrison's delight in duplicity and, more than that, his taking Mathew 18:6 as his guiding text – with the inventive variation of his causing his little ones both to stumble and to carry their millstones as well.

The millstone which Stephen has to carry as an adolescent, as well as the memory of his stepfather's cruelty and his mother's failure to protect him, is that of participation in Morrison's parody religious world and all too real world of prostitution. Stephen's reaction to these events are those which any of the world's thrown-away children might show: dissimulation (he changes names as he changes clients), theft (artfully dodging through his clients' houses he steals their expensive ornaments); extreme wariness of authority; inability to

trust. But there is more to Stephen's reaction than that. For the narrator he is 'quite extraordinary... You know so many strange words – "etiquette", "decorum", even "suffragan"' – his delight in which indicates what she calls his 'need for enchantment':

I see Stephen now as I saw him a few nights ago, on the stage at the opera house, diminished in size, a small boy again, on the very verge of life. And then the image vanishes and is replaced by the tall and handsome boy-man himself, in a striking ensemble of cashmere wool and corduroy. And between the two I sense only waste and emptiness, and a fragile need for enchantment sustained against a mountain of terrible odds (222).

I will consider how Esther, the narrator of the novel, tries to help Stephen deal with his burden when I come to consider how Bailey represents her as trying to deal with her own. But first I will briefly describe what that burden consists of, including the part of it consisting of her mother's religion.

Dr Esther Potocki, the novel's narrator, senior consultant physician in genito-urinary medicine at St. Lucy's hospital in London, shares with Stephen the memory of an unhappy parental home. While Bailey represents Stephen as the victim of overt emotional abuse, he represents Esther as the victim of a more subtle attrition – as the witness of her parents' unhappiness with each other, an unhappiness disguised as humour in the case of her father, of displaced longing and ambition in that of her mother. Thus her father, like Mr Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, finds little comfort in his wife 'other than as her ignorance and folly had contributed to his amusement';³ he goes further than Mr Bennet, however, by recording in a notebook examples of her solecisms. He also encourages Esther, their only child, to resist her mother's ambition that she become a ballerina, and fulfil her own desire, held from the age of thirteen, to become a doctor. Her mother's response to this desire – 'She likes to forget that she is a girl child. This talk of doctors and engineers is bad for her. She will lose her female feelings' – becomes a choice entry in his notebook. Esther's mother's ambition for her daughter is heartfelt and when at last she accepts the verdict of Esther's ballet teacher, Esther describes herself as becoming 'then, what I had not been before – her ungainly daughter, whose hands and feet were not to be trusted' (12). To her mother's tears she responds:

'Don't cry, Mummy. It makes your face all ugly.'
 'If I am ugly, you are to blame for it.'
 I knew why I was to blame, and said I was sorry.
 'You might have been me. The me I wasn't' (12).

³ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 228.

Foiled in her attempt to put her daughter on the stage, she then buys, 'with a few of the many thousands of pounds my father had left my mother' (33), a replacement Esther, an almost life-size glass model of the Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova. Her response to her daughter's professed blindness to the model's beauty is 'a long silence', followed by 'You are beyond me, Esther, I swear to God above, you are beyond me' (34). (Her later response, when Esther 'accidentally' breaks the model, is 'You clumsy bitch. You clumsy bitch with your so great hands and feet. You clumsy unfemale bitch, you have destroyed her' (226.)) The God to whom Esther's mother swears is decidedly not interested in those she characterizes as 'the scum of the earth, Esther, the scum of the earth' (35), otherwise known as Esther's patients. This God ratifies her 'terrible certainties' (37), her anti-semitism, her hilarious ignorance of Jewish history (she does not know of the existence of Esther's Old Testament namesake), her clinging to 'the Catholic faith' (37) to protect her and her daughter's identity, her belief that the primary purpose for which God has designed women is to provide 'the comfort men require' (47). Sitting by mother's bedside at the end of her life Esther meditates on what she has meant to her:

I had brought her nothing but disappointment from the day she learned that I was not cut out for the ballet, so it hardly seemed possible for me to please her now. I had turned my back on my noble blood and my female feelings; I had married a Jew who drank too much, and I had worked on behalf of the scum of the earth instead of the pure and decent, dirtying my life through my involvement with the dirtiest parts of their dirty bodies. And I had broken, one terrible Sunday afternoon, her most treasured possession: that solitary emblem of light and grace in a world grown dark and ugly (43).

