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The sacred and profane

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Sacred and Profane. To utilize the notion of a sacred and a profane is to suggest an explanation and ordering of the world encountered that looks back to the Judeo-Christian traditions often claimed as the foundations of Western society. The term “sacred and profane”, bound together often as a figure of speech, suggests the defining differences between a number of oppositions: good and evil, Godly and Godless or diabolical, civilized and uncivilized or savage, worthwhile and worthless, white and black, and so forth. The absolute definition of such differences in relation to each other effectively divides the world into two: a “theory of everything” which imposed a binary view. The sacred and the profane thus becomes the vector through which the world, as encountered, is interpreted and processed: that which is worthwhile is worthy of God’s creation, and therefore a sacred endeavor, and can be said to be moral or ethically just, even healthy; that which profanes God’s order is understood as morally bankrupt, a corrupting enterprise or influence, and is counter to all our best intentions. Consumer culture has long been considered to be in this latter category, with money seen as indexical to man’s order rather than God’s, and material items – which belong exclusively to the earthly and temporal realms – of no use, therefore, to the soul. In Titian’s painting *Sacred and Profane Love* (1513-1514) the bride is positioned between the symbols of the transitory earthly love (that presumably overwhelm her on this, her wedding day) and the eternal heavenly love. The lesson is clear: only a love of God is sacred, and all other loves (of others, of objects) are merely distractions.

Such an orthodoxy of absolute ideas held sway during the years of theocratic and feudal governance and would only begin to wane with rationalism and the Enlightenment. Early battles between science and religion (as with Galileo and Darwin) can be read as attempts by the Church to shore up the sacred and profane

dichotomy via a retention and defense of a philosophical-theological binary divide, in the face of the fraying borders between the two caused by the advances in science. Any finding of worth in the material world detracted from the transcendental, metaphysical, mystical and otherworldly modes of religion. Even scientists who sought to locate God's handiwork in material creation were accused of blasphemy – often with fatal consequences. The wrath that met such modest proposals can be accounted for by an acknowledgment of the usurping of the absolutism of the sacred and profane in favor of the idea of a dialectical relationship between the two: a thesis of the sacred, an antithesis of the profane. And yet even the scientific engagement with reality that informed rationalism suggested, or became the foundation for, a new religious impulse: that reality itself speaks of God's creation, even in its fallen state, and that it is with a new orientation that becomes possible, away from the profane reality into which we are born, that the goal remains the same. Therefore, if reality is not itself entirely redeemed, it can be the site of grace, of learning, and of new paths to God.

The possibility of redemption is seen to lie in the encounter with the profane. Evelyn Waugh's 1945 novel *Brideshead Revisited* is subtitled "[t]he sacred and profane memories of Captain Charles Ryder". Waugh's protagonist, an interloper who initially harbors a skeptic's suspicions of the religious beliefs of his friends and lovers from the Flyte family, eventually converts, proving the immanence of God in all things, even in modern times, and even in darkest hours of modern times (the book opens and closes with the protagonist preparing for military deployment during the Second World War). Thus Waugh's protagonist finally concludes, reflecting on the twenty years between his youth and middle-age, while unexpectedly finding himself back in the Flyte's stately home, "[t]here was one part of the house I had not yet

visited, and I went there now. The chapel showed no ill-effects of its long neglect... the art nouveau lamp burned once more before the altar. I said a prayer, an ancient, newly-learned form of words... a beaten-copper lamp of deplorable design re-lit before the beaten-copper doors of a tabernacle; the flame which the old knights saw from their tombs, which they saw put out; that flame burns again for other soldiers, far from home, farther, in heart, than Acre or Jerusalem... I found it this morning, burning anew among the old stones.” (Evelyn Waugh: *Brideshead Revisited*, 1959: 331-332) Here Waugh equates the building (Brideshead) with the body (the protagonist, speaking here) – salvation is finally found in both, in a continuum of an ancient tradition that makes sense of the otherwise nonsensical world and casts its travails into relief, even when both building and body have been the location of Godless and hurtful activity. For Waugh’s protagonist it is – perversely – in the very aesthetic failings of the consumer objects of the world encountered that an access to the spiritual is spurred onwards. Writing in much the same manner, Piers Paul Read’s monk protagonist, in *Monk Dawson*, forsakes his priestly vocation to live in the fleshpots of modern, hedonistic society, believing that his mission of love for others is best served in this real world, even in marriage, than from behind the alter or via the chaste and removed existence of the cleric. It is only from this latter perspective that he comes to belatedly realize what he has lost and, overwhelmed with that feeling of loss, retreats to his monastic existence to live out the remainder of his days. This lesson has been learnt via his dalliance with the profane. For Greene, in his novels concerning such matters, faith remains acknowledged (if not celebrated) as an untarnished constant beneath the sometimes shabby veneer – as in *The Power and the Glory* and *The Heart of the Matter* (1940 and 1948 respectively). In these “religious” writers of modern era, the given is not only that our existence in the realm of the

profane can be redeemed, or offer redemption, but also that it is with this existence that we typically or ordinarily encounter the sacred, rather than in the lofty and rarefied environs traditionally associated with the presence of God.

