Robert Hugh Benson and the Catholic Literary Revival in Edwardian England

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ABSTRACT

Robert Hugh Benson and the Catholic Literary Revival in Edwardian England

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Robert Hugh Benson was a popular religious author in Edwardian England; however, he has been all but forgotten by posterity. This study re-examines Benson’s contribution to the Catholic Literary Revival, a movement rooted in Romanticism. Benson utilized a “ministerial approach” to spread his message of renewal. Whereas other Revivalists wrote official histories, Benson wrote historical novels to advance the claim that the sixteenth century was responsible for British social disintegration. By presenting history as art, Benson presented his Christian worldview in a palatable form. Benson also had a complex relationship with 1890’s Aestheticism. Though he wrote a novel denouncing its tenets, Benson seemed attracted by it. While many of his own views on art contradicted Aestheticism, he recognized the aesthetes’ quest for beauty as valuable when consecrated to God. Finally, Benson authored a work of apocalyptic fiction which, though it prefigures many later twentieth-century works, also differs from them in some significant ways, especially in its purpose. Benson was a creative and original artist who deserves fresh attention by contemporary scholars.
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CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION: ROBERT HUGH BENSON AND THE CATHOLIC LITERARY REVIVAL

Some writers take the reader back to past ages, to vanished civilizations, to periods dead and gone; others take a leap into the fantastic and the world of dreams, their vision portraying, with greater or lesser intensity, a time as yet unborn, in which, by an atavistic reaction, the writer unwittingly reproduces the image of past epochs.

—J.K. Huysmans, *A rebours*

The work of Mr. Chesterton has its point from appearing in a world which is definitely not Christian.

—T.S. Eliot, “Religion and Literature”

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

—St. Paul, *Colossians 3:17*

On a Friday afternoon in September of 1903 in a Dominican chapter room at Woodchester, Robert Hugh Benson, the youngest son of the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, made a profession of faith before Father Reginald Buckler, submitting himself to the Roman Catholic Church. Early one Monday morning just over eleven years later, Benson died of pneumonia at the age of 43. Benson’s years as a Catholic were comparatively short as he “passed meteor-like across the horizon of the Church”; but during these brief eleven years, Robert Hugh Benson proved to be one of the most prolific writers ever to contribute to the annals of English literature.
Benson’s fecundity expressed itself through a variety of outlets. Between 1903 and 1914, he produced more than 20 novels in diverse genres—including historical, apocalyptic, and psychological novels—as well as plays and poems. He was a fertile essayist, appearing regularly in publications like *The Dublin Review, The Month,* and *Atlantic Monthly.* He also authored several books of Catholic apologetics and a spiritual autobiography chronicling his own path to Rome. Many of his novels were translated into a variety of foreign languages, including French, Spanish, German, and Italian.

When not writing books, Benson toured England and America speaking to large crowds that gathered to hear him. An ordained priest in the Catholic Church, Father Benson was a coveted preacher. When he preached on Good Friday in Kensington in 1907, the church was full an entire hour before the beginning of the service. Officials had to install sliding doors in order to enable the large crowds to exit smoothly. Similarly, when Benson traveled to New York in 1912 to preach on Ash Wednesday, 1250 people crowded into a church designed to hold 850. A return visit in 1914 saw even greater numbers. In addition, Benson supplemented his more formal sermons with frequent lectures throughout England on such topics as “Modern Miracles” and “The Modern Novel.”

Benson’s creative output and concomitant popularity found other venues as well. In 1907 he was offered the position of Chair of the English Department at the Catholic University, an offer he gracially declined. He wrote on “The Dissolution of the Religious Houses” for *The Cambridge History of English Literature* in 1909. Blossoming modern novelists like Ford Maddox Ford sought him out for help in faithfully depicting matters of religious ceremonial, while other popular novelists...
solicited him to write prefaces for their books. And perhaps most importantly, Benson was an avid letter writer, taking time out of his busy schedule to correspond with hundreds of converts seeking spiritual advice, as well as with fans of his books. Indeed, Benson was so popular when he died—and the public response so overwhelming—that the Nonconformist paper *The British Weekly* declared with an air of exasperation “No More Hugh Benson!”.

Despite Benson’s immense popularity on two continents during his lifetime, however, he has been largely forgotten by posterity. The opening sentence of Janet Grayson’s recent biography—the only substantive study of its kind in more than 80 years—is a telling register of contemporary attitudes toward Benson. “Does anyone read Robert Hugh Benson anymore?” she quips. Today, only one of Benson’s books, *Lord of the World*, an apocalyptic thriller about the coming of Antichrist, is readily available in large, popular bookstores. A handful of others have been reprinted by small, private Catholic presses and can be obtained solely by direct order. Others can only be bought used, and still others cannot be found at all. Modern critical attention has been equally elusive. Only a few scattered and cursory articles have recently treated Benson’s work, and the term “Benson scholarship,” if such a thing exists at all, would likely meet with questioning looks.

Still, Grayson’s 1998 work on Benson marks a small but growing interest in the forgotten work of a hugely popular author. Whispers of a “Benson revival” have been uttered among Catholic scholars, and with the flood of interest in eschatological fiction engendered by the frenzy surrounding the Protestant *Left Behind* series, *Lord of the
World, at least, is slowly reappearing before the eyes of the general public. The time seems ripe for a new study of the literature of R.H. Benson.

A fresh study of Benson is also needed in that those major studies that do exist—both earlier and more recent ones—are limited by the fact that they are solely biographical in nature. The biographical approach is necessary, of course, and it is especially understandable when dealing with minor figures of literature that lack a sharply defined presence in the collective consciousness of literary critics. For despite the residual effects of the New Criticism’s caveats about the biographical fallacy, students of literature nevertheless hunger for a certain authorial identity on which to pin their interpretations of individual works. At the same time, however, the biographical approach tends to subjugate both particular works of literature and larger literary trends to the task of understanding the psychological nuances of a given author. C.C. Martindale, author of the two-volume definitive biography on Benson, admits as much in his dedicatory epistle written to Benson’s mother: “[T]o speak for one moment grandiloquently, I have had to try to treat this ‘Life’ as a psychological study, or not at all. As mere annals, a list of things done, or as a mere study of a litterateur’s output, it was inconceivable.” Clearly, what matters most to Martindale, and to the biographer in general, is not the art but the man. Various works of literature are utilized merely as keys to a greater understanding of the differing moods and life events of an author—a kind of tool for psychoanalysis—and as a result, a thorough examination of literature qua literature is often lacking.

This work pursues a slightly different path, aiming, in contrast to earlier studies, to examine several of Benson’s novels for their own sake, for what they may serve to
reveal about the Catholic perspective in Edwardian Britain, and for what they contribute to the English literary tradition overall. In large part, this study offers readings of some of Benson’s most creative and original novels, including his historical novels, *By What Authority?* and *Oddsfish*; a contemporary novel entitled, *The Sentimentalists*, representing Benson’s response to the fashionable Aestheticism of his day; and his apocalyptic novel, *Lord of the World*, in which he depicts the coming of the Antichrist and the end of the world. In conjunction with these interpretive projects, the present work also endeavors to place Benson’s literature in the context of a number of important historical discourses pervading Edwardian England, as well as a frequently neglected literary movement that flourished during the early part of the twentieth century in Britain—the Catholic Literary Revival. As a vanguard member of the Edwardian phase of the Catholic Literary Revival, Benson’s work manifests a number of similarities in both theme and form with other writers of the Revival, most notably its two prominent figures—G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. Together, Benson and “ChesterBelloc” (as George Bernard Shaw cleverly termed the tandem), along with Maurice Baring and others, constituted a concerted literary and religious response to certain post-Victorian cultural trends. By situating Benson within these milieus, I hope to make clear the creativity and originality, as well as the nuances and idiosyncracies, of Benson’s works and their important position in the Catholic Literary Revival.

**Benson as “Catholic Author”**

It is perhaps best to approach Benson by applying to him what, at first glance, appears an innocuous term. Robert Hugh Benson is first and foremost a *Catholic*
author. Significantly, later writers like Graham Greene and Francois Mauriac have vehemently denied the applicability of this term to their artistic enterprises. Graham Greene has proclaimed it a “detestable term,” arguing that “Many times since Brighton Rock I have been forced to declare myself not a Catholic writer but a writer who happens to be Catholic.” The differences between the two ideas are subtle, but important nonetheless, and it is a useful distinction that is worth preserving in relation to Benson. Initially, it seems as if authors like Greene are aiming to establish a kind of compartmentalized approach to their art and lives. Religion and literature are separate facets of life and need not interpenetrate or inform one another. Novels are one thing, devotion another. Such a dualism, however, forces one to question not only the integrity of the author’s faith, but also the degree to which his art justly represents his vision of reality. While it does award an author a needed degree of freedom, it appears to do so at an unacceptable cost. Is a person truly faithful if he ostensibly sacrifices that faith to aesthetic concerns?

To charge authors like Greene with “compartmentalization,” however, is to argue for something that is not borne out in their works. Greene’s work clearly does reflect an inter-relationship between art and religion. His novels are permeated with a religious sensibility that informs the component parts. How, then, does Greene reconcile his novels with his own statement? By rejecting the term Catholic author, Greene opens the door for a more subtle exploration and expression of religion in literature—the kind of ambiguous inference favored in many modern novels. Like an underground spring watering fruits above, Greene’s Catholicism nourishes his narratives as they flow forth from his underlying faith. Events may not always appear pious on the surface, but
underneath lies an attitude towards reality nurtured by Catholicism. Additionally, Greene is free to explore issues of faith (and lack of faith) without feeling constrained to preach a sermon at the conclusion of the novel. For “the author who happens to be a Catholic,” religious issues in novels are grayer, less black-and-white, even if the author himself happens to opt for a black-and-white reality in his personal life. Furthermore, the burden of interpretation, as is the case with most modern and post-modern novels, is left more squarely with the reader.

In contrast to this, the Catholic author would be more apt to engage in overtly didactic or polemical writing. He would accept the burden of the “apologetic and morally edifying” approach and devise stories accordingly. Instead of allowing a story to flow freely out of an investigation of the world colored by Catholic faith, the Catholic author begins with the Catholic faith and fashions a story to illustrate or defend it. The works of the Catholic author are less exploratory and more expository. Though certain areas of “grayness” may materialize from time to time, a feeling of “black-and-white” predominates. A further comparison may here serve to emphasize the point. A writer to whom one might justifiably apply the term Catholic author approximates the allegorist in form and purpose. In an effort to depict certain truths in an imaginative manner, the allegorist creates a story to illustrate the intended point. The writer who happens to be a Catholic, on the other hand, begins by writing a story (albeit surely one informed on some deep level by his belief system) and ends by permitting the reader to interpret the story accordingly. This does not mean that the work of the latter author is completely lacking in religious themes; rather, it means that his work would undoubtedly be more subtle and complex in the development and exploration of those themes, creating a
greater authorial distance and relying more on inference than on a "moral of the story" technique. Mauriac explains the difference nicely:

> Being a Christian, my Christian beliefs dominate my novels, not because I want to make propaganda for Christianity, but because it is the deepest part of my nature. . . . I am a Christian first and last, which means a man responsible to God and to his conscience for the epoch he lives in. . . . he has been put here to play a certain role among his fellow men. He is engaged; it isn't a question of deliberately engaging himself.¹⁵

It is important to note here that Mauriac still professes some kind of engagement with "the epoch he lives in." Indeed, the distinction he makes is at base a psychological one—engagement with the epoch does not require a conscious act of will, but rather develops organically from one's core of faith. One can presumably imply from this notion a corresponding alteration in the way in which Mauriac's faith manifests itself in his novels. Still, as Theodore Fraser points out, novelists like Greene and Mauriac have often come under attack for "authorial manipulation" and "creating puppetlike characters" as a result of their rejection of modernist biases against authorial intrusion.¹⁶

Thus, even though Mauriac decries a propagandistic approach, his use of certain literary devices commonly considered to be outmoded (the omniscient narrator discussing the inner-psychology of characters directly, for instance), opens him up to the critique of a type of propaganda anyway.

Nevertheless, whatever the psychological nuances of literary creation might be for various authors of the Catholic persuasion, and whatever the corresponding artistic manifestations, one grasps intuitively a fundamental difference between the novels of a Greene and a Benson. In speaking of Benson, then, the term Catholic author provides a proper starting point. Indeed, unlike Mauriac and Greene, Benson would surely have
embraced this designation and its implications. Patrick Braybrooke writes of Benson, “His philosophy peeps out from his writings the whole time. It is an insistence on the necessity of the Catholic point of view.” Benson believed passionately that novels should have a clear point and that authors must not be ashamed to steer directly towards that point, carrying their readers along with them. For Benson, his art was a matter of deliberate engagement with his epoch, and because of this belief, it is not surprising that when critics speak of Benson at all, their discussions are usually rife with terms like “propaganda” and “polemic.” Even George Shuster, a fellow Catholic and a critic who is, on the whole, sympathetic to Benson, declares that his novels have “some of the atmosphere of a ‘tract’.” Such labels are almost always meant pejoratively, and they carry with them negative connotations that even the most open-minded of readers may find it difficult to ignore as images of a merciless proselytizer flash before the mind’s eye.

Such charges, however, are in many ways a vestige of modernism. With the advent of post-modernism, critics and theorists have repeatedly questioned the ability of any writer to secure for oneself a truly objective vantage point. As a result, Benson’s purposeful brand of literature may no longer seem as out of place as it once did for earlier modernist critics. Despite this broadening of critical perspective, however, the idea of religious propaganda and its implied weakening effects on the quality of literature has perhaps not entirely disappeared altogether. Therefore, I would like to suggest a new term for the approach to literature which Benson and his fellow Catholic Revivalists took. This term is not intended as an escape from the very real charges associated with the notion of propaganda, but is meant only to eliminate the
instantaneous prejudices called to mind upon hearing the word. Moreover, this fresh term entertains the possibility that while polemical literature is often considered "weak" literature from the standpoint of some modern(ist) criticism, such literature is not entirely without its positive enjoyments and effects. And finally, this new term signifies more accurately the essential motivations which lie behind the writing of such literature; namely, in the case of Benson, Chesterton, Belloc, and Milton before them, "to justify the ways of God to man."

One might say, then, that Benson wrote with a ministerial approach. (Closely related to this, one could argue that Benson deserves not only the label of Catholic author, but also the epithet priest-novelist. This term is valuable in that it succeeds in embodying not only Benson's occupational status, but also his distinctive aesthetic program.) When reading a novel by Benson, one is confronted with the feeling that he is experiencing a kind of extended sermon illustration. Two of Benson's novels, Lord of the World and The Dawn of All, are self-acknowledged extended parables delineating possible futures for European society. But even aside from these obvious parables, one senses with many of Benson's books that the majority of typical artistic considerations—character, setting, even plot—have been pressed into the service of some over-arching religious theme. In By What Authority?, for example, Benson submits his readers to a theological survey of religious positions ranging from Calvinism to Catholicism (with a stop at Anglicanism in between), all in an effort to establish Catholicism as the only historical source of Christian authority. In The Sentimentalists, the reader apprehends almost from the start that the decadence of Christopher Dell is a bankrupt philosophy and that his only redemption is to be found in the Catholicism of John Rolls and Dick
Yolland. And in *Come Rack! Come Rope!*, the message is equally clear: Robin Audrey (and the reader) should answer the call to his vocation even if the result is death.

Benson’s ministerial approach is not confined to him, however. In fact, it is a defining characteristic of the Catholic Literary Revival in the Edwardian Period. Benson, Chesterton, and Belloc all employed versions of this method, and later writers like C.S. Lewis also showed signs of utilizing this approach. The ministerial approach can be identified by the following characteristics. First, the author consciously conveys a specific (spiritual) message and urges the reader toward accepting this message. Second, other artistic concerns typically adopt an ancillary position to theme. Third, the author using the ministerial approach is motivated by a belief that the conventions of art are an effective means of delivering the said message; or in other words, authors using this technique would likely disregard the dictum “art for art’s sake.” Fourth, and closely related to number three, the author senses the power of art to be a catalyst for change, both social and personal. And fifth, the author is driven by a kind of prophetic impulse; i.e., the author has a message of renewal that his audience must hear, often in opposition to a multitude of competing cultural messages. Very often this message is considered by the author to be rooted in divine truths and therefore of the utmost importance. Like a minister preaching to the congregation, purveyors of the ministerial approach use art to challenge their readers towards personal and social change.

Clearly, the ministerial approach does not dictate the use of a particular genre, nor does it superintend minute issues of imaginative expression (it does not, for example, determine what color boots a character wears or where a novel takes place); rather, the term speaks more to the preoccupations of the author and his specific goals in writing.
Moreover, varying degrees of success can be found within this approach to literature. Both Chesterton and Benson employ a version of this approach, yet while Benson has disappeared into history, Chesterton scholarship remains alive and vibrant. Whereas popular interest in Benson has waned so much as to be virtually non-existent, popular interest in Chesterton continues to grow.

