

Who Are the Heretics?

A heretic proclaims something the world does not admit and hesitates even to consider.

Memory can be cosy, not least that collective memory known as history. 'The element of fear is withdrawn from it,' Thomas Carlyle wrote in his journal in 1835; it is 'all safe, while the present and future are all dangerous.' Two years later his history of the French Revolution appeared, a pyrotechnic display of style masking a comfortable assumption that such things could not happen here. In 1848 Karl Marx argued in *The Communist Manifesto* that they could: England, after all, was in a perilous condition as the world's first industrial state. Plainly Carlyle was not a real heretic; Marx, even if he got it wrong, was. They exemplify a distinction to be perceived and argued: not between right and wrong but between being a heretic and merely wishing to be thought one.

The past is safe if you want it to be, but by the twentieth century it was common to doubt it. It is a tradition to mark, perhaps to celebrate. Though the great heretics are not forgotten, their heresies are, and they emerge without a single party or unitary cause. F.R. Leavis clamoured to be thought a heretic all his life, but he followed fashionable leaders like T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence at a safe distance and in the end he does not qualify. Neither, in the new millennium, do those who occupy public spaces like St Paul's cathedral to protest against global capitalism. Protest can be chic, after all, and it is fashionable to decry bankers' bonuses. Some bawl from housetops to show off. Gilbert Murray's grandson Philip Toynbee used to shout from his college window: 'Join the party, comrades, it's the easiest way to get a girl.' He was fined by the Communist Party for rowdiness and would not qualify here.

Some highly dignified figures, on the other hand, do. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, or Q, protested that his passion for the remote past, classical and Renaissance, made a radical of him. The paradox was echoed a few years later by T.S. Eliot who, in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), linked youth with tradition: the young poet achieving individuality by encouraging

dead masters like Dante and Shakespeare to assert their immortality through what he writes. Both declarations, a few years apart, amount to a single heresy. True originality, as Jean Cocteau told the French Academy years later when they finally admitted him to their number, consists in trying to behave like everyone else without succeeding. In 1940 Winston Churchill spoke for a nation when he defied Hitler, but when a generation earlier he helped Asquith and Lloyd George to found a welfare state against socialist and conservative opposition he was plainly and proudly a heretic. A lifelong free-trader, despising after 1940 the party he had come to lead, he would have been incredulous to hear the free market described as a conservative idea. What in the world, he would have asked, is conservative in its social effects about a free market?

Churchill was not only a heretic but a wit. Comedy has a massively neglected role in history, though common experience shows that laughter is cleansing and derision easily more effective than anger. It is also more difficult. Tragedy is hard, as Mel Brooks used to say of show-business, but comedy is murder, and every actor knows it and every director. Shakespeare's early career suggests that comedy dominated his genius from the start, and comic masters of the twentieth century like P.G. Wodehouse and Douglas Adams deserve a place in the canon of heresy. So does T.S. Eliot, who adored the Marx brothers. He bought Groucho a large cigar when he came to dinner in London and wrote a collection of comic sketches, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939), which became a long-running musical called *Cats*. Critical confusion is confounded by the word 'serious', which can mean substantial as well as uncomic. 'Should I do your play,' John Gielgud once asked Terence Rattigan, who was trying to persuade him to star in his new comedy, 'or should I do something serious?' Gielgud was famous for dropping bricks, but that brick has been dropping for centuries.

The purest literary instance of a twentieth-century heretic was perhaps William Empson (1906-84). His name survives as an apostle of ambiguity, though in later years he disowned *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), his first book, as a youthful folly. Returning from China for the last time in 1952, he was appalled as an ardent atheist to discover a school of Christian apologetics flourishing under Eliot's leadership. What was worse, superstition was buttressed by a widespread conviction that authorial intentions are unknowable. 'A poem should not mean but be.' It was a doctrine fatal to any intelligent study of literature, as he saw, whether present or to come.

The arch-villain of the story was a Yale professor called W.K. Wimsatt (1907-75). In 1946 'The Intentional Fallacy' appeared in *Sewanee Review*, denying poetic intentions to be knowable, to be collected eight years later with revisions in *The Verbal Icon*; and it was soon a core belief of the American New Criticism and a quick-spreading plague in literary studies, its progeny a cult of critical indeterminacy. A poem may be, henceforth, but it cannot mean, and what you think it means is no more than what you think.

The myth was self-confirming: if poems mean what you think, you study them because you hope that what you think is interesting. *You* are interesting. Wimsatt was a life-long conservative Catholic, and Empson fervently believed that religion and indeterminacy were linked in an obscurantist conspiracy to destroy all rational debate. His vendetta in the cause of intention was pursued in articles and letters-to-editors over thirty years; after his death, in 1987, a mountain of his scattered articles was assembled in *Argufying*. Empson did not mince words. People are wrong, he would say when asked why he wrote, and they need to be told it; and on the indeterminacy of meaning, as on Christianity, he rejected all temptation to be bland or broad-minded. 'The crude doctrine is what does all the harm,' he wrote in 1955 in 'Still the Strange Necessity', comparing Wimsatt to a mastodon rising from a primeval swamp with dripping fangs. To abandon intention is to abandon literature, as he clearly saw, and the battle for intention had to be fought and won. It was no time for equivocation or courtesy.

