

**Writers rush in where theologians fear to tread:
the artistic problem in
The Vintner's Luck and *Mr Weston's Good Wine***

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Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the Angelic Orders?
(Rilke, *Duino Elegies* I, trans. A.S. Kline)

... though what if earth
Be but the shadow of heav'n, and things therein
Each to other like, more than on earth is thought?
(*Paradise Lost*, V.574-576)

Q: What do you get if you cross a wine-loving supernatural being with a small village?

A: It depends. If you're a contemporary New Zealand reader, your answer will probably be *The Vintner's Luck*, Elizabeth Knox's acclaimed novel about angelic visitations to a nineteenth century French village. However, seventy years ago, the same riddle might have been answered with reference to *Mr Weston's Good Wine*, a novel by T. F. Powys about the visit of a divine wine-merchant to a Devonshire village in the early twentieth century. In what follows, I do not wish to suggest that Powys had any direct influence on Knox. Instead, I consider what these novels suggest about the artistic problems that inevitably attach to any fictional exploration of Christian theology. While both *The Vintner's Luck* and *Mr Weston's Good Wine* feature supernatural actors taken from the Christian story, their portrayal differs significantly from portrayals of the same characters in more orthodox narrations of the story. Ultimately, I wish to suggest that these variations are intrinsic to the way that these ambitious novels successfully meet the artistic problems of imaginative engagement with Christian theology.

Bringing supernatural characters from the traditional Christian narrative to the imaginative page is a difficult task. In many readers' minds, a work as magisterial as *Paradise Lost* has failed in the attempt. That failure has been remarked mostly in Milton's portrayal of God, but there are also mutterings

about the unfallen angels.¹ One-dimensionalism and anthropomorphism are among the more regular charges. Yet, as the characters in *Mr Weston's Good Wine* and *The Vintner's Luck* prove, supernatural figures need not be artistically uninteresting. Readers are invariably engaged by Knox's sinuous and finely drawn Xas, the angelic protagonist in *The Vintner's Luck*, while the wry and wistful caricatures of the divine Mr Weston and his assistant Michael in Powys' novel are similarly attractive. In the case of *The Vintner's Luck*, the interest of the novel depends on a vigorous rendering of Xas, because the story relies on extensive exchanges between him and his human friend, Sobran, such that, without a credible portrayal of Xas, it would inevitably fail. Yet the successful realisation of Xas comes as something of a surprise to readers of *Paradise Lost*. In *Paradise Lost*, the successful realisation of Satan and his fallen angels is generally considered to depend on the fact that they are fallen and therefore interesting, rather than perfect and therefore remote. While *The Vintner's Luck* eventually reveals that Xas is one of the fallen angels, this revelation occurs some way into the story. Readers accept the novel's angelology and grow fond of Xas before the disclosure of his fallen status. This is achieved by progressive revelation of fascinating information about angelic life: Xas's friend in Damascus, his passion for flowers and wine, his enigmatic status as the subject of a Treaty between God and Lucifer. Together with the titbits of information he reveals about heaven, these details create an engaging portrait of an angelic character about whom the reader wishes to hear more, and about whose ontological status the reader makes several assumptions. In this manner, Knox succeeds in portraying an angel whose interest to her audience does not depend on his fallenness.

It is notable, however, that this interest comes through what is apparently, on the surface at least, a traditional Christian framework. The core elements of the Christian metaphysic are present, and they neither limit artistic licence nor hinder the novel's achievement. Rather, they provide the essential parameters for the development of the narrative. God's in his heaven, and Lucifer is in hell (or otherwise at large), working always to frustrate God's designs. Christ features too, even if he is seen solely through Xas's retrospective recollection of various events from Christ's incarnation, including the harrowing of hell (123) and the temptation in the wilderness (238-239). Together, these characters and events mean that the novel is a work neither of entirely original fantasy nor of the untrammelled imagination, but that its narrative is developed within the received boundaries of the Christian story.

¹ See Alastair Fowler's Introduction to *Paradise Lost*, 2nd edition (London: Longman, 1998) pp. 39-40.