One effect of the ministerial approach when reading Benson is the sense one gets that Benson is continually dealing with an ideal form of Catholicism. Rarely does Benson treat the dark sides of Catholicism, and when he does, it is only to insist that the ideal has not been met. This does not imply that Benson’s characters are always martyrs-in-the-making, carried away by their religious zeal—though certainly many of them are. Nominal, complacent, and even bumbling Catholics (Annie Brasted in *The Conventionalists*, for example) do appear,

21 but Benson’s foundational message is frank and obvious in each and every one of his novels: *Only in Catholicism can one find personal redemption and a divine system for the governance of human society.* Benson’s goal is to challenge all people, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, to a higher form of faith and devotion. For non-Catholics, Benson seeks to substantiate the truth of Catholicism. (As a former Anglican, Benson is particularly hard on Anglicanism and its lack of apostolic authority.) For Catholics, Benson cautions them against the dangers of conventionalism—a favorite Bensonian term for Christ’s admonition to the Church in Laodicea against lukewarm religion.

22 It is not surprising, therefore, that Benson’s passion and the ministerial approach which he adopted to relate it garnered criticism from all sides. Maisie Ward summarizes the negative effect Benson sometimes had on people from a variety of denominations: “Most ‘cradle Catholics’ and many converts
disliked those jibes at Anglicans. . . . Moreover, along with the jibes at Anglicanism were attacks upon Catholic complacency.\textsuperscript{23} In his private life, Benson treated people of all faiths with kindness, gentleness, and compassion. In his novels, however, Benson had a message to spread and did so with fervor and fire. Albert Sonnenfeld has suggested that Catholic novels “can be seen as arrogant, often filled more with hate than with love”\textsuperscript{24} because Catholic authors, grounded in what they believe to be Absolute Truth, must necessarily present a view of the world that is at once exclusionary. Jesus Himself said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). There exists little doubt that while Benson’s passion was attractive in one way, his idealism sometimes invoked the critical fire of contempt from those who failed to share his zeal. Indeed, as the virtue of tolerance has become more and more the vogue throughout the twentieth century, it is little wonder that Benson’s novels, with their strict claims that Truth is to be found in one place and one place only, have fallen by the wayside.\textsuperscript{25}

To speak of Benson as an idealist with a compelling vatic impulse is at once to point to another essential quality of his writings; in fact, it is an essential quality in all of the authors of the Catholic Literary Revival. Benson and his fellow Revivalist authors were, at base, neo-Romantics. Not only does a thread of religious idealism run throughout Benson’s works, but he exhibits other Romantic characteristics as well. There exists a medievalism in Benson, a fascination with, and an energetic passion for, a time when the Church was one and ruled the world. Supernaturalism courses through the pages of his novels, displaying itself in a variety of forms as Benson strives to affirm the sempiternal reality behind the veil. Benson’s world is a sacramental one—material and immaterial,
flesh and spirit, regularly fuse and transubstantiate. Even the Romantics' stereotypical love of nature is imbued in Benson's lush descriptions of the natural environment, what Christian tradition has called "the back of God."

The Foundations of the Catholic Literary Revival

Robert Hugh Benson was a central figure in the Edwardian phase of a literary movement known as the Catholic Literary Revival. A subsection of a larger Catholic Revival that had been sweeping Europe since the mid-nineteenth century, the Catholic Literary Revival was an attempt to reclaim for God and Church a literary institution that had become increasingly secularized and to spread a traditional and orthodox Christian message that had largely been lost. Benson and his fellow Revivalists strived to reinvigorate Edwardian society with a renewed sense of its spiritual roots and to remind the people of their need for God. Moreover, the Literary Revival was part of an ongoing effort to reclaim the status of a Catholic heritage that had been ignored and suppressed since Henry VIII's break with Rome in the sixteenth century. Broadly conceived, the Catholic Literary Revival impacted genres of literature ranging from history and biography to fiction and poetry. Though artistic in form, it was religious and socio-political in impetus, its main proponents confronting religious and social issues through imaginative means.

Benson and his fellow Revivalists burst onto the literary scene during a contentious period in English history. By the conclusion of the Victorian Era, Britain had reached a crisis of faith and found itself at the breaking point. Rationalism, empiricism, positivism, modernism, Darwinism, and Higher Criticism had succeeded in undermining
the traditional belief systems of not only the intellectual elite, but also those of many average citizens as well. A growing religious pluralism only exacerbated the situation.

In 1902-3, R. Mudie-Smith conducted a poll of people living in the vicinity of London for the *Daily News*. According to the survey, only two out of every eleven people attended church. This marked decline in British church attendance is perhaps reflective of Victorian religious tensions, but the decline was certainly not for lack of choice among competing denominations. Since the Reformation, schism after schism had culminated in a developed state of religious pluralism. In England, the Anglican Communion remained the official national faith, but the nineteenth century had seen the explosion of a variety of Nonconformist sects, each with its own version of "true" Christianity. By the start of the Edwardian period, the splintered condition of Christendom contributed to the growing feeling that Christianity was in danger. People, according to Keith Robbins, "began to suspect that perhaps the condition of the churches in society had already reached its peak,...and that what lay ahead might be a long and difficult struggle to 'hold the fort.'"

In large part, those people, events, and publications which epitomize the Edwardian Era take their distinctive quality from their efforts to wrestle with the forces of secularization and division. Much like the Romantic movement a century earlier, Edwardian England responded to a rapacious rationalism by seeking spiritual answers in new places. As Jonathan Rose writes: "Among Edwardian intellectuals, a recurring pattern can be traced: they commonly passed through a phase of doubt or disbelief, ultimately discovered they could not do without one or another of the comforts provided by religion, and went on to construct some secular form of faith." Some of these new
secular forms of faith included Socialism, Idealism, the demiurge of George Bernard Shaw known as the "Life Force," and Spiritualism. The still embryonic discipline of psychology also sought to distance itself from the mechanism of its nineteenth century predecessor and did so by theorizing about the "subconscious" mind. Subsequently, the subconscious became for some a natural explanation for what had always been considered supernatural phenomena. The Apollonian and the Dionysian of Nietzsche constituted a similar attempt to posit the existence of a deeper non-rational reality without taking recourse to Christian concepts of God, spirit, and soul.

What many, if not all, of these new secular forms of faith had in common was their effort to mollify humanity's desire for religion while preserving the intellectual integrity apparently demanded by the rationalist perspective. To adopt a phrase from Romantic criticism, many Edwardians aimed to devise eclectic belief systems of "natural supernaturalism" by striving to reconcile the supposedly polar claims of science and faith. Traditional religious urges were sublimated into political, preternatural, or non-conventional supernatural spheres. As a result, one finds among Edwardian writers, even Catholic ones like Robert Hugh Benson, a somewhat bizarre straining after a holistic model of the universe that could bridge the gap between science and faith. For example, one of the prominent organizations of the period, the Society for Psychical Research, purported to investigate the claims of Spiritualism through a strict use of the scientific method. Indeed, in the minds of many, a mutually satisfying relationship seemed to exist between Science and Spiritualism during the Edwardian Period. Scientists like Oliver Lodge found in the empirical study of spiritual phenomena a substitute for the lost hope of religion, while Spiritualists themselves longed for the
vindication of their experiences that science could bring. As historian Janet Oppenheim puts it:

It was the fond hope of British spiritualists that, through their faith, the constructive aspects of the scientific method might be harnessed to the search for philosophical or religious meaning in human existence, thereby mitigating the destructive impact of science. If the validity of spiritualist phenomena could be proven in acceptable scientific fashion, then science could become once again, as in past centuries, the defender and not the challenger of the faith.\textsuperscript{29}

Whether scientists or spiritualists or both, Edwardians struggled valiantly to locate a source of meaning in the spiritual vacuum left by Victorian skepticism and materialism. However, concerned primarily with fulfilling the need for religious \textit{emotion} in a doctrinal wasteland, people everywhere turned outside the Church for hope and a new kind of truth.\textsuperscript{30}

Consequently, it is not at all surprising that Calvert Alexander, in his book \textit{The Catholic Literary Revival}, argues that the Catholic Literary Revival “is primarily one of revolt. Catholic literature, when we discover it coming into being in the mid-nineteenth century, is a literature of protest against the course being followed by European society.”\textsuperscript{31} Albert Sonnenfeld makes a similar claim in \textit{Crossroads: Essays on the Catholic Novelists}. For him, the literary gifts of the Revivalist authors “were initially negative or reactionary. Their inspiration increases when the Church’s power decreases; they thirst most acutely for a world of order when their world is threatened by total disorder.”\textsuperscript{32} These claims are foundational for understanding the Catholic Literary Revival. The Revival, like its half-brother Romanticism, is at base a revolt; or more precisely, the Revival is a counter-attack, a new offensive by a seemingly diminished tradition of orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{33} It is a group of authors speaking out through their
art against a creeping secularism and the decline in the European social consciousness
that such secularism was causing.

That Romanticism and the beginnings of the Catholic Literary Revival should
coincide is not surprising. Romanticism was a vehement reaction to Enlightenment
rationalism. In his famous essay, *Was ist Aufklärung?*, Immanuel Kant posed the
quintessential Enlightenment challenge to all of humanity—*sapere aude*—“dare to
know.” This tiny phrase epitomizes the Enlightenment *zeitgeist*—a period in history
when men believed in the power of human Reason to effect a utopian state of perfection.
The universe was no longer ruled by a supernatural deity (or a deity, at least, that took an
interest in human affairs), but was subject to rational and scientific laws able to be
deduced by the empirical observations of men. Science was the celebrated “hero” of the
Enlightenment, and it was seen as “the basis for an unbounded faith in progress, a belief
in perfectibility and the imminent elimination of pain and suffering.” 34 In response to
this enlightened humanism, the Romantics celebrated the mysterious, the supernatural,
the emotional, and the spiritual side of human existence. While Isaac Newton was busy
discovering the laws of physics, the Romantics were busy exploring metaphysics—that
“awful shadow of some unseen Power” which “Floats though unseen among us,” as
Shelley so beautifully describes it (“Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” 1-2). 35 Romanticism
was a reactionary movement that attempted to recognize and re-infuse an essentially
religious spirit into an empty and hollow culture debased by pure intellect, or so
Romantics like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats saw it. As such, “All Europe
was feeling the profound stirrings of renovating forces which seemed to promise much
not only for the renewal of the arts but for the revival of religion.” 36
The sweeping sense of spiritual revival inaugurated by the Romantics fired the imaginations of men like John Henry Newman who, in 1833, along with John Keble, became a preeminent figure in the Oxford Movement—a movement designed to bring reform to the Anglican Church by hearkening back to the forms and rituals of traditional Catholicism. Alexander writes:

The Oxford Movement was a late echo of the Romantic Revival. Coming as it did...at a time when popular opposition to the Romantic excesses had already begun to solidify, it was in the nature of a last brave attempt to realize for religion and art some of the early promises of the revival before English society had hardened into Victorianism.37

Thus the Oxford Movement—a distinctly Christian program—took its cues from the Romantic push for spiritual renewal.

The Oxford Movement also shared with Romanticism a hunger for the past; specifically, for the medieval past.38 The Romantics were horrified by the effects of nineteenth-century industrial society. Large, poor urban masses lived in close proximity with little true human contact. Growing industrialization prevented people from living in simple harmony with Nature. And art had become too rigid, too strict, too rational. Western civilization seemed to be in chaos and on the brink of crumbling. As a result, the Romantics were attracted by the primitive simplicity of the Middle Ages with its harmony and order. They were drawn to its ritual, pageantry, and mysticism, and they sought to recapture the medieval spirit by transporting themselves and society—via art and imagination—back to the past. The Oxford Movement, with its atavism, also strived to reinvigorate Anglicanism by re-instituting older forms of worship.

However, after ten years as a figurehead of the Oxford Movement, Newman began to understand, in the words of Alexander, that its “program for the restoration of religion
was as nostalgic, vaporous, and unreal as that of the Romantics in other fields.” Though
the Movement was Christian in that it recognized humanity’s need for an encounter with
the authentically supernatural, its power was derived largely from a kind of sentimental
vision of the past and a drive to recreate that past in the present. In contrast to this,
Newman realized that “the revival of religion in England was not primarily a matter of
historical re-creation and renewed contact with the past at all. It was first and foremost a
matter of re-establishing contact with the authentic source of the supernatural in the
present.”^39 For Newman, this authentic source of the supernatural in the present was
none other than the Catholic Church. Prior to any form of social revival or redemption,
Newman believed strongly that fallen human nature must be redeemed, and that the only
way an individual could be freed from “the terrible aboriginal calamity” was through
divine intervention.40 As is well known, Newman converted to Catholicism shortly
thereafter and transferred with him the seeds of the Catholic Literary Revival.

To suggest, however, that Newman and the Catholic Literary Revival were children,
or products, of Romanticism, is to overstate the case. Alexander’s phrase, “stimulated
by Romanticism,”^41 is much more carefully chosen to reflect the finer nuances of the
relationship. Clearly, a conduit existed between the two movements. Both represented a
type of spiritual response to a growing trend of anti-supernaturalism. Both saw
something in the medieval past worth examining more closely. The fledgling Catholic
Literary Revival was inspired by and content to ride the spiritual wave of Romanticism,
at least temporarily. However, even from the beginning of the Oxford Movement, there
were important differences between the two responses.42 Indeed, the differences
between Romanticism and the Catholic Literary Revival are at least as important as the
similarities. Rather than viewing it as if Romanticism begot the Revival, it seems more just to suggest that Romanticism and the Catholic Literary Revival are themselves two children of a common parent—the Enlightenment—genetically similar, but different in personality and outlook. Or, to phrase it another way, they are like two trains that begin on parallel tracks only to diverge indefinitely somewhere down the line. Their motives are similar, their characteristic responses different.

Viewing the two movements in this way has important ramifications for the terminology one can employ. When one speaks of Benson and other authors of the Catholic Literary Revival as “Romantics,” one can effectively conjure an aspect of their artistry and thought. This approach also calls to mind tendencies these authors share with more famous writers like Wordsworth or Shelley. However, when utilizing such terms, one must also recall that the responses of Catholic authors to similar issues differ not only in degree, but also in kind. There is a qualitative difference between the Romantics and the authors of the Catholic Literary Revival, a difference that must be remembered at all times. “[I]t is...,” writes Alexander, “...inevitable that the numerous schools, tendencies, individual artistic preferences existing among modern Catholic authors should be called ‘romantic’ or ‘classical’ or ‘traditional’ or ‘modernist.’ But these terms must be applied with a difference. And that difference is fundamental and of great importance.”

One important difference, then, between Revivalist authors and their Romantic predecessors, is that while the Romantics sought to reject Reason nearly altogether as a reaction to Enlightenment excesses, Revivalist authors acknowledged the importance of Reason and worked to retain it. As Alexander makes clear, the Catholic Church
repudiated Romanticism because “it attempted to dethrone the intellect.” While Catholics surely could not accept the anti-supernaturalism of Enlightenment rationalism (and its descendant Victorian materialism), nor could they abide the notion that pure intuition and feeling were adequate guides to truth and reality. As a result, the authors of the Catholic Literary Revival aimed to strike a balance between rational modes of knowledge and mystical modes of knowledge. On the one hand was scientific knowledge which, in typical Edwardian fashion, could not be ignored, while on the other hand was the timeless truth that Christians must “walk by faith, not by sight.” Thus one frequently observes what appear on the surface to be bizarre paradoxes in authors like Benson and Chesterton. Benson, for example, in articles like “A Modern Theory of Human Personality” published in *The Dublin Review* in 1907, stretches himself to adduce a psychology of human behavior that squares with the scientific facts, only to deliver a paper on “Mysticism” the very same year. Similarly, among the many paradoxes in Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy*, his use of the word “rational” itself gives one pause. On the one hand, he claims he must accept the dogmas of Christianity because he is “a rationalist” who “like[s] to have some intellectual justification for [his] intuitions.” Only pages later, however, Chesterton uses the term “rationalist” with obviously negative connotations: “It is we Christians who accept all actual evidence—it is you rationalists who refuse actual evidence being constrained to do so by your creed.” Chesterton, as is nearly always the case, is far more playful than Benson; and Chesterton’s project, of course, is to demonstrate how Christians have actually trumped agnostic intellectuals by proving themselves more rational than the rationalists. Still, a kind of *via media* is evident in both authors—an attempt to retain both reason and
intuition, rational and phenomenological knowledge—and to avoid slipping too far in
either direction. Or perhaps more accurately, the Catholic viewpoint is not so much a
mere balance as it is a passionate embrace of both extremes simultaneously which leads
to an even greater balance. Chesterton makes the same argument in regard to Christian
virtue in a chapter aptly titled, “The Paradoxes of Christianity.” “Everywhere I began to
find that... duplex passion was the Christian key to ethics everywhere. Everywhere the
creed made a moderation out of the still crash of two impetuous emotions.” The
apparent paradoxes between reason and emotion are paradoxes only to Enlightenment or
Romantic extremists. Moreover, Benson’s and Chesterton’s insistence on a balance of
these two extremes is nothing more than a plain embrace of what the Catholic Church
had advised for centuries concerning the relationship between passion and intellect.