This is Esther's burden, her millstone: to have to live with the constant knowledge that she has disappointed her mother, had neither measured up to the physical image of womanhood dictated by her mother's obsession with ballet, nor the spiritual image required by her religion. It comes as no surprise to the reader to learn that Bailey represents Esther as having 'decided to turn her back on the faith of her ancestors' (40). As such her story is unremarkable. As Stephen's was only one amongst the countless stories there have ever been of neglected and abused children, so Esther's is an everyday tale (with a late nineteenth century flavour) of a child rebelling against a parent's religion and turning to the 'Greek philosophers, Hume and Gibbon, my beloved George Eliot' (45). What makes her story interesting, however, is what else she turns to – the desire to work with the sick after what she describes as a 'road-to-Damascus experience' – hearing, and being appalled by, an acknowledged authority on venereal diseases rage like 'his compatriot John Knox' against the

immorality of those who ‘had committed sins of the flesh’ (53). Religionless, but turning to an image from one of the world’s great religious texts to describe her conversion to venereology from paediatrics (52), Bailey’s Esther takes her place beside another figure of the same name, in a nineteenth century meditation on child abuse and the possibilities of healing for its survivors, with, like Bailey’s novel, a curiously troubled relation to the religious theme that pervades it: Dickens’s *Bleak House*. I want now to think about the second question which I posed at the beginning: what kind of healing might be possible for someone who has had to carry the burden of exposure to corrupt or brutal or merely stupid religious belief and practice, and what part Bailey’s Esther plays in bringing that healing – to herself and Stephen.

The history of this frail/strong Esther, echo of *Bleak House*’s Esther who rescued and healed deserted children and the Old Testament Esther who rescued an entire people, is parallel to that of Stephen, but the difference between the two stories is as wide as that between Stephen’s ‘bishop’ and a true priest. It focuses amongst other things on the differences between how she and Stephen use their bodies. Stephen sells his body for an empty satisfaction of his clients’ sexual needs (Esther’s husband-to-be expresses pity for one of Stephen’s clients in the grip of a sado-masochistic fantasy – ‘Poor Louis . . . To be in need of a devilish angel’ (137)). But his clients have no individual meaning for Stephen who recounts what his friend Tonio had said at the beginning of Stephen’s career about the ‘hundreds and hundreds’ he would have: ‘I often think to myself that there’s just one single solitary punter in the world who’s been multiplied and multiplied (196). His relation with his clients is marked by his determination not to ‘stumble’ (218) – Bailey’s tacit reference to Matthew 18.6⁴ with his use of that verb is ironically precise – which means for him avoiding both HIV and falling in love. In contrast Esther uses her body freely to satisfy the fantasies of her two partners. With her husband, Sammy, she plays a profoundly erotic version of the Biblical Esther. After Sammy’s death she meets Gabriel, narrator of *Gabriel’s Lament* and victim of his mother’s desertion and his father’s deception; with him she completes the healing that had begun when Gabriel found out the truth about his mother’s fate in the earlier novel. The healing she offers is, when they have sex, to allow Gabriel to wear a dress like his mother wore when she left him, and so reach sexual consummation: in contrast to Stephen’s ‘devilish angel’ Bailey portrays Esther as simply angelic – if angels understand what it is to be human. One of Iris Murdoch’s male narrators says that talking to and being seen by a particular woman ‘was like being

⁴ Also St Mark 9:42 and St Luke 17:2 (American Standard Version, 1901).

seen by God',⁵ an idea not far from Bailey's portrayal of Esther's understanding of Gabriel's need:

I went in, and faced him. He stared at me in terror, in sheer terror. It was his fear, and only his fear, I registered first. His body and whatever was covering it were blurred before me.

'Gabriel,' I said. 'There's nothing to be frightened of. Really there isn't.'

'Do I look ridiculous?'

'No.'