The same is true of *Mr Weston's Good Wine*. Although its allegorical form distinguishes it clearly from *The Vintner's Luck*, it shares a similar core of key personnel from the Christian universe. God appears in the guise of Mr Weston, a wine merchant on a sales trip through the towns, villages, highways and by-ways of Southwest England. His assistant on this trip is the eager Michael, recognised through the novel's allegorical lens as the archangel of the same name.² The devil has a smaller role than has Lucifer in the drama of *The Vintner's Luck*, but he is still present. He features as a lion kept in the back of Mr Weston's van, who brings havoc among Mr Weston's adversaries, and is thus clearly recognisable as the "roaring lion" of 1 Peter 5:8, the lion who carries "Mrs Vosper to hell" (234), and, in Mr Grunter's unforgettable words, claws "the wicked same as our cat do the wold 'oman's chair covers" (235).³ Jesus has his place too, although as in *The Vintner's Luck*, he is mentioned only in passing, mostly by reference to his unfortunate death (53).

Rendering these beings believable in a post-Christian age poses quite a different artistic task to that which faced Milton in the seventeenth century. Of course, it is, as Sidney might say, a natural part of the "vigour of his own invention" for the poet to translate other worlds into the lives of his readers. Yet this is uphill work for writers in a sceptical age, where most readers lack common awareness of the biblical story and so are naturally inclined to view its supernatural characters with incredulity. The reception history of *Paradise Lost* may be a case in point: it is when society's uncritical Christian belief wanes that Milton's readers begin to doubt *en masse* the success of his theodicean enterprise. Since most contemporary readers hold assumptions very different from those shared by Milton's first audience, the believability of God and Lucifer in both *Mr Weston* and *The Vintner's Luck* becomes all the more impressive.⁴

In large part, the two novels achieve this believability by managing to bypass their readers' expectations about religion. Readers of *The Vintner's Luck*, for example, accept as they are told that hell can be reached from a salt dome in Turkey. They are similarly taken with the romance between the archangel Michael and the romantic human, Tamar Grobe, in *Mr Weston's Good Wine*. In both cases, the novelists stage-manage such displacement of disbelief by giving imaginative twists and energy to their religious frameworks.

² The novel also features hints to his identity: Michael once "by his strength and courage, quelled a mutiny that arose amongst the workers in Mr Weston's bottling department" (17).

³ Similar references are found at pages 223, 226-227, 229-230, and 239. The novel also hints that Satan may exist as a rival merchant to Mr Weston ("for I believe another dealer visits you" (218)).

⁴ Kate De Goldi, 'The Vintner's Luck', *Landfall* 197 (Autumn 1999), 127-129, p. 129.

From the start of *The Vintner's Luck*, Knox engages her reader by means of imaginative interpretation of the supernatural elements, as in the initial, very physical arrival of the angel Xas in “wing, pure sinew and bone under a cushion of feathers” (9), right through to the majestic realisation of Lucifer’s unexpected arrival to operate on Xas. Though Lucifer’s arrival is terrifying, his terror lies more in his splendour than in any evil he might represent. Such splendid imaginative representation of the angelic beings is matched by the delightful touches of irreverence with which Xas recollects various received events of religious narrative, irreverence that stops the reader from assigning the events to the theological rubbish bin. Xas’s memory of Christ’s preaching at the harrowing of hell, for example, portrays neither the unequivocal triumph of Christ nor the vanquished terror of the demons which Langland and Dunbar record when they deal with the same event.⁵ Instead, Xas’s ironic memory underplays the whole event: “We didn’t hide. We hung about like a lot of bold moths, as I recall. Christ was preaching to souls, not bodies. He didn’t say anything we hadn’t already heard” (123). The resultant picture is one of fallen angels exhibiting the casual half-interest of bodgies at a milkbar in a rock and roll spoof, listening to familiar tunes on the jukebox.

The gently irreverent characterisation of God as a forgetful wine-merchant in *Mr Weston’s Good Wine* works to similar effect. Mr Weston’s immodest delight at his own authorial talents offers a faintly sardonic perspective on conservative doctrines of biblical inspiration, as does his tendency to correct the misappropriation of the bible by those who take it too seriously.⁶ Similarly, Michael’s indispensable secretarial and public relations services to his somewhat absentminded master highlight the dangers that attend an anthropomorphic view of God. Thus, Michael acts as reader to cover for Mr Weston’s failing eyesight (35), fills the gaps in Mr Weston’s failing memory (46), and apologetically supplies politically correct amendments to his master’s rhetorical excesses:

[Mr Weston:] ‘... I will content myself by saying that, in all the careful process of the making of our wine ... no plan has been overlooked, no new and improved system left untried, no expense or labour spared, to perfect its qualities, so that our wine may be a suitable drink for all conditions of men.’