Both the Revivalists and the Romantics also displayed a fascination with the
medieval past. Critics, however, tend to talk about the Catholic and Romantic longing
for the past in terms of “nostalgia.” Sonnenfeld, for instance, writes: “It was as poets
and dreamers that Catholic novelists viewed history, transmitting a vision, a memory of
a story-book past that was surely never as glorious as their nostalgia intimated.”
Similarly, Lord Acton, the great nineteenth-century British historian and one of the first
to consider the relationship between Romanticism and the Catholic Revival, noted the
propensity for the Romantics to favor imagination at the expense of an investigation that
was methodologically sound: “It is the note of the Rom. School that it put imagination
and constructiveness before analysis and criticism and that it was always wrong.”

For the most part, however, the authors of the Catholic Literary Revival did not
value the past merely for its own sake, simply because it was different than the confused
modern world in which they lived. They did not seek the trappings of the past, but the genuine Catholic spirituality that had produced it. In contrast to this, writes Alexander, the Romantics struggled "to revive the shriveled culture of the non-Catholic world by contact with a Catholic culture without any disposition to reaffirm belief in the supernatural principle that had produced that culture." Whereas some Romantics merely slipped imaginatively into the past as an escape from the degradation of the modern world, the Catholic Revivalists sought to transmute the orthodoxy of the Middle Ages into the present, and they did so with an intense and pointed energy, not the weak-kneed sentimentality of which they are sometimes accused.

Moreover, in their battle for spiritual significance, some Romantics constructed esoteric, solipsistic belief systems—personal models of spirituality through which they endeavored to revitalize their worlds. Blake's claim that the source of all religions is "the true Man... he being the Poetic Genius" in "All Religions Are One" is a prominent example of the Romantic rejection of orthodoxy in favor of individualized religious paradigms. Shelley, too, in his "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," calls "the names of God and ghost and Heaven" nothing but "Frail spells" (27-9), revealing a similar distaste for institutional faith. The authors of the Revival, on the other hand, undertook to apply the old orthodoxy to a new world; or more to the point, to argue that the old orthodoxy had never ceased to apply at all. In his preface to The Dawn of All, Benson expresses his faith in an "ancient thought... which has stood the test of centuries, and is, in a very remarkable manner, being 'rediscovered' by persons more modern than the modernists." And Chesterton writes at the beginning of Orthodoxy:

I freely confess all the idiotic ambitions of the end of the nineteenth century. I did, like all other solemn little boys, try to be in advance of the
age. Like them I tried to be some ten minutes in advance of the truth. And I found that I was eighteen hundred years behind it. I did strain my voice with a painfully juvenile exaggeration in uttering my truths. And I was punished in the funniest way, for I have kept my truths: but I have discovered, not that they were not truths, but simply that they were not mine. When I fancied that I stood alone I was really in the ridiculous position of being backed up by all Christendom. It may be, Heaven forgive me, that I did try to be original; but I only succeeded in inventing all by myself an inferior copy of the existing traditions of civilized religion. The man from the yacht thought he was the first to find England; I thought I was the first to find Europe. I did try to found a heresy of my own; and when I had put the last touches to it, I discovered that it was orthodoxy.56

Romantics like Blake and Shelley, then, lacking a solidified belief in a concretely defined supernatural entity who transcends and guides history, were compelled to view the past sentimentally as a better time when art and mystery were alive and well in the population at large. The Revivalists, in contrast, though they occasionally sugarcoated elements of the past, avoided a purely sentimental remembrance of it. Instead, their belief in a steady, unbroken line of orthodoxy, and most importantly, their united belief in a real presence behind that orthodoxy, allowed the Revivalists to point to the past as a model of what could be, and permitted them to claim the supernatural power to call it into being. They didn’t so much escape into the past, as they attempted to argue that the spiritual foundations of the past were still with them in the present. “How can we say that the Church wishes to bring us back into the Dark Ages?” inquires Chesterton. “The Church was the only thing that ever brought us out of them.”57 The Revivalists believed in the staying power of the Church. Though it might suffer temporary setbacks, the Church will always emerge again unbroken:

The world was swarming with sceptics, and pantheism was as plain as the sun, when Constantine nailed the cross to the mast. It is perfectly true that afterwards the ship sank; but it is far more extraordinary that the ship came up again: repainted and glittering, with the cross still at the top.
This is the amazing thing the religion did: it turned a sunken ship into a submarine. The ark lived under the load of waters; after being buried under the debris of dynasties and clans, we arose and remembered Rome.58

Benson displayed a similar confidence in the unity and vitality of the Catholic Church:

We are told occasionally by moralists that we live in very critical times, by which they mean that they are not sure whether their own side will win or not. In that sense no times can ever be critical to Catholics, since Catholics are never in any kind of doubt as to whether or no their side will win.59

None of this means, of course, that the authors of the Catholic Literary Revival were at all times utterly free of any sentimentality or idealism regarding the past. On the contrary, Benson, for one, occasionally slips into a more strictly "Romantic" attitude. His idealized portrait of sixteenth-century monasticism in The King's Achievement is but one example, a decision for which he came under a considerable degree of critical fire.60

But even in Benson one sees an effort to present history with a measure of objectivity. A prime example of this is Benson’s descriptions of the executions of the Catholic Edmund Campion in By What Authority? and the Protestant Bishops Ridley and Latimer in The Queen’s Tragedy. One might expect Benson to have glorified the death of Campion over that of Ridley or Latimer, but although it is no secret where Benson’s sympathies lie, he depicts the executions of all three men with equal pathos and narrative interest. In fact, the entire novel The Queen’s Tragedy, though it characterizes Mary Tudor ("Bloody Mary") in a semi-favorable light, is nevertheless one grand effort for a Catholic to grapple with a suspect period in English Catholic history. Benson does not shy away from contentious issues, but rather works to face them directly.
Finally, both the Romantics and the Revivalists considered themselves to have a kind of vatic burden to bear a message of social and spiritual rejuvenation through art. There is a parallel between the ministerial approach of the Revivalists and the Romantic vision of the poet as prophet. Blake claims to dine with the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,* implying his own affiliation with the prophetic line, and Shelley declares that “Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called in earlier epochs of the world legislators or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters.” The Romantics, though they shared certain similarities which literary historians have seen fit to deem “Romantic,” were essentially lone prophets, each one broadcasting a brand of redemption founded on his own esoteric version of reality. *Contra* the Romantics, the Revivalists encouraged a return to orthodoxy, to the traditional and timeless truths of the Christian faith. Furthermore, the Romantics had a much greater sense of their own prophetic roles, a kind of hyper-developed fascination with their own importance as truth-bearers. In its most extreme form, this trait culminates in poets like Shelley with arguably melodramatic lines like, “I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!,” in which Shelley compares himself with the crucified Christ (“Ode to the West Wind” 54). This kind of martyr complex is largely absent from writers like Benson, Chesterton, and Belloc. The Revivalists did firmly believe in their message of redemption and their responsibility for spreading it, but nowhere does one get the feeling that they are guilty of the corresponding elevation of the self so often attributed to the Romantics.

In the end, then, while there are a number of similarities between the Romantics and the Revivalists—the Catholic Literary Revival was “stimulated by Romanticism” in its
early stages, and a “Romantic” strain remained with the Revivalists even into later
stages—there were nonetheless significant differences between the two movements.
Both were interested in a type of spiritual revival, but offered drastically different means
of catalyzing it. Both were attracted to the past, but approached it in slightly different
ways. And both had a developed social consciousness which they sought to express
through art; but even here important differences existed. Both movements were, in a
sense, revolutionary, but Benson and the authors of the Catholic Literary Revival were
perhaps the more astonishing in that they were bold enough to suggest that the most
Romantic and revolutionary thing one could do was to return to a forgotten truth that had
really been present all along.


3 Ibid., 154.


5 Benson did not think himself equipped enough to handle a formal faculty position relating to English Literature.


7 Grayson, *Life and Works*, 147. Ford later used the notes he received from Benson in his novel *The Fifth Queen and How She Came to Court*.

8 Ibid., xiv.


13 See Swift’s discussion of Greene’s (mis)appropriation of John Henry Newman’s remarks on the impossibility of Catholic literature, especially 114-115.


16 Ibid., xix.


19 Interestingly, J.R.R. Tolkien, another Catholic writer from the mid-twentieth century, does not reflect this approach. This may be one of the reasons why Tolkien’s works have found a much larger and more diverse audience than any of his fellow Catholic (or Anglo-Catholic in the case of Lewis) authors.

20 It should be noted at the outset that “art for art’s sake”, as has been frequently pointed out, is itself a type of propaganda. Still, its ideas exercised a great deal of influence, either directly or indirectly, on modernist aesthetics. It was also a trendy idea in Benson’s day—one which he rebelled against, at least for the most part. See Chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion of Benson’s response to Aestheticism.

21 One strange but not untrue criticism was leveled at Benson in early discussions of his work; namely, that the priests in Benson’s novels are frequently foolish and inept. Martindale affirms Benson’s early dislike and even distrust of Catholic priests even once he had become one himself. For a literary discussion of Benson’s novels reflecting this view, see John Dawson, “The Priest in R.H. Benson’s Novels,” The Month (Dec. 1917), 512-19.

22 “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (Rev. 3:15-16). All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

23 Qtd. in Joseph Pearce, Literary Converts: Spiritual Inspiration in an Age of Unbelief (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 75.


25 The recent focus on tolerance seems to have resulted in an interesting phenomenon hitherto unknown in society. In the past, tolerance has suggested that it is a virtue to accept the fact that others may differ from one’s own viewpoint. It did not, however, preclude one from speaking his viewpoint boldly and with zeal. Nor did it greatly
influence the understanding that Absolute Truth existed in some form and could be
discerned. Nowadays, however, at least in popular culture, the emphasis on tolerance
appears to have contributed to a growing relativism, as well as a general discomfort
among some people about expressing their views at all.

Donald Read (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1982), 114.

27 Ibid., 126.


29 Janet Oppenheim, The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England,

30 In some cases, people actually attempted to blend Christianity and Spiritualism.
Oppenheim classifies Spiritualists into two camps (though she problematizes this general
division): Christian spiritualists and non-Christian spiritualists. See Oppenheim, Other
World, 63-110.

31 Calvert Alexander, The Catholic Literary Revival: Three Phases in Its Development
on Alexander’s discussion of the historical roots of the Catholic Literary Revival in the
discussion that follows. Alexander’s study is particulary helpful in assessing the early
stages of the Revival; however, as it was published in 1935, it lacks the benefit of
hindsight in analyzing the later phases of the Revival. As a result, Alexander’s study
grows considerably less useful as it progresses chronologically.

32 Sonnenfeld, Crossroads, 4.

33 The word “revolt” somewhat inaccurately suggests the creation of something new in
reaction to the current state of things. Revivalist authors, however, were returning to an
old order (albeit in a fresh way) that they perceived as never having been quite
destroyed. Thus “counter-attack” seems a more precise term. See also note 42 below.

34 Issac Kramnick, introduction to The Portable Enlightenment Reader, (New York:

35 Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, eds., Shelley’s Prose and Poetry (New
York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977), 93. All references to Shelley’s poetry are
taken from this edition.

36 Alexander, Catholic Literary Revival, 22.

37 Ibid., 28.
* * See Ibid., 22-6 for a discussion of medievalism.

39 Ibid., 29.

40 Ibid., 31.

41 Ibid., 19.

42 This point is especially important when one considers that critics like Harold Bloom have suggested that the Romantic Revolution was fundamentally a Protestant one. Bloom writes: “Though it is a displaced Protestantism, or a Protestantism astonishingly transformed by different kinds of humanism and naturalism, the poetry of the English Romantics is a kind of religious poetry, and the religion is in the Protestant line, though Calvin or Luther would have been horrified to contemplate it.” (Harold Bloom, introductory essay to *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971], xvii.) Since the word “Protestant” inherently suggests a breaking away from an established standard (in this case Catholicism), Catholics by definition, no matter how reactionary or revolutionary they appear in relation to whatever secular trends they may be denouncing, can never truly share more than a superficial similarity with revolutionary movements like Romanticism. Chesterton’s “Romance of Orthodoxy” is revolutionary in its emotional impact and unique presentation of orthodoxy, but it is still, at bottom, a return to the old. (Chesterton was still a Protestant when he wrote *Orthodoxy*, but I believe that it nevertheless reveals his affinity for the Catholic tradition; and at the very least, it certainly does not contradict that tradition.) Protestants (and Romantics) on the other hand, can divide and rebel against one another indefinitely, but all new sects are still “Protestant” in that they are deviations from the central fixed standard of Catholicism.


44 Ibid., 26.

45 Robert Hugh Benson, “A Modern Theory of Human Personality,” *The Dublin Review* (July 1907), 78-96. It is noteworthy that Benson concludes the article in a quintessentially Edwardian manner with an almost pleading tone for the reconciliation of science and faith: “May it not be our hope, then, that after a few more mutual explanations Science may come to understand that the Church does not reject the fruit of her labors, but welcomes them? Is it too much to hope that when Science has advanced yet a few steps more she may have come to Faith with the human soul newly discovered in her hands?” (95).


Ibid., 159.

Ibid., 95. See also the entire chapter, pp. 81-103, in which Chesterton develops at length this idea of Christianity as a home for ostensibly irresolvable paradoxes.


Robert Hugh Benson, preface to *The Dawn of All* (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1911).

Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 5.

Ibid., 156.

Ibid., 155.

Benson, preface to *Dawn*.

Benson was most vehemently attacked by historian G.G. Coulton. See Coulton, “The Truth about the Monasteries,” *Contemporary Review* 89 (Apr. 1906), 529-538.


CHAPTER 2

CONFRONTING THE PAST: BENSON’S HISTORICAL NOVELS

In a sense much more striking still, however, the Christian must find that religious thought is inextricably involved in historical thought.
—Herbert Butterfield, Christianity and History

When you are criticizing the philosophy of an epoch, do not chiefly direct your attention to those intellectual positions which its exponents feel it necessary explicitly to defend. There will be some fundamental assumptions which adherents of all the variant systems within the epoch unconsciously presuppose. Such assumptions appear so obvious that people do not know what they are assuming because no other way of putting things has ever occurred to them.
—Alfred North Whitehead, Science and the Modern World

There is still a certain Christian flavor even in those parts of western society most nearly denuded of the Faith—a mould of mind, an ethical habit—still a spark that may be kindled into flame anew. If Catholics will be wholly loyal to their own timeless principles and—without timidity or apology, but with all the militant confidence that should flow from a realization that they and they alone represent the one continuous mind and central historical tradition of our civilization—go forward to grapple with the modern world, assimilate what is good in it, and order all of it, then the remaining spark may indeed be fanned into such a flame that the sun itself would be paled.
—Ross J.S. Hoffman, Restoration

Of the nineteen books published by Robert Hugh Benson between 1904 and 1914, five of them were historical novels, and a sixth book professes to be the transcript of an archival source dating back to the fourteenth century.¹ Taken in sum, nearly one-third of Benson’s creative energy was devoted to the artistic rendering of history; however, Benson’s historical novels have often been dismissed as unworthy of any sustained
critical attention. Oddly enough, such verdicts are frequently due more to the *a priori* assumptions of given critics concerning the nature of historical novels as a genre than to thorough considerations of the novels themselves. John R. Aherne, for example, argues that Benson’s historical novels are weak because “most of the characters are historical personages, a severe limitation on development of character, essential to the novel.”2 In the same vein, Hugh’s own brother, A.C. Benson, writes: “Moreover, I have a particular dislike of all historical novels. Fact is interesting; but I do not care for webs of imagination hung on pegs of fact. Historical novels ought to be like memoirs, and they are never in the least like memoirs; in fact, they are like nothing at all, except each other.”3

But to ignore Benson’s historical novels as mere vapid specimens of literature is to overlook an important point—their contribution to a larger revival in historical interest on the part of Catholics during the Edwardian period. This chapter will evaluate two of Benson’s historical novels, his first and his last—*By What Authority?* and *Oddsfish!*—and their characteristic themes in the context of this larger interest in history. While sharing many of the same concerns that his fellow Revivalist historians did, Benson opted to express these concerns through the medium of the novel rather than through the writing of “official” histories. This creative strategy allowed Benson a great deal of freedom in uniting history and theology, and it also succeeded in making digestible for the populace at large complex and controversial themes which, at the time, would have been considered subversive and “revisionist.”
In an essay entitled, "About Historians," originally published in 1936, G.K. Chesterton writes, "I am happy to say that there seems to be a real revival of interest in history." In reality, however, a "revival of interest in history" had been materializing among Catholic authors for quite some time prior to 1936, with Chesterton himself as a primary contributor. Abbot Gasquet and Dom Bede Camm led the charge at the conclusion of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth, continuing the work begun by John Lingard and John Henry Newman in the early years of the Victorian period. Hilaire Belloc, trained as an historian at Oxford, transported Catholic historical scholarship outside the cloistered halls of Oxbridge with works like Europe and the Faith, The French Revolution, Characters of the Reformation, and a four-volume History of England targeting the general populace. Additionally, Belloc published numerous essays on history and historiography in popular journals with titles like "Catholicism and History," "History Is With Us," "The Need for True History," "On the Method of History," "On the Reading of History," and "On a Method of Writing History." Beyond his essays, Belloc wrote a substantial number of historical biographies treating figures from Milton to Napoleon. Strongly influenced by his friendship with Belloc, Chesterton also authored numerous biographies, as well as A Short History of England, and essays like "On the Writing of History," "On Turnpikes and Medievalism," and "About Historians." The rising interest in Catholic historicism was extended by Christopher Dawson in the post-Edwardian years and finds a comprehensive and nuanced expression in the works of Herbert Butterfield, Professor of History at Cambridge, in the mid-twentieth century.
Indeed, the growth of Catholic historicism in Edwardian England was contemporaneous with an increased attention to history at large. In 1906, for example, the Historical Association was formed by a tiny group of scholars in Britain and was devoted to the pursuit of history. Ten years later, they published their first issue of *History.* Moreover, the sheer number of books published in the field belies the Edwardian concern with the past. In 1909, 913 books were published in the subjects of history and biography—the most published in this category in a single year dating back to 1870. Only the categories of Theology, Fiction, and Arts & Sciences outweighed those in history. 1911, 1912, 1913, and 1915 saw even greater increases in historical publications. 1906 saw the publication of Albert Schweitzer’s *The Quest for the Historical Jesus,* undoubtedly an offspring of the Higher Criticism which professed to locate the “real” Jesus of history apart from the supernaturalism of the New Testament. In 1908, Ernest Baker authored *History in Fiction,* an overview of historical fiction organized according to each novel’s setting, beginning with the Neolithic period and proceeding through the nineteenth century. Such a work, as Anthea Trodd observes, “was characteristic of the Edwardian period, and it is difficult to imagine its publication later.” General histories became the vogue, like H.W.C. Davis’s survey of the Middle Ages and *The History of the Freedom of Thought* by J.P. Bury, Chair of Modern History at Cambridge. In 1919, H.G. Wells completed *The Outline of History,* a tome which aspired to cover the whole of human civilization in a kind of universal narrative. History, it seems, was everywhere.