The blur vanished, and I saw him as he needed me to see him (81) – the last sentence revealing Esther's gift of seeing those in her life, from 'the scum of the earth' in her consulting room to Gabriel and Stephen, in a way that will offer them healing. (Her mother, in an ironic touch by Bailey, also refers to Esther's patients as 'lepers' – thus does he suggest another Biblical figure behind Esther, who also specialised in curing the sick.) The reader may wonder why Bailey has given Esther the profession, among all medical disciplines, of venereologist other than because it is a plot-device to enable him to integrate Stephen's story with hers (it is in her hospital that Stephen finds his friend dying of AIDS). But beyond that simple reason there is something appropriate about this choice of vocation for Esther, precisely because it locates her work amongst those, like psychiatric patients, whose conditions evoke, in those who observe them, fear, hostility and mirth, as well as appalled pity; and, in those who treat them, the temptation to reduce them to collections of symptoms or moral failings. This temptation Esther resists. Although Bailey represents her as using every available pharmacological response to her patients' needs, he represents her as also able to listen to them, as well as to see them in the ways they need to be seen. Dickens in *Bleak House* uses two people to represent what Bailey represents with one: the scientific, manly doctor, Allan Woodcourt, and the feminine, caring, listening Esther; in Bailey's Esther the attributes of both are combined. Bailey represents his Esther as having brought herself healing after the long emotional attrition of her childhood (in which her mother's religion played its part) precisely by having achieved this combination in herself – of having followed (in her mother's word) the 'unfemale' profession of medicine but not having denied (also in her mother's unintentionally perceptive words) her 'female feelings'.

But if Esther has brought healing to herself, and helped to bring it to Gabriel, there are those she has not been able to help – like Sammy, her alcoholic first husband who drank himself to death, as well as those of her patients who attack her because she is a woman.

⁵ Iris Murdoch, *A Word Child* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1975), p. 122.

How far is Esther really able to help Stephen? Jesus of Nazareth's words on the deserved fate of those, like the Bishop of Wandle, who cause little ones to stumble implies the irreversibility of the harm they inflict. This issue – how to help such 'little ones' – was one that deeply troubled Dickens and I have argued elsewhere⁶ that his response in *Bleak House* was ambivalent: on the one hand an Esther Summerson might physically rescue such children, but on the other the emotional healing they (and she) required was not possible in this world. Hence the ironic fairytale ending of that novel. *Sugar Cane* has no equivalent ending – indeed Stephen's story has no ending: he vanishes at the end without telling Esther where he is going. I have thought at times that *Sugar Cane* might have been a more compelling novel if Stephen had not vanished and Bailey had made the therapeutic interaction between Esther and Stephen its heart – perhaps made Esther a psychotherapist or social worker instead of a venereologist; but if he had done so he would have had to make one assumption which the novel avoids: that Esther would have been able to engage Stephen in therapy in the first place. As it is, Bailey captures, in the fleeting interactions between Esther and Stephen, the intense difficulty of 'engaging' someone with such a history in any relationship at all.

Meditating on what she has tried to offer Stephen, Esther asks herself, after he has vanished for ever from her life, whether, 'if he were here beside me now', he would 'accept my circuitous – of necessity circuitous – offer to rescue him? It's doubtful' (148). All Bailey represents Esther as knowing is that he trusted her to the extent of putting, onto

two cassette tapes . . . HIS STORY BY STEPHEN. On the plain postcard that accompanied the present Stephen had written, 'Dear Doctor Lady and Mr Gabriel. You can play these tapes if you want to. It is up to you. You may learn something from them, Stephen' (119).

Esther learns, as we have seen, of Stephen's 'descent into hell' and that his life might have been otherwise. But the reader also learns that she has offered, even if only for a short time, what Yalom describes as one of the most important functions of the psychotherapist: that of witness to a story.⁷ Whether this does Stephen any 'good' seems as futile a question as it seemed to Winston Smith to ask, in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, whether a woman's gesture to try to save her child was any use: 'The refugee woman in the boat had . . . covered the little boy with her arm, which was no more use against the

⁶ Rob Hardy, 'Doing Good and Winning Love: Social Work and Fictional Autobiographies by Charles Dickens and John Stroud', *The British Journal of Social Work* 35 (2005) pp. 207–220.