⁵ Compare Dunbar’s ‘On the Resurrection of Christ’ with its “campioun Chryst”, at whose presence the “divillis trymmillis with hiddous voce”; and Passus XVIII of the B text of Langland’s *Piers Plowman*.

⁶ Eg: “...it is certainly strange that even those who should know my book the best have the poorest opinion of what we sell” (46). Compare Mr Weston’s pity for the poet Cowper (“I was always vastly sorry for him because he was so firm a believer in the Bible ... [N]o poet should ever believe the words of another” (207)), and his wry dismissal of Dr Johnson’s conversion after reading William Law’s *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (212).

‘And women,’ murmured Michael. (46)

Humorous interpolations such as these are common to both novels, yet it is not their humour alone that engages readers. In both cases, the novels’ successful depiction of the major players in Christian theology depends on a degree of heterodoxy. The pantheistic death-wish that marks the allegory of *Mr Weston’s Good Wine* is quite unlike the celebratory humanism of *The Vintner’s Luck*, yet despite their differences, both captivate their readers by departing from the dominant “received conceits of Christianity”,⁷ while retaining their apparently orthodox guise. Yet more than this, both must necessarily depart from theological orthodoxy in order to sustain their respective trajectories.

In both novels, the nature of God is crucial to this departure. *The Vintner’s Luck* begins in apparent orthodoxy, with a beautifully succinct description of the nature of God, a description of which St Paul might be proud:

‘All angels love God,’ the angel said, ‘and have no other. He is our north. Adrift on the dark waters still we face Him. He made us – but He is love, not law.’ (12)

The juxtaposition of love and law in this formula represents authentic Pauline theology; it is also very similar to expressions from the gospel.⁸ Yet as the novel unfolds, elements emerge which separate the theological universe of *The Vintner’s Luck* from these roots. The most obvious of these is Xas’s Gnostic conviction that God did not make the world, the heresy for which Xas was apparently evicted from heaven (100). Yet this simply presents in its clearest form the view of God seen throughout the novel. De Goldi probably goes further than the evidence permits when describing the novel’s God as “an arrogant, obsessive ideologue, as venal in his emotions and responses as any human”.⁹ Nonetheless, the picture of God which emerges is confusingly and deliberately contradictory. Early on, Xas repeats a series of expected pieties (“God is just and merciful” (36); being with God is consciousness of glory (49), God loves both the fallen angel and his human friend, Sobran (83)). Alongside these conventionalities is reference to God’s puzzling silence which suggests an inscrutable mixture of divine awe, terror, compassion and sadness: “He didn’t speak to me, just took me and held me in Heaven’s ice

⁷ De Goldi’s phrase (p. 128).

⁸ eg: Galatians 5:18: “But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law”, or Matthew 22:36-7: “which is the greatest commandment in the law?”. Jesus said unto him: “Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all they heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind”.

⁹ De Goldi, p. 127.

and – terrible – His sorrow“ (81). There is a positive edge to this inscrutability, but it sits simultaneously alongside the suggestion that God is “obtuse” (174); perhaps even capricious or impotent. “I don’t know what God intends”, says Xas on one occasion (34), while there are certainly suggestions of an indeterminate dualist competition between Lucifer and God, in which God is thwarted by the Loki-ish tricks of the perfectionist Lucifer. The suspicion remains that God demands obedience and gives no explanations (184) either because he is not all-good, or because there *are* no explanations, no plan. The characters are continually remarking on the evidence of his deliberate wastefulness, his lavish universe that appears to have fallen below his own expectations (239), and to be beyond his control (174). He may in fact be the ultimate plagiarist (100, 174), relying on human experience to create heaven’s perfection (151), for his jurisdiction seems not to extend beyond heaven (82), which may be boring in any case (50, 90).