Into this historicist mêlée ventured Robert Hugh Benson with a rather unique weapon of choice—the historical novel. In August of 1907, Hilaire Belloc wrote a
letter to Hugh’s brother Arthur, expressing his interest in Hugh’s talent for historical novels and seeing in him a powerful opportunity for conveying the truth about the Reformation to the English people:

I will send books, as you suggest, to your brother. I have met him once or twice, and liked him enormously. His historical work has always seemed to me unique. It is quite on the cards that he will be the man to write some day a book to give us some sort of idea what happened in England between 1520 and 1560. No book I ever read has given me the slightest conception, and I have never had time to go to the original stuff myself. This is the most interesting of historical problems after the transformation of Gaul in the ninth and tenth centuries.12

It is somewhat unclear from Belloc’s statement whether he intends Hugh to write an official book of history, or whether he hopes Hugh will craft another historical novel treating Tudor England. (Hugh’s major “historical work” up to that point had been almost entirely historical novels—by 1907 he had published By What Authority?, The King’s Achievement, and The Queen’s Tragedy, as well as The History of Richard Raynal, Solitary.) Whatever the case, Belloc’s most provocative statement is that Benson’s “historical work has always seemed to me unique.” This evaluation is precisely the point at which an assessment of Benson must begin, and it is this uniqueness that calls for closer scrutiny.

On the whole, Benson was quite a success as an historical novelist. The historical novel is itself an interesting brand of story. It aims to combine actual historical events with fictional episodes in a seamless whole. It must remain true to the larger facts of the past while also providing the reader with a degree of narrative interest. Because the historical novel is such a hybrid of fact and imagination, questions of veracity inevitably come to the fore. To what degree can one believe an historical novel? Which events really happened, and which are authorial fabrications? Is it possible for a novelist to
achieve the perfect balance between historical reality and a good story? Will not an artist invariably favor a captivating plot over the interests of "dry" history? Is not any artistic vision of the past bound to skew historical truth in the smallest of ways? For the careful novelist, however, this balance appears attainable. For the artist who is first of all the careful historian, seeking in all cases to purge his work of historical inaccuracies and anachronisms, it is indeed possible for historical truth to be conveyed with narrative interest. In fact, the addition of small imaginative episodes to the larger historical narrative may actually work to bring the broad historical picture into clearer focus. Historical fact brings order to fiction, and in return, fiction breathes an otherwise absent life into dry historical facts. For the twenty-first century reader, envisioning the details of sixteenth century England and the dissolution of the monasteries under Thomas Cromwell may prove impossible. But by creating the fictional characters of Ralph and Chris Torridon and dropping them into the religio-political fray impacting sixteenth-century England, Benson brings the chaos of the past alive in a new way. As he describes the internal struggles of Chris in deciding whether to leave the monastery and acknowledge the authority of King Henry VIII over the Church, the larger historical struggle is magnified and vivified in a way which might otherwise be missed. The political battle for authority is distilled to the personal level as the reader observes the inner turmoil of a single individual as he is forced to decide to whom he will give his obedience; and consequently, the reader can identify with this political and spiritual tug-of-war and partake of it more fully, glimpsing briefly what the impact of sixteenth-century politics must have been on the mind of a faithful monk.
Furthermore, art has a power over readers that plain history sometimes does not. Few readers can resist the enchantment of a story; but it is more than common for people to complain about the dullness of history books, overloaded with facts, figures, and analyses. In the historical novel, however, the facts are presented, but they are presented with all the suspense and living color of a story. Herbert Butterfield recognizes and testifies to the power of historical novels to convey history to the reader in a unique way:

It is not exactly that history and fiction should dovetail into one another to produce a coherent whole; it is not simply that the story of the Popish Plot can be rounded off by a piece of invention, or the tragedy of Mary Queen of Scots depicted more fully and with more connectedness by the interspersion of imaginary episodes; but it is rather that in the historical novel history and fiction can enrich and amplify one another, and interpenetrate. They can grow into one another, each making the other more powerful. And they can make a special kind of appeal to the reader.¹³

Thus the historical novel, when done well, can illuminate history in ways that “official” histories oftentimes cannot. Art frequently reaches people on a level to which academic prose fails to penetrate.

The historical novel also demonstrates a flexibility in handling themes that rigid historical methodologies disallow, a flexibility of which Benson took full advantage. An historical vision, for example, attuned to the actions of God in history or to the developing hand of Providence may be excluded from “sensible” historical scholarship on the grounds that such things cannot be substantiated empirically. For Benson, throughout the entirety of history God could be found “at His work and at His labor till the evening.” “To one who has a grasp of Catholic history,” wrote Benson, “it is simply enchanting to see how the purpose of God runs through it all.”¹⁴ To claim that through history one can see “how the purpose of God runs through it all” is to find oneself at the
juncture of fact and faith. That a certain event occurred at a given time and in a given way may be established as fact; that the same event was part of the unfolding purpose of some supreme being can only be arrived at through faith. Here, however, is where Benson’s artistic rendering of history comes to the aid of his historical vision. The novelist, in contrast to the strict historian, has a good deal more freedom to incorporate such a vision of history. A novelist may stay true to the historical facts, and yet suggest through his art a particular interpretation of those facts that may not be acceptable in other venues. Hence, Benson can depict the reign of Charles II and his conversion to Catholicism with a good degree of historical accuracy while at the same time suggesting symbolically to readers that this conversion was the result of genuine spiritual forces—that it was the will of God. Art, like religion, includes within its sphere the pursuit of knowledge so often barred from the domain of purely empirical investigation.\(^{15}\)

Not surprisingly, some Revivalists stressed the power of a more artistic approach to history, calling for a more “picturesque” form of history writing. The Edwardian Revivalists frequently emphasized the notion of imaginative investment in the past—what Butterfield would later designate the “sympathetic imagination.”\(^{16}\) In typical fashion, the Revivalists took a Romantic concept and altered it according to their own purposes. Whereas the Romantics were sometimes accused of sacrificing historical accuracy to flights of the imagination, the Edwardian Revivalists sought to achieve a balance. They desired both truth and imagination, bound together in a harmonious whole. Throughout Chesterton and Belloc’s writings, for instance, are calls for a sort of history writing that is more exciting and less bland. Belloc envisions a new, more “living” approach to history writing:
Hence must arise a second or new method peculiar to those rare and probably ephemeral stages in the come and go of human affairs which we call "highly civilized": a method which should attempt a perfect resurrection of the distant past in its detail and atmosphere, and a presentation of it so living by a combination of minute information and an exact order in the marshalling of that information as shall give the reader life in the past. He meets dead people, as he would meet a living character. Their particular actions fit in with their general aspect and with all that they are as complex human organisms. Their institutions seem naturally to flow from the way they live and think and act.  

Belloc's call for a new type of history is based first and foremost on meticulous scholarship, and yet his desire for a presentation of history "so living" can only be achieved by an act of the imagination. This kind of history "reads more like what we are accustomed to see in journalism or in a novel than in history."  

Chesterton takes Belloc's vision a step further, underscoring the need for imaginative energy in the handling of the past:  

There are three ways of writing history. The old Victorian way, in the books of our childhood, was picturesque and largely false. The later and more enlightened habit, adopted by academic authorities, is to think they can go on being false so long as they avoid being picturesque. They think that, so long as a lie is dull, it will sound as if it were true. The third way is to use the picturesque (which is a perfectly natural instinct of man for what is memorable), but to make it a symbol of truth and not a symbol of falsehood. It is to tell the reader what the picturesque incident really meant, instead of leaving it meaningless or giving it a deceptive meaning. It is giving a true picture instead of a false picture; but there is not the shadow of a reason why a picture should not be picturesque.  

Here, Chesterton clearly rejects the unadulterated Romanticism he claims existed in many nineteenth-century historians who were heavy on raw fancy and light on fact. Truth, of course, is indispensable, but that truth need not be expressed in a colorless, insipid fashion. A balance can be achieved, a balance which Chesterton later clarifies with a concrete example. Writing of an historical battle, one historian "narrates it with the topographical clarity of a military history; but he cannot prevent it sounding like a
boy's adventure story." Both Belloc and Chesterton articulate the desire for a marriage of historical fact and imaginative presentation.

In anticipation of certain post-modern emphases, Benson extends this idea of imaginative presentation by stressing the role of the imagination as a psychological faculty in the reading and writing of history: “The historian cannot interpret events rightly unless he is keenly and emotionally interested in them; the sociologist cannot interpret events adequately unless he personally knows something of passion.” Unless an historian makes a volitional act of commitment and love toward the human events that he desires to interpret—which, in turn, is fundamentally an imaginative act being that the events themselves are not immediately present—accurate interpretation proves impossible. Any hope of unity or meaning in the historical narrative, by extension, is also impossible, since (and here again one must note the Romantic influence) it is the imagination that, in Coleridge’s famous phrase, enacts the “reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities.” The Romantics had earlier stressed the imagination as humankind’s foremost faculty for apprehending and experiencing the world and making meaning out of it, and here Benson asserts a similar notion regarding the discovery of meaning in history. Consequently, historical truth is itself at least partially dependent upon the imagination. In an article on the “theology of history” in The Everlasting Man, critic Joseph Schwartz also draws a similar conclusion about Chesterton’s emphasis on the place of the imagination in the interpretation of history. For Chesterton, like Benson, the imagination is necessary to discover the larger patterns of meaning in history. There is a need for an “everlasting enthusiasm for the object.”
The fact that Catholic authors were foregrounding the role of the imagination in writing history and calling for a more imaginative form of historical narrative is not unusual in light of their ministerial approach. Chesterton’s “picturesque” history would theoretically, at least, be more enjoyable to read, thus making it more accessible to the population at large. This communicability was a valued aspect of the Revivalists’ view of art. People must understand their history aright, and in order for this to occur successfully, Catholic historians would have to remain true to the facts while simultaneously meeting the population at its own level by offering an attractive package that people would truly desire to read.

Benson boldly answered the call of his fellow Revivalists for a more picturesque and palatable form of history by presenting it as art in the form of the historical novel. He worked hard to balance historical precision with an imaginative presentation. Indeed, his attention to historical detail was indefatigable. Benson took great pains to rid his historical novels of any anachronisms and inaccuracies, and if inaccuracies were discovered *ex post facto*, he promptly admitted them publicly.  

Hence, while Benson shared the same concerns as his co-religionists, he chose a different and potentially more effective means of reaching the general public.

*By What Authority?* and Revivalist Historicism

Benson’s first true novel, *By What Authority?*, is something of a behemoth. Its sheer length invests it with a sort of epic quality, as does its treatment of a period in English history so central to the country’s sense of national pride. Indeed, Benson’s intent is clearly to locate historical answers for some of the problems facing his own twentieth-
century society. A number of well-known historical events—including the issue of the Papal Bull releasing Britain’s Catholic subjects from the spiritual authority of Queen Elizabeth, the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and the trial of the Jesuit martyr Edmund Campion—form the backdrop to Benson’s story of the religious struggles of two neighboring families. One of these families, the Maxwells, is a longstanding and respected Catholic aristocratic family who now faces persecution under the reign of Elizabeth for its religious sympathies, including heavy fines and imprisonment. The family is comprised of Sir Nicholas and Lady Maxwell, their two sons James and Hubert, and Lady Torridon, the sister of Lady Maxwell and an ex-Benedictine nun who was ousted from her convent during the dissolution of the monasteries under Thomas Cromwell. The other family, the Norrises, is a Puritan family headed by Mr. Norris, an intellectual working on a scholarly book on the Eucharist. Mr. Norris’s wife has long since passed away, and he is left to raise his two children, Anthony and Isabel, by himself. Oddly enough, despite their religious differences, these two families share many pleasantries. Anthony and Hubert are good friends, regularly hunting together on the moors around their houses, and Isabel spends a great deal of time visiting with Lady Maxwell and Lady Torridon. A number of famous historical personages also have roles in the story to greater and lesser degrees, with appearances by the poet Sir Philip Sydney, Queen Elizabeth, and Edmund Campion. Sir Francis Drake and his piratical exploits, though not appearing firsthand, are nevertheless frequently alluded to throughout the text and play a role in the story indirectly. The novel is about one-third history, one-third theological debate, and one-third old-fashioned adventure and intrigue.
The basic story line is as follows: The action begins not long into the reign of Queen Elizabeth. England is fearful of an impending Spanish attack, and tempers are flaring regarding the religious sectarianism that has inflicted England since King Henry VIII. Early in the story, a budding romance between Hubert Maxwell and Isabel Norris is already evident, but their religious differences stand between them. Despite her cold Puritanism, Isabel’s “love for the Savior was ever romantic and passionate,” and she is troubled by the hatred bred of religious discord: “Why cannot we leave one another alone, and each worship God as we think fit?” she asks Hubert one evening (26). On a visit to London, however, Isabel receives her first taste of worship outside of the stark Puritan creed when she visits St. Paul’s Cathedral. It is also during this trip that she and her brother first witness Queen Elizabeth as she parades through the streets of London.

Soon after her return from London, Isabel is introduced at the house of the Maxwells to a close family friend, Mary Corbet, a Catholic lady-in-waiting to Queen Elizabeth. Mary is a bold, outspoken girl, wholly dedicated to the Catholic faith and finding Protestants to be “all hot and hard and glaring” (52). In a rather brash manner, Mary Corbet asks Isabel and Anthony to take her to see the Anglican church in the village. Much to the chagrin of Mr. Dent, the somewhat feebleminded rector, Mary backs him into a corner with her spirited denunciation of the iconoclasm of Anglicanism and the way the Anglicans have ruined the parish church by removing all vestiges of its Catholic heritage. Despite Mary’s effrontery, however, Isabel and Anthony are attracted to Mary and a friendship is begun.

Shortly thereafter, a mysterious rider arrives from London. He is a Catholic emissary of sorts, and Sir Nicholas, fancying himself a master spy, stupidly contrives to
call him “Mr. Stewart” and to give him lodging. A purveyor of Catholic devotional materials, Mr. Stewart is traveling illegally. Marion, the gregarious and self-righteous wife of the Anglican rector, Mr. Dent, gets word of Mr. Stewart’s visit and reports him to the authorities. On the night that Mr. Stewart is scheduled to leave, the authorities arrive at the Maxwells’ house and arrest Mr. Stewart and Sir Nicholas, hauling them off to prison. Anthony witnesses the taking of Mr. Stewart, and Isabel witnesses the forgiveness of Lady Maxwell as she chastises the people of the village for throwing the conniving Marion into a pond, inviting the humiliated rector’s wife into her own home.