Commercial applications of the Sacred and Profane

Even in the secular age, the dichotomy of sacred and profane remains as an interpretive frame. Divested of theological baggage, qualities understood as sacred and profane can be seen to co-exist in the passionate person: someone who is both a mature parent and passionate lover, someone who will chase after his own desires despite the council of others, and yet quit a job rather than engage in ethical compromise. Such a person is understood to be able to access the qualities, good or bad, that once flowed from such a binary reading of, and reaction to, the world – to juggle with them as he sees fit; a desirable person, of high endeavors and low drives (as with the quintessential Greene protagonist). Such characterization can be bought into. Givenchy's 2009 perfume *Ange ou Démon – Le Secret* suggests an enhancement of just such a persona. Gianni Versace's use of the "slutty" dress code of prostitutes and Miami street roughs for the glamour of his expensive 1990s collections creates just such a teasingly ambiguous tension too. Likewise, the sacred and profane maps readily onto preconceived ideas of high art and low culture. Moments of gravitas (a wedding or funeral, for example) call for ceremony, respect, classical music, smart dress; moments of celebration or relaxation (a birthday, a holiday) lend themselves to the instant gratifications of low culture, such as pop music, spontaneous dancing and junk food. Today's pilgrims are said to follow the sun, and "live life to the full" by exercising their freedoms to indulge their desires within, or even on the border of, legality – those modern day pilgrimages given over to the profane: the package

holidays advertised as opportunities for sex and excessive drinking rather than sight-seeing, or to cities with notorious red light districts rather than sites of historic interest. In some places, such as London's Soho or parts of Amsterdam, the two are combined.

Moralists who despair at such things often share the same intrinsic interpretation of those who capitalize on them: dividing the world into that which is good and that which is bad. For the indulgers, the very attractiveness of the qualities of an unapologetic "sinning" reside in the way in which once prohibited or disapproved behavior remains sinful – not sinful in the literal sense (resulting in an afterlife of eternal damnation) but as endowed with a frisson of sinfulness via engaging in forbidden or dangerous acts, experiencing emotions that are denied to the everyman. People can boast of the ill-advised nature of their intentions; they will abuse their body beyond what they know is their limit – and therein is the thrill, and the social status that can be gained from such proclamations and activities. Again environs readily present themselves for this commercial tendency: innumerable dance tracks that, in their lyrical content, anticipate the coming weekend, as played in bars and clubs that finesse opportunities for rapid drunkenness (the "happy hours" of two drinks for the price of one). The phenomenon of "car crash television", of "good girl gone bad" pop singers and formerly squeaky-clean female stars, or dangerously out-of-control but brilliant male artistes, is pruriently picked over by the tabloid press and television programs such as *The Jerry Springer Show* from just such a paradoxically moralistic position too. The reportage effectively celebrates, as well as copiously illustrates, that which they condemn, disseminating the idea (and images) of the very things preached against. It is no surprise that pornography is often strangely

moralistic; women are both taken advantage of *and* condemned for their behavior, not least in the typical dialogue.

This suggests that traces of the old dichotomy live on through a commercial make-over for the secular age: the financial potential of selling a full immersion in the profane, especially now that the masses are freed from the religious and moral codes of yesteryear, seems considerable. In this respect – which may be identified as a postmodern appropriation of the sacred and profane (where the form lives on as a cultural point of reference, even as the content is long forgotten) – progress seems anything but progressive.

The Sacred and Profane in the Postmodern Era

However, a further secular use of the dichotomy, through a synthesis of the sacred and profane, gives rise to new modes of expression, indicated by cultural artifacts that both reflect secularization and articulate an acknowledgment of, or even respect for, older metaphysical concerns. Such a paradoxical “holding together”, rather than the dialectical, “conversational” relationship between the sacred and profane, is one well-suited to music. The repetitions and all-engulfing volume of shoegazer and post-rock groups (such as My Bloody Valentine, The Telescopes and Mogwai), particularly in concert, work to induce in the listener a heightened state of contemplation, shutting off some senses while heightening others, and seeming to stretch and compact time – in these respects, as a kind of freeing of aspects of the body and psyche from its immediate and material surroundings, a latter-day form of meditation. The same occurs in rave culture, with Ecstasy and “acid house” music sending the dancer into an altered, joyous state of consciousness. On the 1994