All this differs greatly from traditional Christian assertions of an intrinsically loving and omnipotent God who created the universe out of nothing, and who is guiding it to its teleological conclusion, replacing him with a capricious and possibly localised deity, whose motives and imaginative power are both suspect. The effects of these changes for the novel are various. On one level, they attract reader fascination by departing from parroted religious formulae in startling ways. Yet the departures are also necessary to sustain the novel’s emphasis on the worth of carnal beauty. By presenting God as potentially unstable, perverse or boring, the concomitant portrayal of human vulnerability and frailty is rendered all the more attractive. God’s concentration on the distillation of souls for his disembodied heaven leaves him largely uninterested in the affairs of earth-bound men and women. Certainly, for the human reader, God seems unsympathetic when compared to Xas. Xas is fascinated with the ordinary details of Sobran’s life as “a soldier, a family man, a vintner” (99). There is a simple dignity to these roles which God apparently ignores, but Xas does not.¹⁰ As if to complete the picture of heaven’s disinterest in human affairs, God’s rule is somewhat arbitrary. His judgement on Xas’s rebellion certainly punishes the angel for what is essentially speculative curiosity (100). Overall, therefore, there is much in the novel’s portrayal of God to attract reader distaste.

The dominant arc of the novel therefore finds beauty in the ordinary, perishable things of life. Xas comments that the human soul is “made of losses” (49), and it is the fact that humans are touched by time (34) which renders their corporeal mortality attractive to him as an inviolate angel. He is interested in mutability and change, an interest seen both in his garden (“my

¹⁰ Compare also Xas’s relationships with Apharah and Niall.

communion with perishables”, as he calls it (146)), and in his interaction with humans. In this light, the forbidden relationship between Xas and Sobran is rooted in the motif of the doomed union between the mortal and the immortal, a motif which finds beauty in the fleeting and ecstatic moment where the timeless joins with time.

Of course, such an exaltation of mortal fallings and vanishings does not fit with an epistemology where God’s divine fullness - the antithesis of human ephemerality - is considered to be the limitless source of beauty. Instead, human experience is contrasted favourably with the dull perfections of the eternal realm. Angels, so Xas tells Sobran, are so wadded from mutable experience that they can be “block-headed” (34), “impervious ... durable, unchanging, placid” (146). Xas and his Syrian pupil Apharah suggest that anything positive in heaven derives from human experience and not divine plenitude. In a reversal of the Christian assertion that humans yearn for the perfection of heaven, heaven is rather fashioned by God from human aspirations for happiness (151, 238). Heaven is thus the work of a plagiaristic God, delving into human expectations in search of the raw materials for eternity. He refines human beings into their souls, and distils human yearnings into the condensed, but all too perfect matter of heaven (238, 151). In keeping with the novel’s approval of earthly experience, God is condemned here by his misunderstanding of the source of true beauty, for the things of true value in human experience are found in weaknesses and flaws. This indeed is the testament of Sobran’s slow ageing that the novel depicts. Against this, Xas’s accounts of heaven describe it like the illustration from a religious tract: devoid of imagination and human interest. Certainly, God’s distilled humans are, like most of their unfallen angelic counterparts, dull. When Xas visits heaven in search of lost friends – Sobran’s daughter Nicolette, and his friend Niall the Irish monk – he meets “blissful distillations”, unrecognisable as the people whom Xas loved (238).

In *The Vintner’s Luck*, God’s lack of creativity, his inability to perceive the beauty in frail things, and his lack of control over his universe lends weight to the novel’s challenge to the traditional concept of divine goodness. The morality of the good wineseller in *Mr Weston’s Good Wine* is also open to challenge, although he dresses it up in more orthodox garb. This is particularly evident when Mr Weston stuns the company in the parlour of *The Angel Inn* with a ventriloquial pronouncement that shocks the assembled company: “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I, the Lord, do all these things” (118). Though these words appear shocking, Mr Weston is of course quoting directly from the Bible, the self-penned masterwork of which he is possessively proud. In traditional theology, this same extract from Isaiah 45:7 is used to support the concept of the *Deus*