Mr. Norris, perhaps fearing his daughter’s growing attachment to the Catholic Maxwells, decides to send Isabel to visit a Puritan community in Northampton. This visit, meant to reinforce the truth of Puritan dogmas, turns out to be a negative experience. While at Northampton, Isabel listens to a sermon preached by Dr. Carrington, a friend of her father’s with heavily Calvinist leanings. As she listens to the fiery sermon,

it was all so miserably convincing: her own little essays of intellect and flights of hopeful imagination were caught up and whirled away in the strong rush of this man’s argument; her timid expectancy that God really was Love, as she understood the word in the vision of her Saviour’s Person,—this was dashed aside as a childish fancy; the vision of the Father of Everlasting Arms receded into the realm of dreams; and instead there lowered overhead in this furious tempest of wrath a monstrous God with a stony Face and a stonier Heart, who was eternally either her torment or her salvation. (121)

Predictably, the harsh Calvinism of Carrington is no comfort to Isabel, and she is forced to reassess her own understanding of Christianity. Isabel’s experience with the sermon is followed by a stringent and vacuous Communion service which further exacerbates her already growing sense of doubt regarding the efficacy of Puritanism. To make
matters worse, Isabel receives news of her father's death shortly before leaving Northampton. Strangely, Mr. Norris leaves the care of Isabel to Lady Torridon, who moves into the Norris house to take care of Isabel.

After the death of his father, Anthony travels once more to London to assume a position as Gentleman of the Horse for the Archbishop of Canterbury. While there, he develops an affection for the old Archbishop, and he also renew his acquaintance with Mary Corbet. Working at Lambeth instills in Anthony a growing sense of nationalism and pride in his country. However, at the request of Lady Maxwell, Anthony visits an incarcerated Catholic friend of the Maxwells, a Mr. Buxton, with whom he discusses the universality of the Catholic Church versus the limiting (from Buxton's viewpoint) provincialism of the Anglican fellowship. Buxton wins the rhetorical victory, and Anthony is left pondering the constraints of the English Church.

Meanwhile, the relationship between Hubert and Isabel continues to grow. All expect that they will be married as soon as Isabel converts to Catholicism—an event that seems likely at any time. Mistress Torridon—the mystical contemplative of the story (Benson always seems to have one)—seeks to answer Isabel's numerous questions about Catholic doctrine. Isabel's interest in the Catholic Church is clearly growing, and the conversations between the girl and the old nun "were sufficient to show Mistress Margaret, like tiny bubbles on the surface of a clear stream, the swift movement of this limpid soul that she loved so well" (161). Hubert, however, announces that he has signed on with Sir Francis Drake to sail the seas as a defender of the Crown. After Hubert is some time at sea, Mistress Torridon receives a shocking letter from him declaring that he has converted to Protestantism, thinking that this will be good news to
Isabel and that the marriage can proceed unobstructed. Isabel, though, has seen the truth of the Catholic faith and makes a courageous decision to give up Hubert and submit to the Church.

Simultaneously but separately, Anthony has begun on his own path to Rome. He gains access to the trial for alleged treason of Edmund Campion, the Jesuit missionary to England, and is amazed by his intellectual acumen, his gentle demeanor, and his inner confidence in the truth of his position. When Campion is sentenced to death, Anthony attends the execution, but significantly, “He had come, he knew, to see not an execution but a martyrdom” (215). Not long after, Anthony is lured into betraying his old family friend, James Maxwell—who has now become a Catholic priest. An ex-servant of the Maxwell’s, Joseph Lackington, has risen up the hierarchy in service to the queen and maintains a passionate hatred for Catholics. Thinking he is actually saving James from capture (Catholic priests educated on the continent were not allowed in England by law), Anthony actually contributes to James’s arrest. James is then racked and thrown into the Tower to await his punishment.

Anthony, feeling guilty, contacts Mary Corbet and manages to gain an audience with Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth to plead for James’s life. Anthony has become quite a gallant young man with all the charms of the courtier, and he acquits himself well with Elizabeth. Elizabeth agrees to set James free, banishing him from England. Anthony’s own journey toward Catholicism continues as well. As it turns out, Mary Corbet is a dear friend of Mr. Buxton, and through this mutual friendship Anthony is able to arrange a retreat at Mr. Buxton’s country house. Here, in hopes of finding the truth amidst the religious pluralism of the day, he agrees to embark on the spiritual exercises of St.
Ignatius in an effort to put himself at peace. Anthony does so under the direction of Father Robert, who later turns out to be the famous priest Father Persons, author of the “Christian Directory.” Not surprisingly, Anthony, like his sister, decides to submit to the Catholic Church, arriving at the conclusion that “long he had lived in the cold and the dark!” and that he had been “saved from freezing by the warmth of grace that managed to survive the chill about him” (321). And upon doing so, Anthony decides that he must become a priest.

Anthony returns home to tell his sister that he has become a Catholic, only to find that she herself has already done the same. There is celebration at the Maxwells at the news of both Norris children coming to the faith, and Mistress Torridon declares with joy to Anthony and Isabel, “You look like a pair of lovers” (325). This, in fact, is true—both are now lovers of Christ and His Church. Isabel chooses to accompany Anthony to seminary on the continent since traveling with a woman will afford him an added degree of protection.

A great deal occurs in the meantime while Anthony and Isabel are in France. Hubert distinguishes himself in the service of Francis Drake, and subsequently marries another woman after being rejected by Isabel. He then takes over his father’s estate. On the national level, the Spanish Armada is defeated by the English, and there is celebration among both Protestants and Catholics all around. Eventually, Anthony and Isabel return from the continent to begin their ministry in England. Because of laws against Catholic priests, however, Anthony is in constant peril of his life. After some time as Mr. Buxton’s chaplain, as well as some time traveling to the furthest corners of England saying Mass, Anthony himself falls into the hands of the authorities and is thrown in
prison. In the process of his capture, Mary Corbet, who had briefly become a member of Anthony's traveling party, is accidentally killed when a man opens fire on Anthony, hitting Mary instead. Anthony rides back to help Mary, and while administering the last rites, he is apprehended by the priest-hunters.

Due to his smooth performance during his previous audience with Elizabeth and because he was a friend of Mary's, the Queen requests a meeting with Anthony. During the meeting, Elizabeth offers to pardon Anthony if he will renounce the Catholic faith. Anthony struggles momentarily when he thinks of the pain of the rack, but in a moment of pure faith, he refuses the amnesty offered by the queen and is therefore doomed to death. Anthony is racked and dies in his cell. The novel ends with a new day dawning (literally and figuratively) as Isabel walks out of Anthony's prison cell. "The glory in her eyes was supreme," and the reader feels that, despite Anthony's death, both Isabel and Anthony are victorious in the eyes of God.

*By What Authority?* is a Catholic historicist *tour de force*, embodying most of the major themes proclaimed by Revivalist historians during Benson's day. Most prominently, the novel is emblematic of the Revivalist thesis that the sixteenth century is a critical turning point in English history and the source of much of the modern fragmentation of society—spiritually and culturally. After more than three centuries of Catholic oppression in England (Catholic civil rights were not restored until 1829), a majority of the English citizenry had rather uncritically embraced the notion that the Reformation had been a decisive victory in favor of progress in the course of British history. In contrast to this dominant view, the Revivalists held to an interpretation of the
sixteenth century as a period of social and spiritual disintegration when the religious and cultural fabric of the nation had begun to unravel.

It should be noted at the outset that in many ways, the historical arguments of the Revivalists were ahead of their time. It would take another 50 or more years before major historians began to lend credence to the interpretations advanced by Edwardian Catholic historians, and even longer before many of their arguments were embraced widely. Revivalist views of history clearly formed a minority in Edwardian England. Since the sixteenth century, Catholics had endured harsh oppression and a lack of civil rights, suffering through the famous penal laws. Catholics had watched as their materials of devotion had been made illegal, their priests hunted down, their churches taken over by Protestants, and their fellow Catholics executed for alleged treason to the Crown. Numerous regulations had been instituted which regularly found reason to fine and imprison Catholics all over England. Catholic civil rights were legally restored in 1829, and the Catholic population had been on the rise since the mid-nineteenth century. A religious census in 1851 estimated the total number of Catholics in Britain to be approximately 900,000. By 1891, Catholics were figured at 1,357,000, and by 1913 at just over 1,793,000. But Catholics still constituted a minority in a country whose religious population was largely Anglican and Nonconformist, and whose general population was becoming more secularized all the time. This is significant in that while the ministerial approach of the Edwardian Revivalists was grounded in a spiritual belief concerning the fallen nature of humankind and its need for redemption, it is not unlikely that the vehemence with which these authors prosecuted their viewpoints was catalyzed by a sense of minority status. The vast majority of the English at the turn of the
twentieth century unconsciously embraced the Reformation as a positive moment in the history of the world. Fighting against this powerful current were the Catholic Revivalists—driven by a sense of purpose and motivated by a belief that they were the last hold-outs of a lost and glorious European order—presenting a “revisionist” view of the Reformation as a regrettable moment of national apostasy.

The essence of the Revivalist viewpoint finds its most concise and intelligent expression in a compelling work published in 1931 by Herbert Butterfield called *The Whig Interpretation of History*; and though obviously post-Edwardian, he nevertheless captures the main thrust of his predecessors’ arguments. In this seminal work, Butterfield treats “the tendency in many historians to write on the side of Protestants and Whigs, to praise revolutions provided they have been successful, to emphasise certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present.” Butterfield cuts to the core by problematizing the unrecognized but pervasive underlying assumptions of many historians to read into history their own myths of development; and by extension, to misread the past as a mere function of the present. Thus, for whig historians, the Reformation is good because from the point of view of progress, it seems to have lifted humanity out of the oppression of the Dark Ages. It was a landmark event in the evolution of humankind. Inherent in Butterfield’s argument is the further idea that, for whig historians, the past is somehow less valuable than the present since it represents an earlier stage in humanity’s development; or perhaps more precisely, the past is valuable only in reference to what succeeds it. Our primary interest in the Dark Ages, the whig historian suggests, is the manner in which it brings greater glory to the Renaissance and Reformation by playing
the foil. Understanding the Dark Ages is important insofar as it shows us how far we’ve come.

The seeds of Butterfield’s more mature argument are present in the thought of the Revivalists. Chesterton, for instance, writes:

For though today is always today and the moment is always modern, we are the only men in all history who fell back upon bragging about the mere fact that today is not yesterday. I fear that some in the future will explain it by saying that we had precious little else to brag about. For, whatever the medieval faults, they went with one merit. Medieval people never worried about being medieval; and modern people do worry horribly about being modern.

To begin with, note the queer, automatic assumption that it must always mean throwing mud at a thing to call it a relic of medievalism. Chesterton, like Butterfield, questions the notion that what is old is necessarily of poorer quality than that which is new. He addresses the issue even more cleverly in his novel, *The Ball and the Cross*. The story of an impending duel—originally staged after Evan MacIan, a Catholic, smashes the window of John Turnbull’s (an atheist) printing shop for an article blaspheming the Virgin Mary—*The Ball and the Cross* is an allegory of the conflict between strict rationalism and faith. In the midst of one of the many arguments between MacIan and Turnbull, MacIan notes the importance of the past to true progress:

No, the great Freethinker, with his genuine ability and honesty, does not in practice destroy Christianity. What he does destroy is the Freethinker who went before. Freethought may be suggestive, it may be inspiriting, it may have as much as you please of the merits that come from vivacity and variety. But there is one thing Freethought can never be by any possibility—Freethought can never be progressive. It can never be progressive because it will accept nothing from the past; it begins every time again from the beginning; and it goes every time in a different direction. All the rational philosophers have gone along different roads, so it is impossible to say which has gone furthest.
Thus, the past is not only valuable, but it is also indispensable for true progress to occur. One must value the Middle Ages not simply because society has emerged from them, but because they may still hold something even more valuable—a timeless truth of some sort—upon which a nation may continue to build. Many, claimed Chesterton, believed “that we have got all the good that can be got out of the ideas of the past,” but in fact, “we have not got all the good out of them.”

Benson takes this idea that authentic progress must be rooted in the past one step further by linking it explicitly with the past of the Catholic Church. Real progress, argues Benson, can only occur under the tutelage and guidance of Catholicism.

Mr. Charles Devas, in his brilliant book, *The Key to the World’s Progress*, points out by an argument too long to reproduce here that, so far as the word progress means anything, it denotes that kind of development and civilization which only makes its appearance, and only is sustained under the influence of Catholicism. . . . [The book] is also of service in indicating the probability that that same religion should accompany and inspire progress in the future as it has in the past.

The whig interpretation of history, believed the Revivalists, was everywhere the dominant one, and much of the time and energy devoted by Catholic authors to the writing of history was aimed at exposing whig fallacies regarding the Middle Ages and the Reformation. A recurring theme in the writings of all the Edwardian Revivalists was that it was Catholicism that had made Europe what it was socially, culturally, politically, spiritually, and intellectually, and that the advent of the Reformation had begun the decline that resulted in the confusion and helplessness they perceived in society around them. This thesis is expressed most succinctly in a line from Belloc’s general history, *Europe and the Faith*: “Europe will return to the Faith, or she will perish. The Faith is Europe. And Europe is the Faith.” For Belloc and the Revivalists, the European unity
maintained by the Roman Empire, along with the Empire’s sense of vitality and its establishments, had been saved and retained by the Catholic Church. In contrast to other prevailing interpretations of the time which posited either that Catholicism had ruined the Roman Empire or that the Empire had been overrun by barbarous Germans (which, thought Belloc, were strangely reminiscent of nineteenth century Protestants), Belloc presented Catholicism as the deliverer and redeemer of Europe.

Understandably, Belloc was especially concerned about the state of Britain in a post-Catholic world. As John P. McCarthy explains it:

Belloc devoted a good part of his . . .writing efforts to presenting a distinct view of English history, emphasizing its essentially Roman and Catholic roots and viewing the Reformation and its aftermath as a departure from the foundation rather than as the logical climax of inherent tendencies as the prevailing popular historical consciousness was then holding.39

Indeed, in an article entitled, “How England Was Made Protestant,” Belloc exposes what he calls the “Elizabethan myth”:

Official history represents the great religious revolution of the period 1560-1603 as having the nation behind it. It represents it as the action of the English people, spontaneous and congenial to the English character. After Elizabeth’s accession a remnant called “the Catholics” are represented as having formed an exceptional body which rapidly dwindled, and England is presented as anti-Catholic well before the middle of Elizabeth’s reign.

This view, contends Belloc, is that which all English “get in [their] novels, newspapers, school books, university lectures, and, worst and most dangerous of all, [their] examination papers.” In short, it is the view that permeates the Edwardian English culture, and it is a dangerous view,

For if men believe that their fathers were by nature opposed to the Faith and welcomed the change, as they are commonly taught, they will get a conception of their own selves entirely false. They will not know “the pit
out of which they were digged." They will not know the stuff out of which they are made.40

Belloc here exhibits a belief in the power of history to effect social and moral changes in people. Once the English people understand the truth of history—in this case, that the Reformation and subsequent suppression of Catholics in England was not the innocuous event that most historians would have one believe—then a more complete conception of national and personal identity can be forged. People will “know the stuff out of which they are made.” “In a word, it is better to have no history at all,” warns Belloc, “than to have history which misconceives what were the general direction and the large sweeps of thought in the immediate and the remoter past.”

Chesterton mirrors Belloc’s views in A Short History of England, though he projects himself as a bit more broadminded than does Belloc, acknowledging both the positive and negative effects of the Reformation. In his introduction, Chesterton discusses these effects, asserting that in many ways modern human beings fail to match the overall vigor and completeness of their medieval progenitors:

A fair statement of the transition from the Middle Ages would, I think, be something like this. With that change the world improved many things, but not in the one thing needful; the one thing that can make them all one. It did not become more universal; it became much less universal; for it only picked up and polished the fragments of a shattered universe. In other words, the improvement was the sort of improvement which is seen when medicine becomes purely specialist or football becomes purely professional. The medieval man was really ruder and more ineffective in many ways; but his outlook on life was really larger and more human. . . . Thus the Reformation intensified religion into sects; but it was no longer possible to reconcile men through religion. . . . In a hundred ways human beings had lost the conception of a complete humanity.41

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Benson clearly, and not surprisingly, shared his fellow Revivalists' distaste with the whig interpretation of history, as well as a belief that the source of Christendom's present troubles in England could be traced back to the sixteenth century.

The modern thinkers take their rise, practically, from the religious upheaval of the sixteenth century. At that period of Christendom the establishment of the principle of Nationalism in religion struck the first blow against the idea of a final revelation guaranteed by an infallible authority; for the substitution, as a court of appeal, of a written Book for a living voice could only be a transitional step towards the acceptance by each individual, in whose hands the Book is placed, of himself as the interpreter of it. Congregationalism followed Nationalism, and Individualism (or pure Protestantism) Congregationalism; and since both the Nation and the Congregation disclaimed absolute authority, little by little there came into existence the view that "true" religion was that system of belief which each individual thought out for himself; and, since these individuals were not found to agree together, "Truth" finally became more and more subjective; until there was established the most characteristically modern form of thought—namely, that Truth was not absolute at all, and that what was true and imperative for one was not true nor imperative for another.43

This passage can really be viewed as a kind of rough outline for the historical context of *By What Authority?*. The passage is also a concise summary of the basic viewpoint of the Catholic Revivalists en masse. There existed little difference between the various Revivalists in their interpretation of the events of the sixteenth century.