⁷ Yalom, op.cit.

bullets than a sheet of paper'⁸ (134). Bailey represents Esther as never knowing whether her witness to Stephen's story was of any use to him, but he also portrays her as representing the opposite of the Party in Orwell's novel: 'the terrible thing that the Party had done as to persuade you that mere impulses, mere feelings were of no account' (134). The world of the Party is the world that Stephen was inducted into by the 'bishop', who also persuaded him that his, Stephen's, own feelings, when he was first introduced to prostitution, were of no account. Esther comes from a gentler world, that mourned by Winston Smith, where 'What mattered were individual relationships, and a completely helpless gesture, an embrace, a tear, a word spoken to a dying man, could have value in itself' (135). One might say that this was a world with a memory of religion.

Nineteen Eighty-Four's memory of religion is ruthlessly buried: one of Winston's colleagues is imprisoned because he 'allowed the word "God" to remain at the end of a line' (185) in his edition of Kipling's poems. One could argue that Esther Potocki's commitment to 'scum', 'lepers' and Stephen himself is a religious commitment – but this would be to deny the stated truth of the text – that she had outgrown the religion forced on her as a child, finding, as we have seen, succour in the great freethinkers (45). I have suggested that the novel is an exploration of the effects on 'little ones' like Stephen and Esther of religion expressed as brutal parody or mere stupidity and it would be tidy to finish by arguing that the novel has cleared a clean post-Christian space for the celebration of the best of what can remain in this world of Christianity – its stories, and commitment to 'little ones'. But though that would be tidy, it would not be true. I began by asking whether one of Bailey's achievements in this novel is to suggest an alternative narrative, where the word 'religion' is not simply a burden. I have already drawn attention to Esther's function as Stephen's witness. But there are also instances of good 'God talk' in the novel which are hard to ignore – throw-away references which come up in some of the memorable meetings between people: between Esther and Max, the saintly consultant, who characterizes his faith as a 'streak of illogicality [which] runs in everybody: 'Mine's a God-streak, the most illogical and incomprehensible of the lot' (74), or between Esther and Gabriel, who, as in *Gabriel's Lament*, refers to his admiration for George Fox because he took off his hat only 'for his God' (67), or, most memorably, between Esther and Stephen, who speaks of his great friend Tonio – 'my one true friend' (218) in the same breath that he speaks of God, 'if there is a God':

⁸ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1979), p. 134. Subsequent page references are to this edition.

Thank God, if there is such a person, I heard from Graham on the circuit that Tonio was back in London from abroad. ‘Tony Innocent’s been sighted,’ he said. ‘He’s dying from the dreaded,’ he said, ‘and he’s in hospital. Nobody knows which.’

Which I found out, doctor Lady. The hospital. Yours.

Thank God, if there is a God, I reached him in time. There isn’t much to thank God for, if there is such a person, but I do thank God. I sat by Tonio, and touched him, and held his hand, and saw my friend, my one true friend, go out of this world (218).

One has to think what to make of these instances of God talk – or of that when Stephen discourses on the origin of the description ‘doubting Thomas’ – another lesson he has learned from the ‘bishop’:

if you were to ask me who Thomas was, I could tell you straight off. Real name Didymus. Right? His story’s in St. John’s Gospel. Right? Chapter 20. Verses 24 to 31. Am I right or am I right? Of course I am. Because, after that day, whenever I was alone in the palace with just the Bish, he’d say, ‘Tell me, dear boy, who is doubting Thomas?’ and I’d tell him straight off exactly what he’d told me in the first place (191).

God-talk in Iris Murdoch’s *A Word Child* has been well described by one critic as what characters resort to when they want ‘to convey the depths of their experience, their longing for some kind of transcendence, the feelings they cannot yet put into any other words’.⁹ One might say the same of the function of God-talk in *Sugar Cane* – and yet there seems to be another dimension to it as well. Of all the deprivations Bailey describes Stephen as having endured, the deprivation of any understanding of the teachings of Christianity other than via the blackened, parodied version of the ‘bishop’ seems one of the most brutal. I have argued elsewhere¹⁰ that Hilary Burde in *A Word Child* has to say farewell to Christ before he can start to become psychologically healed. In *Sugar Cane* Bailey represents Stephen as having scarcely learned his name.

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⁹ Peter S. Hawkins, *The Language of Grace: Flannery O’Connor, Walter Percy and Iris Murdoch*. (USA: Cowley Publications, 1983), p. 117.

¹⁰ Robert Hardy, *Psychological and Religious Narratives in Iris Murdoch’s Fiction* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000, p. 35).