absconditus, the hidden God of negative theology. It supports the concept of a God who would be unknowable but for his own self-revelation. In *Mr Weston*, however, the extract from Isaiah works in a manner closer to its literal meaning, confirming the mysterious, all-enveloping nature of God. Mr Weston admits ownership for the good and the evil; the light wine of love and the dark wine of death,¹¹ thus offering apparently orthodox support for a less orthodox understanding of God. The lighter side of this understanding is reinforced through the presentation of a slightly bumbling Mr Weston, yet as the Isaiah quote indicates, there are darker sides to his character. On a few select occasions, Mr Weston acts in a way that reveals his dreadful solemnity. He plays the role of judge, for example, exhibiting his hatred of the evil worked by Mrs Vosper in leading the village maidens into the grasping clutches of the lascivious Mumby brothers. With all the tricks of an artful salesperson, and aided by the roaring lion he keeps in the back of his delivery van, he enacts judgement on the cruel machinations of Mrs Vosper and her willing henchmen. Yet while these actions show that he does not sanction the human evil seen in microcosm in the village of Folly Down, it is also clear that evil has its source in him, such that he cannot eliminate it completely. Consequently, he resigns himself sadly to the continual cycle of love and death, and to the inevitable corruption of the good. This resignation is in line with the limits on Mr Weston's power hinted at throughout the novel. In his account of the eighth day of creation, for example, Mr Weston tells Mr Grunter how he attempted to rescue humans from their underlying sadness, but that his attempt to bring them comfort proved only the limits of his power and confirmed (something reminiscent of Knox's novel) human autonomy (301). Faced with his own inability to restore humanity to happiness, the only gift Mr Weston can offer is the wine of death.

As in *The Vintner's Luck*, this suggests a God who is neither omnipotent nor all-sufficient. Instead, the varied faces of Mr Weston serve as a cloak for a pantheistic deity, outside whom nothing lies, including the balance between good and evil. The ebb and flow of love and death represent the way the eternal and unchanging state of the world. On this count at least, Mr Weston is adamantly envious of humans, for they at least can escape from the cycle: "not a death happens in all the world", he tells Mr Grunter, "but I wish it were mine own" (301). "I long to die", he says, "I long to drink my own dark wine"

¹¹ "My wine,' said Mr Weston... 'is as strong as death and as sweet as love'" (116); "I speak of a wine...that, though we do not advertise it as medicinal, yet, as you very well know, there is no trouble incident to the fretful and changing life of man that this particular wine will not cure for ever. ... To taste this wine of ours that has never seen daylight is the desire of some of the most noble of our customers.' (42): "the darkness and the light are both alike to me" (238).

(300). Thus while the novel suggests a universe full of mystery and wonder, typified in the mysterious light wine of love which Mr Weston likes to offer to the public as a wine which “can be drunk at all times without the chance of a headache’ (227), it simultaneously suggests a universe of “care and torment” in which Mr Weston sells his “strongest and oldest wine that brings to the buyer a lasting contentment, and eases his heart for ever” (56). The enigmatic figure of Mr Weston spans these extremes, responsible for the universe’s unexpected and dazzling joys, but ultimately also responsible for its sorrows, its sadness and its death.

The willingness of *Mr Weston’s Good Wine* to lay final responsibility for suffering and death on God, coupled with its proposal that death involves a certain welcome release, set it most clearly apart from orthodox Christianity. Certainly, there is little suggestion in Mr Weston’s discursions that the universe has experienced any Fall from perfection, and no suggestion that Mr Weston has a redemptive plan for the cosmos. One of his few references to Christ, for example, includes no mention of redemption. Instead, it comes in response to Michael’s mention of the cross, and it is something of a sad rebuke:

... in our family we have long ago ceased to mention the Cross, or the dreadful end of Him who was hanged upon it (65).¹²

This unveils no commitment on Mr Weston’s part to the annihilation of evil as is found in orthodox Christianity, although as suggested above, this is attributable to impotence rather than malice. If Christ was at all linked with such a plan on Mr Weston’s behalf, it is clear that he failed to be anything other than an exemplar. Thus, at Michael’s recollection of Christ, Mr Weston sighs sadly that, “He was a great poet’ (65), but he does not contradict Mr Grobe’s limited belief in Christ as “a young man of fine parts”, who, though “as mortal as [all other humans], bore the most dreadful agony in the most praiseworthy manner” (65-66). There is no resurrection; no expectation of a world remade.