Throughout his novel, Benson presents the quintessential Revivalist view of the Reformation as an event that had weakened England, not strengthened it, and in doing so, challenges customary notions of the Reformation as a moment of national progress. Mary Corbet, as she asks Isabel and Anthony to tour the Anglican church with her, comments sarcastically on the effects of the Reformation when she finds the church is locked:

"Come, my child," she said, "and you too, Master Anthony, if you can spare time to escort us; and take me to the church. I want to see it."
"The church!" said Isabel, "that is locked: we must go to the Rectory."
"Locked!" exclaimed Mary, "and is that part of the blessed Reformation? Well, come, at any rate." (53)

In contrast to this, the pure Catholicism of the people of northern England is almost idyllic:

It was pleasant, too, to go, as they [Anthony and Isabel] did, from great house to great house, and find the old pre-Reformation life of England in full vigor; the whole family present at Mass so often as it was said, desirous of the sacraments, and thankful for the opportunities of grace that the arrival of the priest afforded. (391)

This romantic relic of a Catholic past lives its edenic existence apart from the inchoate religious state of England; and here one sees the same belief in the intrinsic power and robustness of the rustic, medieval Catholic present in Chesterton's *A Short History of England*. Although Benson attempts to give certain elements of Protestantism their due throughout the novel, there remains little doubt that, in the end, Benson is about the business of constructing a Revivalist vision of history. Catholicism is what made England what it was, and to suggest that its abandonment was a good thing is unthinkable, both for Benson and his staunch Catholic character, Sir Nicholas:

What especially he could not get off his mind was that this was the Old Religion that was proscribed. That England for generations had held the Faith, and that then the Faith and all that it involved had been declared unlawful, was to him iniquity unfathomable. He could well understand some new upstart sect being persecuted, but not the Old Religion. He kept on returning to this. (70)

And so does Benson. Again and again the reader is led to see the Reformation not as a moment of glorious human advancement, as the whig historian would have it, but as an aberration that ran contrary to a European order that had been in place for nearly 1500 years.

Nor is the Reformation a moment of English advancement either.
Thus, in every department, in home and foreign policies, in art and literature, and in religious independence, England was rising and shaking herself free; the last threads that bound her to the Continent were snapped by the Reformation, and she was standing with her soul, as she thought, awake and free at last, conscious of her beauty and her strength, ready to step out at last before the world, as a dominant and imperious power.

Thus believes Anthony Norris until his meeting with Mr. Buxton, who convinces him that only the Catholic Church can provide true Christian unity as Christ encouraged—"one visible kingdom, gathered out of every nation and tongue and people" (173). Only by returning to the Catholic faith will England avoid the division and confusion that was already beginning to taint her existence. "Europe will return to the Faith," said Belloc, "or she will perish."

The central theme of Benson's novel, embodied in the title—*By What Authority?*—also deserves close scrutiny. Through his exploration of this theme, Benson aims to pinpoint the historical source of the liberal inclusiveness which he perceived in the Edwardian Church of England, as well as the Edwardian trend towards individualistic, self-devised systems of truth. For Benson personally, the lack of a central authority in the Anglican Church was a main factor in his own conversion to Rome. Subsequent to his conversion, the issue of authority became one of his main tenets in arguing for the truth of Catholicism. In a 1907 article entitled, "The State of Religion in England," Benson addresses this lack of central authority in the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England, a group Benson denotes as the "Ritualists":

The Ritualists, that is to say, while acknowledging that the sweep of the Church's range must ever whirl wider and wider, covering this ground and that which in primitive ages was outside her province, suffer from this fatal and irremediable defect, that they have no immovable central authority from which the whirling may be controlled. They acknowledge neither Canterbury nor Rome as their fixed pivot; they have too much
knowledge for one and too little for the other; and the result is that their organization covers indeed a quantity of ground...but it swings loosely here and there at random, and is at one time Tractarian and severe, at another Ultramontane and Belgian; at one time Roman, and another Sarum; there is neither rest nor security; they have no certain guides.

Benson discusses two other “schools” of religious thought outside of the Catholic Church in England, and concludes that they all represent a “failure to meet modern questions”; and as a result, the English people display “an attitude of bewilderment” about religious issues. Add to this the hodgepodge of individualized “secular religions” abounding in Edwardian Britain, and the confused mindset of the English population is increasingly apparent.

By What Authority?, then, is Benson’s fictional treatment of the source of England’s religious “bewilderment.” Without the Catholic Church to provide the country with spiritual and cultural unity, people are left to wander aimlessly in search of truth. Protestant Christianity is unacceptable because it is the very source of the individualism that Benson detests. Even the bumbling Anglican rector, Mr. Dent, seems to grasp the ominous effects of jettisoning the Old Faith:

But it seemed rather to such sober men as the Rector that the principle of authority had been lost with the rejection of the Papacy, and that anarchy rather than liberty had prevailed in the National Church. In darker moments it seemed to him and his friends as if any wild fancy was tolerated, so long as it did not approximate too closely to the Old Religion. (79-80)

Instead of the desired freedom, implies Benson, the suppression of Catholicism succeeded only in opening the floodgates of relativism, and social and spiritual anarchy. Anthony, too, must come to terms with what a loss of central authority means for him spiritually. In a conversation with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Anthony repeats a prophecy made by Mr. Buxton about the future of Anglicanism.
Anthony could not help thinking of Mr. Buxton's prediction that the Church of England had so repudiated authority that in turn her own would one day be repudiated.

"A Papist prisoner, your Grace," he said, "said to me the other day that this would be sure to come; that the whole principle of Church authority had been destroyed in England; and that the Church of England would more and more be deserted by her children; for that there was no necessary centre of unity left, now that Peter was denied." (210)

Here again, the hero of the story touches upon the major theme of the novel—the loss of spiritual authority would mean the unraveling of truth itself.

Benson's examination of authority in the novel is a complex one operating on many levels. On a basic level, questions of authority are always concerned with some kind of spiritual authority and its relationship to a temporal kind of authority. Still, the different manifestations of this conflict are not homogenous. There is the spiritual conflict between Catholicism, Anglicanism, and Puritanism with their varying doctrines of salvation, worship, and church government. On the abstract level, one sees this in the way that Benson packs his text full of direct theological discussion, only occasionally cloaked loosely in dialogue. These episodes are too numerous to treat at length, but a single instance in which the narrator examines the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism is sufficient to convey the tone of the remaining examples in the book. It is here quoted at length:

The arguments for Catholicism burned pitilessly clear now; every line and feature in them stood distinct and hard. Catholicism, it appeared to her [Isabel], alone had the marks of the Bride, visible unity, visible Catholicity, visible Apostolicity, visible Sanctity—there they were, the seals of the most High God. She flung herself back furiously into the Protestantism from which she had been emerging; there burned in the dark before her the marks of the Beast, visible disunion, visible nationalism, visible Erastianism, visible gulfs where holiness should be: that system in which now she could never find rest again glared at her in all its unconvincing incoherence, its lack of spirituality, its adulterous union with the civil power instead of the pure wedlock Spouse of Christ.
She wondered once more how she dared to have hesitated so long; or dared to hesitate still. (178)

There is an essential difference between Catholicism and all other forms of Christianity to Benson, and this kind of theological digression by the narrator is a common feature of the novel as Benson attempts to establish the Catholic Church as the only supreme authority in spiritual matters.

This abstract level underlies the individual one; and therefore, the reader witnesses this conflict of authority in the spiritual journeys of Isabel and Anthony, especially in that of Anthony. Anthony begins as the son of a Puritan minister, distant even from the Anglo-Catholic wing of the English Church. He then takes a job at Lambeth Palace, moving more solidly into the center of the Anglican Church. Finally, however, Anthony perceives the truth of the Catholic Church and faithfully goes to his death in Her name.

Also on a personal level, human beings are forced to choose between the authority of the self and the authority of God, another favorite Bensonian theme. Isabel, for example, must choose between her human love for Hubert and her love for God.

And then on the other side all her human nature cried out for Hubert—Hubert—Hubert. There he stood by her in fancy, day and night, that chivalrous, courteous lad, who had been loyal to her so long; had waited so patiently; had run to her with such dear impatience; who was so wholesome, so strong, so humble to her; so quick to understand her wants, so eager to fulfil [sic.] them; so bound to her by associations; so fit a mate for the very differences between them. And now these two claims were no longer compatible; in his very love for her he had ended that possibility. (179)

Isabel, of course, makes the proper choice in Benson’s view, sacrificing her dreams for Catholicism just as Anthony later sacrifices his very life.

This primary spiritual conflict plays itself out in a number of further ways. In sixteenth-century England, the spiritual struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism
had distinct political dimensions, for, as the narrator puts it, “What was true of politics was also true of religious matters, for the two were inextricably mingled” (140). There is therefore the battle for temporal allegiance between the mandates of the Pope and the laws of Queen Elizabeth. This tenuous relationship between conscience and queen, church and state, is represented symbolically early in the novel as Anthony and Isabel watch the procession of Queen Elizabeth through the streets of London. Immediately preceding the queen’s entourage is another parade—this one of a condemned heretic (“He said Jesus Christ was not in heaven” [39]) on his way to the gallows. The mischievous crowd of onlookers takes up the mocking chant, “Way for the King’s Grace! Way for the King’s Grace!” Men form lines around the transgressor’s cart “like gentleman ushers” in parody of this “red-robed king of anguish” (39). The stark contrast between the downtrodden heretic, beaten bloody by the whip of the hangman, and the pomp and circumstance of Elizabeth’s caravan is dramatic. The state clearly has the power and means to impose its will upon the bodies of men in an attempt to influence their consciences. This juxtaposition of faith and politics foreshadows for Anthony and Isabel the conflict they themselves will have to resolve. Moreover, this scene is laced with irony as it is a poignant embodiment of the very confusion of authority that the novel interrogates. On the one hand, this man is representative of the individualized belief systems that are permitted to prevail in the absence of a central religious authority; on the other hand, however, Elizabeth, as an increasingly Protestant queen, would theoretically value this man’s freedom of choice in matters of faith. Paradoxically, though, Elizabeth (as the figurehead of the state) executes this man nonetheless. This very rich scene signifies the futile and contradictory struggle to maintain order in the
absence of true authority. The crowd’s parody of royal majesty only further suggests that perhaps Elizabeth herself is little different than the heretic that forms the vanguard of her train.

The political aspect of the religious controversy manifests itself time and again throughout the novel as various characters endeavor to decide their loyalties to God and/or country. Mr. Buxton and the converted Anthony regret the impact that the failed Spanish invasion will have on the place of Catholicism in England. "The national spirit is higher than ever," [Mr. Buxton] said, "and it will be the death of Catholicism here for the present" (382). The Catholic characters throughout the story declaim the rising tide of nationalism in England time and again as a threat to the trans-national unity of the Catholic Church. Here, again, is a common Revivalist theme. The Revivalists often bewailed the negative effects of overgrown nationalism. As McCarthy points out, nationalism became one of Belloc’s favorite punching bags. For Belloc, nationalism was "a sort of murder of Christendom," the institution of a secular authority in place of a religious one. Nationalism, in turn, "interferes with the universality of Catholicism," and in doing so, "lends to national ends functions which are essentially religious, such as the teaching of morals, the presentation of true history, . . . [and] above all the general education of the young."^46

At the same time that Belloc and his co-religionists gloried in the trans-national unity of the Catholic Church, however, they were also patently English in nature. The indisputable focus of their energies was England. It is significant, for example, that all of Benson’s historical novels treat English history alone, and both Belloc and Chesterton invested themselves wholeheartedly in the study of England’s past. Also present in
Belloc's writings is the idea that part of history's function is to bolster the social fabric of society. Belloc writes, for instance, that "upon the right reading of history the right use of citizenship in England to-day will depend." Elsewhere he argues: "A society whose history is neglected grows weak. A society whose history is false becomes diseased." The Revivalists, then, seem to have displayed a kind of tempered national pride. They were patriotic, but they were not provincial.

Consequently, Benson seems at pains in *By What Authority?* to vindicate Catholics from the charge of being unpatriotic. Despite the fact that Spain is a Catholic country, Catholic characters like Sir Nicholas do not readily embrace the coming of Philip as savior of England. Benson offers here the balanced view that nationalism is dangerous primarily when it transcends one's loyalty to God and Church. Hubert, Anthony's foil in the novel, is the foremost example of this. Although he converts partially to win the hand of Isabel, he refuses to return to Catholicism based more on the spirited sense of patriotism he gains as a result of his adventures with Sir Francis Drake. Drake, a national hero, is Protestant; therefore, Protestantism is good enough for Hubert. Concurrently, though, patriotism is acceptable when it is subjected to the guidance of God. Again, Benson and the Revivalists, while being vehemently pro-Catholic, were also passionately English through and through.

One final facet of Benson's treatment of authority in the novel is especially pertinent to the subject of the present chapter—namely, the authority the Church is able to offer in interpreting history. When *By What Authority?* was published in 1904, Catholic historians were embroiled in bitter ongoing debates with non-Catholic historians regarding the actions of the Catholic Church in history. Secular and Protestant historians...
painted a picture which presented the Catholic Church as a corrupt and oppressive institution. Catholic historians, in turn, were bent on saving the Church's image. Predictably, a battle of history ensued which led to accusations of poor methodology and scholarship on both sides. For example, non-Catholic historian G.G. Coulton (who would later take Benson to task for The King's Achievement) laments what he believes to be the horrendous falsifying of history at the hands of Catholics merely to win converts. In an essay revealingly titled, "Catholic Truth and Historical Truth" (implying that the two are somehow mutually exclusive), he writes:

Some converts think to find their justification in the sober verdict of history. This, after all, is the real and final battle-ground between rival faiths. "By their fruits ye shall know them," said our Lord; and, while some will always be guided by random prejudices, others by unsubstantial speculations, the most convinced adherents of any religious system will always be those who feel it truest at present because they know it to have been most fruitful of good in the past. This the modern Romanist frequently recognizes; and here again he finds a terrible temptation in his traditional claim to a more exclusive possession of the truth than is possible in this mortal world. The logic of his Church...drives him into a corner in which ruin hangs above him by a single thread; and the exaggerated sense of his danger hypnotises not only his intellectual but too often his moral faculties. The same cruel sense of inward weakness behind the imposing bastions of the past: the same lurking disbelief in the power of his own "truths" to wither and destroy, in every honest mind, the "errors" which he attributes to all other denominations—these, which drove him in the past to fire and blood, drive him too often in our more peaceful days to the most flagrant violations of history.\[^{50}\]

Catholics such as Belloc, on the other hand, believed that without Catholicism as a guiding light, history could not be interpreted accurately. Thus, Belloc ripostes:

Nor is this misfortune [the inability to see continuity in the history of Europe] from which the non-Catholic historian suffers a positive and therefore a malicious thing. There is but rarely deliberate mis-statement. There is not commonly present a distinct and analysable bias, but what we get from the 2nd century to the 16th is a sort of disorder: the magnifying of small things at the expense of the great: the lending to

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European society of motives which that society had not, and often of motives which no society could ever have had: the telescoping up of many generations so that the factor of time is obscured or eliminated, and in general a complete moral distortion of the story to be told.\textsuperscript{51}

In the two passages here excerpted, Belloc perhaps appears to treat the matter with a bit more kindness and gentility, claiming that the non-Catholic historian's errors are not willful and therefore "malicious," but that such historians are handicapped nonetheless. (Here again one sees where faith affects interpretation of the facts.)

Benson also weighs in on this issue in \textit{By What Authority}? While observing the trial of the Jesuit Edmund Campion and struggling with his own issues of faith, it suddenly dawns on Anthony that history can be used to support both the Protestant and Catholic claims to divine truth. Such an epiphany, in turn, is capable of driving one quite easily to the abandonment of history altogether as a vehicle for truth, much as it had done for so many of the skeptical historians of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{52} Anthony therefore finds himself teetering on the precipice of total skepticism until he realizes that in the Catholic Church is found an authority equipped to place history in perspective, to bring meaning to the narrative as a whole.

[Anthony] himself was far from easy in his mind. He had been studying Campion's "Ten Reasons" more earnestly than ever, and was amazed to find that the very authorities to which Dr. Jewel [the Protestant interrogator] deferred, namely, the Scriptures interpreted by Fathers and Councils and illustrated by History, were exactly Campion's authorities, too; and that the Jesuit's appeal to them was no less confident than the Protestant's. That fact had, of course, suggested the thought that if there were no further living authority in existence to decide between these two scholars, Christendom was in a poor position. When doctors differed, where was the layman to turn? . . . For the first time he was beginning to feel a logical and spiritual necessity for an infallible external Judge in matters of faith; and that the Catholic Church was the only system that professed to supply it. (198)
History must be safeguarded by the authority of the Church, for it is only through the lens of the Church that it can be interpreted accurately. This, too, is the explanation for Belloc's claim, quoted earlier, that "the presentation of true history" is, at base, "a religious function," not a national one, as well as his hint that the non-Catholic historian inevitably suffers from a bias in his reading of the historical narrative.