Officium album, Jan Garbarek's saxophone playing (suggesting, in keeping with more traditional jazz phrasing, an individual's yearnings and emotions) melds with the Gregorian chant of the Hilliard Ensemble (suggesting sung prayer at the "higher" end of religious ritual – the Latin psalms and hymns of the Monastic community). In this mix, the secular, earthly, individual (in the sense of the sole soloing saxophonist) meets and matches, and enters into a musical cooperation with, the unearthly collective voices in sung prayer. The music represents a synthesis of these seeming polar oppositions. A similar operation is found in the 1968 psychedelic oddity *Mass in F Minor* by The Electric Prunes (then better known for the more straightforward psychedelic music of their previous two albums); here the lengthy acid guitar jams, typical of the West Coast sound of this time, reinterpret the music of the Catholic Mass, interspaced with the group singing the Latin chants themselves. Part of the album was used on the soundtrack to the 1969 countercultural film *Easy Rider* which, while including the expected scenes of free love and drug use, also gestures towards the transcendental and even spiritual potential of these secular and bodily preoccupations. A degree of self-awareness is achieved by the hippy protagonists through their immersion in the world – seemingly to the extent of the anticipation of imminent death. This self-awareness is not particularly different from older religious traditions in the nature of its enlightenment: the moral of the film seems to be that North American society is in a self-induced delusion, and that that drop-out path is one of truthfulness, self-knowledge and enlightenment, and with it comes a new form of living, closer to the nature around and one's true nature.

Peter Shaffer's 1979 play *Amadeus* (made into a film by Miloš Forman in 1984) fictionally dramatizes the interaction between the sacred and profane in the arena of music. Here the composer Mozart, despite his wayward and crude behavior,

is understood to be the chosen vessel of God – a kind of second Christ (the transcendental quality of his music is understood to indicate nothing less) – and is pushed to the point of psychological breakdown and premature death by the jealous and mediocre composer Salieri. Salieri blasphemously defies God, on the basis that Mozart is such an unworthy beneficiary of such divine inspiration, and so – even as Salieri acknowledges the ineffably divine qualities of his rival’s work – seeks to scupper God’s plans. For this dramatic clash of the sacred and profane, and synthesizing these themes into the world of the play, the narrative unfolds in the city slums and the palace, the insane asylum and church, and the opera house and the whorehouse.

On the one hand, this dynamic reproduces the classic structuring of the world along the lines of right and wrong; it is possible to dwell upon a subtext of spiritual battle between good and evil – God versus man, Mozart versus Salieri. But Shaffer muddies these waters. Salieri, an unrepentant sinner, effectively enables Mozart to work – even to the point of taking a dictation of the score for the Requiem Mass from an ailing Mozart on his deathbed. So, on the other hand, the realization comes that it is with an acknowledgment of such a synthesis of the sacred and profane that the world, as encountered, is best understood – even works, mysteriously, to sacred ends. Mozart’s corpse is buried anonymously – tossed into a pit with beggars and the nameless – but his music lives and, as Salieri concedes, will live on. The idea of mortality, as a final horizon of artistic expression has, as the work of Damian Hirst also seems to indicate, remained locked into notions of the sacred.

The postmodern sacred and profane necessarily critiques earlier models. But what is the nature of the critique, and the contemporary response to the tyrannies of theology as was? Anthony Burgess’s 1980 novel *Earthly Powers* (which, in this

context, emerges as a revision of *Brideshead Revisited*), while satirizing the Church, its clerics and its beliefs, and expressing relief on behalf of the protagonist (a hedonistic homosexual English author who recalls a relative: a Pope who, at the outset of the novel, is under consideration by the Vatican as a candidate for Sainthood), is finally unable to diminish the human propensity for belief. It is Burgess's unlikely character, a non-believer, who is called upon as a witness to the necessary miracle required for the ascendancy to the status of Saint. Thus the book begins with a series of comic collisions of the sacred and profane, offered as a reflection on the nature of modern life: "It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday, and I was in bed with my catamite when Ali announced that the archbishop had come to see me. 'Very good, Ali' I quavered in Spanish through the closed door of the master bedroom. 'Take him into the bar. Give him a drink.'" (Anthony Burgess: *Earthly Powers*, 1981: 7)

While Waugh finally reaffirms belief, from the position of a repentant skeptic, Burgess offers an unrepentant skeptic as the final recorder and arbitrator in the progress of the sacred and profane. Re-grounding theology and belief in the material realm in this manner, the profane excesses of the sacred, in an age of fundamentalism and self-declared imperial moral authority, can be seen as driven by superstition rather than egalitarianism.

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