Yet the lack of any redemptive scheme in *Mr Weston’s Good Wine* is unsurprising, for it is fundamental to the pathos underlying the novel that there can be no ultimate redemption. The novel proceeds on the basis that the universe has an inevitable and lasting sadness at its core, a sadness which validates the sorrow of human experience. Any hope of cosmic redemption

¹² Although, compare Mr Weston’s comment to Tamar Grobe: ‘...that is no reason why the book should be dull, for the life God lived when He came down amongst men was an extremely exciting one’ (181). Tamar, significantly, disagrees with this statement.

would negate Mr Weston's pronouncement that he would like to die, a pronouncement that attracts the reader with its elegiac nobility. By showing God to share the same still, sad music which humanity experiences, the novel excuses God from responsibility for suffering. Indeed if God is, like Mr Weston, sorrowful at the state of the world, unable to prevent its corruption, and locked into its fundamental tragedies, then God and humanity are joined on level terms. For readers inclined to Romantic holism, this sorrowful picture of God appeals more than the orthodox Christian picture of a God whose redemptive plan is still in process and who, though reputedly omnipotent, does not prevent the present reality of human pain. Mr Weston fits exactly within this view of the world, and his character depends on it.

As is evident from the discussion above, *Mr Weston's Good Wine* departs a long way from a traditional theology in which Christ is the unique incarnation of God. Though Christ may be a member of Mr Weston's family, his failed death shows that he has little to do with the present state of the universe. Much the same is true of *The Vintner's Luck*, where, though Christ has a larger role, he is essentially a sideline player in the novel's main action. Essentially, the Christ of *The Vintner's Luck* occupies what theologians would call a subordinationist position in relation to God, a view similar to that held in Arianism.¹³ There is no sense, that is, of Trinitarian equality between Christ and the being the novel refers to as "God".¹⁴ Christ, though some sort of spiritual being, is not to be equated with God, who appears as the supreme, undifferentiated monad. There is no hint of the orthodox assertion that the being of God consists in a community of three equal persons. This is apparent at several points in the novel, all of them crucial to the novel's metaphysic, and to its presentation of Xas. Twice, Xas reveals that his physical appearance is like Christ's. Following the first disclosure, Sobran, in theological mood, suggests that this is because both are treaties: Christ the Word a treaty between God and humanity, and Xas a treaty between God and the Devil (123). Admittedly, there is some traditional support for this idea. In the Christian bible, Christ is seen as the mediator of the "new" or "better" covenant between God and humanity, replacing the covenant between God and Israel (Hebrews 8:6, 12:24). Yet by being placed on equal terms with Xas here, Christ appears caught between humanity and God, as Xas is caught between God and Lucifer. He is not the self-expression of God's love, fully

¹³ Subordinationism is the root of many heretical movements, including Arianism, Ebionism, Monarchianism and Socinianism. For details on the historical roots of subordinationism, see J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th edition (London: A & C Black, 1977), pp. 226-240 (Arianism), 139-140 (Ebionism), and 115-119 ("dynamic" Monarchianism).

¹⁴ The orthodox position of Trinitarian equality between Father, Son and Spirit was most famously formulated by the Cappadocian Fathers — see Kelly, pp. 263-266.

human and fully divine, but is rather an uncomfortable intermediary between opposed parties. This suggestion of subordinationism is confirmed at the novel's end, where Xas recalls a conversation with God in which God describes how he made Xas as a copy of Christ *before Christ was born* (238). Christ is not, therefore, "eternally begotten of the Father", as the Nicene creed has it. Instead, he is some sort of subordinate emanation from God, reaffirming God's impassive inscrutability.

Several possible effects flow from this subordination. Most obviously, it assists in the elevation of Xas. From his key role in the cosmic drama, he has a unique perspective on the theological events he relates. As God's decoy for throwing Lucifer off the trail and thus ensuring the success of the incarnation (238-239), Xas has a participant's insight into the almost Manichean struggle between God and Lucifer. His vantage point makes him the object of attention from both God and Lucifer (166, 174). Surely, there can be no better situation around which to structure a novel of cosmic proportions.