Without a doubt, *By What Authority?* is a classic example of Revivalist historicism in novel form; but the novel goes one step further by positing an implicit critique of prevailing Edwardian readings of history that prioritized determinism over free will—specifically, Marxism and Darwinism. The appeal of Socialism during the Edwardian era is a well-established fact. Various forms of Socialism attracted many of the great minds of the time, including G.B. Shaw and H.G. Wells, not to mention the thousands of less distinguished Englishmen who answered the call of this attractive secular religion. Darwinism, too, exerted a powerful influence on the minds of those living in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was a concept that was transferred readily from the field of biological science to sociology and even, in some cases, fields as apparently unrelated to science as ecclesiology; and as a result, it penetrated many diverse regions of the Edwardian consciousness. Inherent in the doctrines of Socialism and Darwinism is a specific interpretation of history; in fact, without its unique interpretation of history, Socialism and Darwinism would cease to exist. Both of these systems lean heavily towards a deterministic version of history. Whereas Christianity works to reconcile the forces of free will and determinism in the course of history, both Darwin and Marx proffer historical visions in which humankind progresses apart from
the conscious will of individuals. Marx, for instance, writes in Part I of *The German Ideology*:

"The social structure and the State are continually evolving out of the life process of definite individuals, but of individuals, not as they may appear in their own or other people’s imaginations, but as they *really* are; i.e., as they operate, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will."\(^5^4\)

Thus Marx emphasizes the conditioning forces of history operating independently of the will of individuals. Paradoxically, Marx seems to allow an element of will to enter his vision when it comes to initiating his version of the apocalypse—the socio-political revolution that will liberate mankind from class oppression—but on the whole, both Marx and Darwin favor a view of history that depicts man as part of a larger machine.\(^5^5\)

It is significant, too, that in both of these systems of thought, God is conspicuously absent from the equation.\(^5^6\)

The vast majority of Benson's novels and other writings, in contrast to the prevailing mechanistic determinism of Marx and Darwin, give great weight to the faculty of the will in human psychology. As one critic recently put it, Benson was literally "obsessed by the will."\(^5^7\) His works are peppered with references to the workings of the will, and it is not unlikely that Benson’s “obsession” was a reaction to the increasing number of philosophies during the period that abolished the element of human choice in the cosmic system. This attention to the will takes on added significance in the context of historical novels since it suggests something about the author’s conception of history. In this case, of course, Benson’s insistence on freedom of the will in the course of past events reflects his subscription to a Christian version of history. Intrinsic to Christianity’s conception of history is its distinctly linear progression. Human history originates at a definitive
point in time ("In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth") and terminates at a specific point of time in the future—the apocalypse. Thus, if the human drama is moving towards a designated consummation—if there exists a telos—there must ipso facto be an element of determinism present in history. Concomitantly, however, Christians have traditionally affirmed the reality of free will, and as a result, the Christian view of history is a type of hybrid of free will and determinism. Much as a person is able to move freely through the various cars of a train while the train is perpetually advancing towards its destination, human beings, posits Christianity, are free to make individual choices while the overarching movement of history itself progresses to a predetermined end. God exercises His will while concurrently permitting us to exercise ours.

In By What Authority?, Benson underscores the power of the human will by placing his main characters in situations in which their entire environment would seem to mitigate against the choices they finally make. Isabel and Anthony Norris, for example, children of a commanding Puritan father, products of an age in which the current of the nation (at least the nation which Benson depicts) appears to be forgetting the Old Faith at an alarming rate, nevertheless make individual commitments—unaided by one another—to the highly unfashionable Roman Catholic Church. Anthony, with a sinecure in the household of the highest Anglican clergyman in the land, laboring happily under the power of a vibrant nationalism, chooses to reject his worldly ambitions, his secure existence, and his financial support in order to convert to Catholicism. In the end, even as Queen Elizabeth offers him a personal pardon, he freely chooses to go to his death rather than renounce his newfound faith. Likewise Isabel, in the face of her earthly
love's conversion to Protestantism, still decides to follow through with her submission to Rome. Examples abound in the novel of characters making free choices even as the world around them is pitilessly pushing them in a different direction. Even Hubert, who to Benson would have represented a negative decision against the truth, nonetheless makes a free choice to embrace Protestantism in the face of zealous disapprobation from his family. Everywhere Benson affirms the reality of free choice in the human being in the context of the historical narrative, and in so doing, tacitly refuses the deterministic outlook of popular philosophies of history.

From the standpoint of its clear articulation of Catholic historicist tenets, By What Authority? is a fine specimen of the Revivalist historical project. As one reviewer put it, "The story is strongest on the historical side. As a picture of those days of change and bewilderment and terror, it is so very good that we are at a loss to recall any other work of fiction which surpasses it in this respect."58 As for the artistry of the novel, one may begin by acknowledging Benson's own criticism of the book some years after its publication:

I have formed a great many criticisms upon that book now. It is far too long; it is rather sentimental; it is too full of historical detail; above all, the mental atmosphere there depicted is at least a century before its time; men did not, until almost Caroline days, think and feel as I have represented them thinking and feeling in Elizabeth's reign. In two points only am I satisfied with it: there is, I think, a certain pleasant freshness about it, and I have not as yet detected in it any historical errors. I was absurdly careful in details that were wholly negligible with regard to general historical truth.59

With admirable humility, Benson has offered some accurate criticisms of his own novel. It is, in truth, too full of historical detail. At numerous points in the narrative, Benson interrupts the flow of the novel to insert sections that amount to little more than straight
historical summary. Though they give necessary background for the main events, they are dry and, as he admits, overly long. Moreover, one senses in these passages a distinct shift in authorial voice. When the main narrator suddenly pauses to become a dry twentieth-century historian looking back on the period, the unity and coherence of the novel is disrupted. Other shifts in authorial voice are also evident. Benson clearly intends the novel to be a comment on the state of Edwardian England vis-a-vis the religio-political history of Elizabethan England. In fact, at two points in the book (at least), the narrator steps in to make explicit connections between the past and his own present state of affairs, reminding the reader of the parallels that exist. At one point, the narrator discusses Anthony’s confusion regarding the “religious controversy” of his day, making two links to the present—one explicit and one not so explicit.

Anthony now settled down rather drearily to the study of religious controversy. The continual contrasts that seemed forced upon him by the rival systems of England and Rome (so far as England might be said to have a coherent system at this time) all tended to show him that there were these two sharply-divided schemes, each claiming to represent Christ’s Institution, and each exclusive of the other. . . . Of course, an immense number of . . . arguments circled round this—in fact, most of the arguments that are familiar to controversialists at the present day. (289; italics mine)

The same arguments with which Anthony struggles in Benson’s fictional sixteenth century are the very arguments with which the people of the Edwardian time period struggled. Questions of authority which had begun in the sixteenth century with the undermining of the Catholic hegemony had led to an even greater state of religious pluralism in Edwardian England. In an effort to make this point, Benson here collapses the distance between himself and his implied author in order to ensure that the reader catches the significance. This narrowing of authorial distance occurs repeatedly, and it
is here represented further by Benson's use of the phrase "at this time." Indeed, Benson utilizes this phrase again and again throughout the course of the novel, never fully allowing the reader to forget the author's presence. These authorial intrusions continually invite the reader to consider the similarities and differences between the fictional time of the story and the contemporary milieu in which the novel is being read. To modernist critics, such authorial intrusions weaken the effect of the novel. On the other hand, intrusions of this sort have become almost commonplace in contemporary post-modern fictions. (Once again Benson appears to have anticipated later aesthetic developments.) Moreover, such intrusions also have the effect of convincing the reader that it is Benson himself that is speaking throughout the text. It fits in well with the ministerial approach of the Revivalists and their mission to aid in the redemption of modern society.

The novel is also, at times, "episodic" in nature, a fact noted by C.C. Martindale. It is full of unnecessary digressions having little to do with the plot or major themes, and which therefore detract from the underlying unity of the book. At two points in the story, for example, Benson allows a minor character to spend multiple pages relating supernatural tales—at times they are plain old-fashioned ghost stories—to the major characters. Though they reinforce the presence of the supernatural in the novel, they do so in a manner that fails to fit the atmosphere of the story as a whole. Here, Benson clearly permitted his own love for ghost stories to seep into a plot that was not designed to hold them.

Still, despite these basic flaws, Benson has succeeded in making his characters attractive and lively. He is especially good at depicting the psychological turmoil of
Isabel and Anthony as they struggle within themselves to locate religious truth. Indeed, although throughout his novels a great majority of his protagonists decide in favor of Catholicism, Benson is able to make the frustration, confusion, pain, and ultimate joy of conversion psychology come to life in his characters. (His portrayal of Algy Banister in *The Conventionalists* is particularly memorable in this regard.) Benson has also done a masterful job depicting Queen Elizabeth. One observes in her a flaring temper and a soothing love of her subjects, a commanding presence and a woman fearful of her image. Her dialogue with Anthony when he visits the court for the first time to plead for James Maxwell’s life is witty and sharp. In short, Benson has succeeded in making Elizabeth human, a feat he would repeat in *The Queen’s Tragedy* with Elizabeth’s half-sister, Mary. Elizabeth is not a caricature or a stock image of royalty, nor is she vehemently anti-Catholic as it might have been easy for Benson to color her. She is a woman, a queen, a friend, a ruler, a caretaker, and even a pawn. The only major character that seems slightly overdrawn is Mary Corbet. She is an incredibly strong woman, even captious at times. Her verbal assault on the rector, Mr. Dent, exudes a singular aggressiveness that is difficult to fathom for a woman of the sixteenth century. Moreover, as a critic would later comment in reference to another female character in Benson’s next historical novel, Mary appears to move around with an amazing degree of freedom, especially for a lady-in-waiting to the queen. Mary is really more of a transplant from the twentieth century than a genuine sixteenth-century woman.63

Of course, some critics would unquestionably point to this novel as a prime case of Bensonian propaganda. Through his many flat theological discussions, as well as through the actions of his hero and heroine, Benson is plainly intending to show his
readers the insupportability of rival systems of faith. All in all, if one can stomach some periods of dry historical summary and theological exchange in addition to some tedious tangents, the novel, on the whole, makes for interesting reading. The characters are vivid and generally well drawn; and Benson succeeds in capturing the trappings of the age quite well. There is, as he said, a “pleasant freshness” to this epic of Revivalist historicism.

Oddsfish! and Christian History

Benson’s Oddsfish! is, in many regards, his most mature historical novel. It was also his last, published posthumously in 1914 shortly after his death. It is not a perfect novel by any means, for it, too, suffers from some minor flaws. As critic George Shuster observes, “There is a characteristic and regrettable weakness of structure, together with a very conventional subordinate narrative. The author’s talent for description leads him into paragraphs of detail which do not bear upon the issue, and his failure to give the women in the story reality makes such love interest as enters rather banal.” Shuster represents a common view, and though many of his observations are justified, it is arguable that Oddsfish! succeeds in other, more compelling ways. Benson revised Oddsfish! six times over a period of ten years, and even then he wasn’t happy with the final draft. This incessant revision, it seems, may have assisted in curbing some of the artistic weaknesses which occasionally taint some of Benson’s other novels, thereby improving the success of this one.

Oddsfish! remains Benson’s strongest embodiment of the Christian view of history, picking up where By What Authority? left off. It manages to resolve convincingly that
paradox between free will and determinism, between man's will and God's will, intrinsic
to the Christian historical paradigm. The resolution is achieved largely through the use
of symbols—one of the essential vehicles available to human beings for representing the
divine. Oddly enough, aside from a few notable exceptions, many of Benson's novels
are symbolically weak. They lack a coherent symbolic system for conveying subtle and
often spiritual meaning. *Oddsfish!*, however, though far from being a symbolist work, or
even an incredibly complex one for that matter, nevertheless avails itself of symbols and
is the better for it.

*Oddsfish!* is also successful in its resolution of another of the fundamental dilemmas
of Christian historicism—how to interpret the hand of God in the sequence of historical
events. Christians maintain a particular theology of history—an approach to the
historical narrative governed by a belief that at certain points in the past, terrestrial
events were touched by the hand of God and time was touched by eternity. The central
example, of course, is the Incarnation of Christ in which the Word was made flesh and
the eternal God condescended to submit to the bondage of time in the form of mortal
man. Thus, say Christians, the divine will manifests itself in the guise of historical
events. And as a result,

a religion which, might otherwise have been too diaphanous—too subtly
compounded of mere spirit and light—comes to us as a thing with a
geographical location, with a place in the historical scheme of things, and
with many of its truths condensed, so to speak into historical events. It
comes to us with its central idea of divinity made incarnate in a
personality more human than the human one.  

Furthermore, this theology provides a key for comprehending the whole of the historical
narrative, a guide by which human beings, as finite creatures, might decipher the
divinely encrypted meaning of the story. As Joseph Schwartz explains,
History is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be contemplated. Since it is drama/play/story/narrative . . . , it can be interpreted and understood. The actor in the drama is, of course, man as he reveals himself in his activities and experience—moral, religious, political, social—and in art, his signature. When we say, as we always do, what does all this mean, we are seeking a philosophy of history. We are ambitious; we yearn to see the whole and the patterns which only looking at the whole will reveal.®

It is here, however, that one again finds oneself at the critical nexus of history and faith. Christians, Jews, Moslems, and Buddhists may all agree that a man called Jesus walked the earth; what they will not agree on is his divine status. The academic historian is confined to verifiable facts, and therefore historical facts alone can never fully affirm any brand of religious belief. What is required is an element of faith to interpret the whole. Oddsfish! triumphs as an effective resolution to this dilemma of faith and facts, and it does so partly due to the fact that it is a novel and not an official history, and partly due to Benson’s wise narratological decisions.

In addition to these strengths and despite Shuster’s criticism that the women in the story fail to have any reality,® Dolly Jermyn, the female love interest in Oddsfish!, proves at the very least to be a woman of her time period, unlike Mary Corbet. The characters are well constructed, especially Charles II, and the plot full of suspense and intrigue. Finally, Oddsfish! is arguably the most gentle and least propagandistic of Benson’s novels. This is not surprising considering the fact that it is the only historical novel to treat a time period other than the contentious, immediately post-Reformation Tudor or Elizabethan ones. Oddsfish!, by contrast, focuses on the reign of Charles II and Restoration England.

The story begins when Roger Mallock, a “very well-educated young gentleman” preparing to take monastic orders, is summoned to the Vatican for a conversation with
There is some question as to whether the contemplative life is truly Roger’s vocation, and so the Pope sends him to the court of King Charles II in “diplomatic service of the Holy See” (7). There is something distinctly supernatural about this encounter, for as Roger and the abbot that had escorted him there leave the presence of the Pope, their faces are “all suffused...for there was something strangely fiery and keen and holy about Innocent” (8). Their radiant faces recall Moses descending Mt. Sinai with the Judaic Law in hand after communing with Jehovah.

When Roger arrives in England, he meets his cousin Thomas Jermyn and Thomas’s daughter Dorothy, also known as Dolly. Slowly over the course of the novel, Roger and Dolly fall in love and eventually become engaged. In time, Roger is also taken into the confidence of King Charles II through a pledge of services reminiscent of Kent in King Lear:

“So you are come to serve me,” [Charles] said presently, “in any way that I will; and you will serve me only that you may serve your master better. And what wages do you want?”
“None that Your Majesty can give,” I said.
“Better and better,” said Charles. “Nor place, nor position?”
“Only at Your Majesty’s feet.”
“And what if I kick you?”
“I will look for the halfpence elsewhere, Sire.” (29)

Through such plain devotion, Charles develops an affection for Roger. Roger initially serves the king politically. He becomes a kind of secret agent, working surreptitiously to uncover plots on the king’s life. Through a series of adventures, Roger discovers the plans for an assassination attempt on the king’s life, and as a result of his input, the plan is thwarted. However, due to some important papers written in cipher that Roger had mistakenly hidden away, Roger himself comes under suspicion as being a double agent.
A failed attack is made on Roger's life while attending a drama at the theater, and in the process his fiancée Dolly is accidentally murdered.

But Roger also serves the king spiritually, and this forms the main thematic thrust of the novel. Early in the novel during a private conversation with Roger, Charles admits his Catholic sympathies in spite of his obvious moral shortcomings ("Charles' private life stank in the nostrils of God and man" [27]):

"There be three kinds of religion in my realm," he said. "The Presbyterian and Independent and that kind—for I count those all one, and that is no religion for a gentleman. And there is the Church of England, of which I am the head, which numbers many gentleman, but is no religion for a Christian; and there is the Catholic, which is the only religion, so far as I am acquainted with any, suited for both gentleman and Christians. That is my view of the matter, Mr. Mallock." (59-60)

Despite his Catholic sympathies, however, Charles refuses to pardon the Jesuits in the famous Titus Oates trial—a trial which Roger himself attends. Charles is torn between his personal attraction to Catholicism, the dangerous anti-Catholic political sentiments in his already unstable kingdom, and his unwillingness to relinquish his clandestine, immoral liaisons. Near the end of the novel, Charles takes ill, and Roger does him his greatest service of all by smuggling a priest into the bedchamber of the king so that he is able to make his final confession and receive Extreme Unction. The king dies reconciled to the Church, and Roger returns to the cloister assured of his vocation as a monk.