Wimsatt had committed a mistake common among intellectuals of confusing knowledge with account-giving. Any life, however, suggests that knowledge precedes language and far outpaces it. A new-born infant learns that other people exist long before he speaks or understands a word; by his second year words, even sentences, accelerate the process of cognition. Reading follows a few years later, perhaps the acquisition of a second language. So do stored memories, gained through listening and reading. 'Estimating other people's intentions is one of the things we do all the time without noticing how it is done, just as we don't play catch by the Theory of Dynamics.'

No one, in short, needs to justify a judgement to be certain of it. Those who think critical judgements need justification are mistaken; those who conclude such judgements are merely personal are talking nonsense. A single counter-instance exposes the mistake. If, to count as truth, all propositions need stated and agreed foundations, what are the foundations (stated and agreed) of that proposition? Those who insist that value-judgements are never more than personal contradict themselves daily, even hourly, in their thoughts and deeds. Everyone knows in practice that some moral views like Nazism are mistaken; everyone speaks and behaves as if they know.

In the last decades of the century the cult of indeterminacy in moral and critical judgements moved sharply from Right to Left. It was a momentous shift, but little studied. Wimsatt died in 1975, an arch-conservative to the end. In 1960 he had voted for Richard Nixon as president because John F. Kennedy, though a Catholic, was also a liberal Democrat. In the years I knew Wimsatt I never heard him associate his conviction that ‘intention’ was a fallacy with his abiding hatred of the Left. He knew, or thought he knew, what they intended, and theories have a comfortable way of being theories of nothing in particular. But they can suddenly prove convenient to enemies as well as friends, and Wimsatt’s dismissal of authorial intention provided a convenient escape-hatch in the 1970s and after for old Stalinists, old Trotskyites and semi-repentant Maoists. You may have condoned the murder of millions. But you did not know it was meant, or what it meant. In any case they were not people like us, being Russian and Chinese, and in the Western world we do things differently... The end of the Cold War found a new use for an old folly.

All that was bad news for heretics. You can only be a heretic if you think truth matters, and long before the century was over critics had decided that moral and critical preferences were no more than a matter of personal opinion. In that case literature hardly counts as an academic study. Nature abhors a vacuum, and the vacuum was promptly filled. Historians replaced critics, and since the 1980s narrative historians like Niall Ferguson, Max Hastings, Simon Jenkins, and Tony Judt have commanded book-sales and crowded the air-waves. They tell what happened, after all, and people, including housewives and commuters, want to know what happened. If critics lose their faith in certainty, that is a matter for them. ‘Our God is alive – sorry about yours.’

In 1980 Jean-Paul Sartre and Roland Barthes died; in 1989 the Berlin wall was demolished by exultant crowds before television cameras. There was no doubt now where the world was going or wanted to go. Marx had proclaimed the inevitable victory of the proletariat as the triumph of history, but in the end it was another kind of history – the kind Macaulay once wrote – that triumphed. Who on earth would have predicted that?

The debris of Marxism was not quickly cleared. By the 1980s Grand Theory was yesterday’s idea, and there was not much demand to know why it had ever looked interesting. ‘All theory is grey,’ Mephistopheles told Goethe’s Faust, and the devil was ultimately seen to be right. Sociology died a gentle death in academe, to be replaced by less ambitious studies like

social anthropology. Marx was allowed to have influenced the language of class, in his day, and Lenin's tomb in Moscow has not been despoiled, nor Mao's in Beijing, though pilgrimages dwindle. Meanwhile a few survivors remain to protest that socialism had a point, in its time, though they cannot remember what it was.



The moment has come for criticism to recover the sense of certainty that laughter brings; and the profundity of the comic muse is the text and subtext of this book. Samuel Johnson demonstrated that criticism can amuse, and critical laughter has a long and lively tradition. In 1897 a young professor of classics, Gilbert Murray (1866-1957), named after a cousin called W.S. Gilbert who was soon to be celebrated for his comic operas, wrote a first book which promptly earned him a name for insolence. It was called *A History of Ancient Greek Literature*, and it began:

To read and reread the scanty remains now left to us of the ancient Greeks is a pleasant and not a laborious task.

But then all his life Murray loved to tease. He was also a passionate man, and laughter is never far from belief, or belief from laughter. In his Oxford inaugural in 1908 he recalled the words of his master Wilamowitz that boldly defined the foundation-dogma of a scholarly life, and it might furnish a motto for a brutal century that ended, in the event, rather well: 'Ghosts will not speak till they have drunk blood; and we must give them the blood of our hearts.' He understood the profundity of laughter, as others have done, and its power to teach.

What laughter teaches is humanism, or the conviction that what unites mankind is more important than what divides it. To be amused by eccentricity is to acknowledge a centre – what mankind is – and in a century torn apart by racism and multiculturalism that has sometimes been hard to accept. No class, said Lord Acton, is fit to govern, and by now the most potent heresy of all is to assert the community of mankind. It is time to make that assertion, and this is a humanist book.