A further effect of this subordination is its reinforcement of the distance between God and humanity, and so its celebration of earthly existence. Given that Xas is a copy of Christ, then they are presumably made of the same angelic stuff, which means that Christ's incarnation does not involve the full assumption of human flesh. Traditionally, the incarnation is considered the means by which God knows and shares human pain, but if Christ has not become fully human, then this cannot be so. Christ in *The Vintner's Luck* does not unite God and humanity in his one person, but appears only as a link in the chain between them, so detaching God further from human experience. Yet in the overall context of the novel and its portrayal of the divine character, this Arian Christology is a positive thing, rather than a tragedy. From Xas's perspective, God's actual involvement in human experience through incarnation would not be redemptive, but would involve unwelcome meddling in earthly affairs. Thus in the Treaty which divides Xas between Lucifer and God, for example, God appears either disinterested in or disapproving of Xas's experience, certainly insofar as it involves what happens on earth. Under the Treaty, God shares Xas's pains, as Lucifer shares Xas's pleasures (36, 57), but God's only interest in Xas's experience on earth seems to be in punishing him. Thus God's archangel wreaks revenge on Xas for his trespass into heaven (51, 81), and the strong suggestion remains that Xas's wings are clipped as punishment for his sexual misdemeanours.¹⁵ To be sure, God prevents Xas from self-mutilation (63), and warns him against becoming involved with Sobran (146). Yet given the novel's implicit approval of the relationship between Xas and Sobran, God's warning is not a welcome one.

¹⁵ De Goldi considers that Lucifer performs this knacker of Xas on God's instructions (127).

Moreover, such disinterest in life on earth seems to explain most of God's dealings with humanity. As indicated above, God deals with humans only to find the raw matter for his anodyne heaven, where there is scant interest in flesh and blood. Xas loathes God's "copies and extractions" (239) for precisely this reason. Copies and extractions destroy the individual physicality and frailty that characterise humans, and for which, as Xas rightly insists, they are loveable. God's heaven, in contrast, is painless, purified and disembodied (49, 238). Here again, *The Vintner's Luck* features a subtle departure from theological orthodoxy. While Christianity customarily posits belief in a painless afterlife, that afterlife is not disembodied. Rather, the creeds assert the resurrection *of the body*; not just the after-death survival of distilled souls. St Paul similarly asserts in 1 Corinthians 15:52 that "the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible", on the pattern established by Christ's resurrection. It is notable that, with the exception of the harrowing of hell, there is no reference in *The Vintner's Luck* to Christ's resurrection. Admitting a physical resurrection occurring at God's behest would threaten the careful opposition which the novel establishes between a disembodied heaven containing a procession of distilled souls, and the flawed but far more interesting physicality of earth. Despite its ostensible framework of orthodoxy, the novel in fact requires a choice on unorthodox terms between the novel's frigidly austere God, uninterested in physical human life, and its warm angel, who observes, experiences and defends physicality. Faced with this choice, the reader's decision to side with the being who is interested in the human condition, who enjoys "communion with perishables", is virtually a fait accompli.

It would be possible to catalogue further instances at which *The Vintner's Luck* and *Mr Weston's Good Wine* diverge from orthodoxy. Most instances would reinforce the conclusion that the divergences contribute necessarily to the structure and substance of both novels. By revelling in the forbidden relationship between Xas and Sobran, *The Vintner's Luck* sets up an opposition between the remote impotence of heaven and the vibrant life on earth, an opposition that necessitates the twists given to the Christian framework. *Mr Weston's Good Wine* has God dispensing the vintages of love and death in a cyclical web of Romantic pantheism which directly challenges the redemptive teleology of the orthodox Christian narrative. Both novels, that is, redefine the main trajectories of Christian belief in ways suitable to their respective plotlines, and they do so to convincing effect. That they manage this is a considerable achievement in itself, for few writers in English since Milton have attempted to deal directly with the large counters of Christian belief, unless in heterodox fashion. Fearing perhaps, in Marvell's phrase, that

they would “ruin ... the sacred truths”,¹⁶ the few notable twentieth century novelists to engage with Christian orthodoxy have been altogether more oblique in their theological dealings. Thus the writings of such figures as Graham Greene, RC Hutchinson, Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy and Evelyn Waugh shy away from direct confrontation with deities, preferring instead to focus on evil and love in human relationships, or to show faint glimpses of grace in moments of human decision. To do otherwise is to turn God into a cause among other causes, and so to invite failure of Miltonic proportions. By contrast, it is the unorthodoxy of *The Vintner’s Luck* and *Mr Weston’s Good Wine* that allows these novels to present successfully the players on the field of cosmic history.

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¹⁶ Andrew Marvell, ‘On Paradise Lost’, lines 7-8.