Like By What Authority?, the novel is an effective example of the reconciliation of free will and determinism, but it also succeeds in providing a Christian interpretation of historical events that is plausible to the reader. Benson's use of a framing device, beginning with a commission for Roger from the Pope and ending with Roger's reflections on his adventures from the monastery, confirms the presence of Providence...
throughout the novel. The Pope’s instructions for Roger are somewhat ambiguous from the start. Roger “will have no every heavy mission given to [him] at first; [he] must mix freely with the world and use [his] wits and see what is best to be done” (7). All he need do is report back to the Pope periodically. This ambiguity, however, actually works to strengthen the reader’s sense of divine Providence. On the one hand, the reader has no idea exactly what might or even what is supposed to occur during Roger’s tenure at the court of Charles; the future is undetermined and open to Roger’s success or failure. And yet the very fact that the Pope himself, Christ’s Vicar on earth, enlists Roger’s services adumbrates a higher plan behind Roger’s adventures. God, via the Pope, possesses a plan of which Roger is a part. In the epilogue to the novel, Roger considers his experiences and reflects directly on the role Providence played:

To what purpose, I ask myself, was that part of my life designed by Divine Providence? For what did I labour so long, when all was to come to nothing? For what was I to learn the passion of human love, if but to lose it again? For what was I to intrigue and spy and labour and adventure my life, for the cause of England and the Catholic Church, when all a year or two later was to fall back, and further than it had ever fallen before, into the darkness of heresy? There is but one effort in all those years of which I saw the fruition, and that was the conversion of my master upon his deathbed. (334)

After thirty years, the purpose of many of his exploits is still vague to Roger; and yet, one purpose is abundantly clear: Roger was sent to England to assist in the conversion of the king. (Roger is the narrator and hero of the story, but Charles is unmistakably the center of the book.) But as is so often the case when it comes to discerning the role of divine Providence in both personal and general history, the precise participation of God can only be seen in retrospect. The epilogue acts as a kind of historical interpretation of
all the pages that had preceded it, and plainly Roger sees in his adventures the hand of God.

The novel's first-person narration also enables this kind of Augustinian interpretation of history to appear plausible. Oddsfish! is the only one of Benson's historical novels to be narrated in the first person, and by using this device, Benson places the onus of interpretation on the hero, thus appearing to distance himself from the hermeneutical act. History thus becomes inextricably linked to personal memory. This subtle maneuver saves Benson from the trap of having to declare omnisciently with exactitude the mechanisms of divine intervention in history, and yet still renders feasible Roger's Christian heuristic. Through the illusion of first person—a kind of narrative legerdemain—we as readers are led to see through Roger's eyes the hand of God at work in history without feeling direct coercion on the part of Benson himself.

God's will is also manifested through symbols and symbolic acts. On the final night that Charles II is seen in public before he dies, a bizarre episode occurs as he attempts to exit.

I watched him go to the door with his hat on, all the other gentlemen uncovered and bowing to him, and him nodding and smiling in very good humour, though still limping a little. And my heart seemed to go with him. At the door, however, he stopped, for a strange thing had happened. As my Lord Ailesbury had given the candle to the page who was to go before them, it had suddenly gone out, though there was no draught to blow it. The page looked very startled and afraid and shook his head a little. Then one of the gentlemen sprang forward and took a candle from one of the cressets to light the other with. (300-1)

Surely this extinguishing of the candle is a bit heavy-handed as a symbol for many modern readers, yet it clearly points to the action of divine Providence in terrestrial
events. Charles’s earthly life is drawing to a close, and this candle episode portends the near future.

More subtle, and therefore perhaps more successful, is Benson’s use of clocks and timepieces throughout the story, especially in connection with Charles. In reality, Charles II was an adamant supporter of science, and as a result, he acquired numerous clocks over the length of his reign. Benson appropriates this minute historical detail for his own symbolic purposes. At the conclusion of Roger’s first meeting with the king, Charles mentions the “clockwork businesses” and his lack of time for chatting with Roger: “Well, I have no time at present, Mr. Mallock, as you can see for yourself. But I will not forget you, if I want you” (31). There is a certain irony in the king’s statement, for indeed he does not have much time, though not in the way he means. By the end of the novel he will be dead, and hanging in the balance is his soul. Significantly, the king’s personal room is filled with “innumerable clocks” (174). After Dolly is murdered, Roger becomes disillusioned with the lying and conniving he has had to do for the king, and decides to leave the king’s services. Charles appeals to Roger to stay, offering him whatever rewards he pleases. Roger, however, insists he must go, and seconds after declaring his intent to leave, “the clocks began to chime, one after the other, for it was eight o’clock, and [Roger] heard them at it, too, in the bedchamber beyond” (297). “Thirty or forty” clocks scream out in symbolic protestation as Roger, the king’s only committed Catholic servant, prepares to leave. It is a critical point in the king’s spiritual journey, and the clocks, in a cacophony of chiming, register this crucial moment from beyond. The next night, the king’s last in public, Roger observes that the
gallery is adorned with "at least five or six chiming clocks that the King had given to Her Grace" (298-9).

After the king falls ill and is consigned to his bed, Roger plants himself outside of the king's bedchamber, listening intently for any indication of the king's health. He notes that it is "about eleven o'clock" when he "first heard His Majesty's voice". Some time later, Roger hears "the sudden chiming of all the clocks that were in the bedchamber" (306). These continual references to time and clocks work to intensify the reader's suspense, while also reminding one that the king's own time on earth is limited. Significantly, it is while waiting in the antechamber that Roger realizes that it was to aid in the king's conversion that he had been sent to England: "This conviction, I suppose, had always been with me that it was for this that in God's Providence I had been sent to England; at least, even in the moment that I had left my house and run down the gallery, there it was all full formed and mature" (305). Roger realizes his mission literally "in the nick of time." Time and again throughout this climactic section, the clocks seem to echo the divine will: The king's end is predetermined, it is fast approaching, and Roger must act quickly to bring redemption to Charles. As Roger enters the king's chamber to beg Charles to allow him to fetch a priest, the "clocks were all chiming four" (313). Shortly thereafter, Roger has a renewed passion to help this dying king to salvation. There arose in him "a fierce, overmastering ambition to accomplish one more task that was the greatest of them all and to get salvation to the man who had again and again flouted and neglected me, whom yet I loved as I had never yet loved any man" (315).

Roger finds a priest, sneaks him into the king's room, and the priest administers the last rites before the Anglican bishops can arrive. Once again, Roger notes the presence
of “at least half-a-dozen clocks whose ticking was very plain in the silence” (328).

Later, when the king has been reconciled to the Church, Roger rejoices that “he was not altogether too late, thank God!”, and he finds it “near incredible that [he] should in very truth be here at such a time, and that [he] should have been, under God’s merciful Providence, the instrument of such an affair” (329). In his epilogue, Roger recounts with amazing accuracy (considering that nearly thirty years have passed) the exact times of important events leading to the king’s final demise. At “about six o’clock,” the king asked the curtains to be drawn, the clocks chimed again, and he asked one of them to be wound (336). At seven o’clock, “breathlessness came on [the king] again and he was compelled to sit up in bed”, and it was “a little before noon” that Charles passed away (337). Throughout the final pages there is a masterful interweaving of the clock motif with Roger’s evolving sense that Providence has been guiding him all along. In a sense, then, the clocks symbolize the divine will at work in the life of the king. The king’s end is determined, and it is up to Roger and Charles himself whether the necessary means of salvation will be gotten in time. What on one level is a mere historical detail (Charles liked clocks) works in Benson’s narrative on a secondary and more meaningful level by intimating the presence of Providence throughout.

Yet, even as Providence is symbolized and alluded to throughout the novel, the element of free will is still present and strong. Charles’s end may be set, but his spiritual decision is not, as is evidenced by Roger’s intense fear that a priest will not be brought in time. In fact, one might conclude by noting with Chesterton that for any narrative to work effectively—for there to be any degree of suspense and narrative interest—the reader must accept, at least partially, the premise of free will:
The point is that a story is exciting because it has in it so strong an element of will, of what theology calls free will. You cannot finish a sum how you like. But you can finish a story how you like. When somebody discovered the Differential Calculus there was only one Differential Calculus he could discover. But when Shakespeare killed Romeo he might have married him to Juliet's old nurse if he had felt inclined. And Christendom has excelled in the narrative romance exactly because it has insisted on the theological free will.\textsuperscript{73}

One must believe that characters have a choice to make and that those choices made will affect their lives in a significant way. Thus, \textit{Oddsfish!} is a fine example of an artistic rendering of Christian history that works quite well.

As Shuster points out, the novel has its weaknesses. There are some crude metaphors, some unnecessary digressions (Benson seems particularly fascinated with describing in detail hiding holes built for priests), and even a misquotation of Scripture.\textsuperscript{74} Still, \textit{Oddsfish!} makes for exciting reading: It is a "‘thriller’ in the best ‘cops and robbers’ tradition."\textsuperscript{75} Its characters are, on the whole, well drawn, and the hero of the story undergoes meaningful development throughout the narrative, deciding to return to the cloister with a firmer conviction regarding his vocation. Dolly, unlike Mary before her, is believable as a woman of the seventeenth century. And perhaps most importantly, \textit{Oddsfish!} is a perfect example of the way in which Benson, by choosing to render history as art, was able to venture into territory disallowed by his co-religionists' more "official" approach to the subject.

This chapter has advanced a basic but important thesis: Benson was a fundamental part of the Revivalist historicist movement, and he was unique in that he availed himself of the power of art to accomplish his ends. While he shared with his fellow Revivalists certain notions about history, he stands out for his creative approach to these notions. Indeed, anecdotal evidence would seem to support the idea that there was something
compelling about Benson's choice to depict history artistically. Another of Benson's historical novels, *Come Rack! Come Rope!*, says Janet Grayson, "did more than any other work of fiction of the time or since to change Anglican attitudes about the cruelties of the English Reformation." From the overwhelming popularity of Benson's novels at the time, it seems safe to assume that his vision of history succeeded in widely influencing the English population and the way in which they viewed their history.
Chapter Notes

1 The novels are, in order of publication, By What Authority? (1904), The King's Achievement (1905), The Queen's Tragedy (1906), Come Rack! Come Rope! (1912), and Oddsfish! (1914). The medieval romance is The History of Richard Raynal, Solitary (1905).


3 A.C. Benson, Hugh: Memoirs of a Brother (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1915), 177. One is struck here by the lack of depth displayed by both critics. Aheme seems entirely unable to imagine the historical novel as a breed of its own, with rules that may vary slightly from other types of novels. Cannot one admire the insights and artistic nuances a writer brings to the characterization of an historical personage? Is this not a kind of art in its own right? Rather than enforcing a rigid standard of originality for the historical novelist, might one not judge instead the novelist's ability to honor the historical facts about a character while simultaneously bringing the character to vivid life before the eyes of the modern reader? Ironically, Arthur hints that the historical novel is a separate class of fiction when he writes that historical novels "are like nothing at all, except each other," but he seems unprepared on a personal level to revise his taste accordingly. In fact, it is arguable that a conception of historical novels as subject to rules different than those which govern other types of novels is the first key to one's ability to enjoy them fully.


6 Of course, many of the tenets of Revivalist historicism are now being embraced by scholars at large. Though Benson, Chesterton, and Belloc targeted a popular audience as opposed to a scholarly one, scholars are now echoing many of the theses expressed earlier by the trio and other Catholic historians. See note 26 below.


See Francis A. Schaeffer’s brief discussion of how this book fits into rationalistic trends of the period in *How Should We Then Live?: The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1976), 175-6.


Benson did, in fact, have ample company. Baker’s *A Guide to Historical Fiction* shows nearly twenty novels treating the reign of Elizabeth published in the Edwardian Period alone, and innumerable more in the decade preceding the dawn of the twentieth century (Ernest A. Baker, *A Guide to Historical Fiction* [New York: Burt Franklin, 1969], 46-55). Many of these novels, however, are species of juvenile fiction; and of those that are not, many of them are basic romances—simplistic costume pieces with little to say about the period politically, religiously, or culturally. Benson, therefore, is unique in his combination of adventure and serious spiritual messages.


Qtd. in Martindale, *Life*, II, 308.

This is not to suggest, however, that art and empirical methods of investigation are mutually exclusive. They can be, and often are, complementary. Empirical investigation is precisely what gives substance to the art in an historical novel; but while availing themselves of empirical methods whenever possible, art and religion also claim to supersede the knowledge gained by empirical means.

Butterfield writes: “It is easy to forget that in the art of the historian there is the exhilarating moment, the creative act. It is by no means the historian’s duty to whittle himself down to a mere transparency, and simply to transcribe information with colourless, passionless impartiality” (Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* [New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1965], 91). See pp. 90-106, “The Art of the Historian,” for a detailed discussion of the role of imaginative sympathy in historical investigation.


Ibid., 152.

Robert Hugh Benson, “Catholicism and the Future,” *Atlantic Monthly* 106 (Aug. 1910), 168. In many ways of course, post-modernism is itself a version of Romanticism taken to its extreme conclusions. Whereas the Romantics emphasized an imaginative investment in the past in order to more fully understand the contemporaneous concerns of a period, post-moderns emphasize the inability of any writer to transcend his own subjective perspective. Thus, the subjectivity inherent in the Romantic ideology is pushed to the limit by post-modernists.


Qtd. in Joseph Schwartz, “The Theology of History in The Everlasting Man,” *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* 49 (Fall 1996), 59. See the whole article, pp. 57-66, for an excellent discussion of Chesterton’s “theology of history.”

Martindale writes: “In speaking of his historical novels, I shall find it easy to emphasize the minute care in research and quite scholarly effort after accuracy he displayed” (*Life*, I, 195). Later, Martindale reiterates his assessment of Benson’s fastidious attention to historical detail: “His own books, of course, were frankly pro-Catholic, only, he would argue, he never distorted the evidence or invented it. He never hesitated to discard his own historical work when he came to think it was inadequate” (II, 225).

Robert Hugh Benson, *By What Authority?* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1906), 22. All further citations are noted parenthetically in the text.

This detail is highly autobiographical for Benson. He, too, utilized the exercises of St. Ignatius on his path to conversion.

In a recent article, for example, Karen Bruhn notes that only “a generation ago” the view that the English population did not readily accept Protestantism immediately and “clung with some tenacity to Roman Catholic beliefs and practices” would have been considered “revisionist.” Karen Bruhn, “Reforming Saint Peter: Protestant Constructions of Saint Peter the Apostle in Early Modern England,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal: The Journal of Early Modern Studies* 33 (Spring 2002), 34. See especially note 2.


The notion that Catholic authors would disparage the Reformation may seem, at first, painfully obvious. However, we must remember that the prevailing view was that of the whig historian. Therefore, I am seeking here to emphasize the counter-cultural impulses of the Revivalists and the particular arguments they used to justify their attitudes.


Benson, “Catholicism and the Future,” 166.

Qtd. in John P. McCarthy, "The Historical Vision of Chesterbelloc," *Modern Age: A Quarterly Review* 26 (Spring 1982), 179. This quotation is post-Edwardian in nature, but we see this distaste for nationalism in Revivalists like Benson in the Edwardian period proper.


Belloc, "Writing History," 144.

In Benson’s *The Dawn of All*, for example, though the world has achieved a Catholic utopia, individual nations still exist (which the narrator spends the majority of the story touring). Individuality within unity is the clarion call of this novel and of the Revivalists in general.


Lord Acton, the famous British historian, was preoccupied with the effects of the critical revolution in historical scholarship that occurred during the nineteenth century. New, more rigid methods of data collection together with the opening of a number of European archives, led to a revolution in historiography. Old histories were being revisited by contemporary historians and questions had arisen concerning their fundamental veracity. When taken to the extreme, many of the new nineteenth-century methodologies easily induced a kind of rabid skepticism. Acton noted the “impatient, restless, storming scepticism” of such historians, and observed the manner in which this skepticism tended to lead to a subversion of trust in history itself: “Some gave it [the pursuit of history] up and rejected history,” he recalled (qtd. in Herbert Butterfield, *Man on His Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1966], 76).

Ironically, Robert Hugh Benson of all people felt no qualms about applying Darwinian evolution to the model of the Church Body: “Whether or no a man may accept Darwin’s conclusions, it is impossible for him not to see that all Almighty God’s noblest works in creation are those that contain the principle of life, and that life, while unchanging in its essence, manifests itself in the gradual perfecting of its outward form” (“State of Religion,” 479). Moreover, as Mark Noll has observed in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), European Christians did not express the same immediate fear of evolution as American Christians did (see pp. 179-181). It seems to me (if one does not exist already) that a study of some early applications of Darwinism to theology and/or ecclesiology would prove a profitable piece of scholarship.

55 Additionally, both Marx's and Darwin's versions of history reverberate with earlier Enlightenment notions of progress. One important difference, however, is that while Marx imagines a definitive consummation—the socialist state—Darwinian progress can presumably continue indefinitely.

56 The anti-supernaturalism of both of these systems of thought was, of course, one of the main reasons, if not the main reason, that the Revivalists denied their validity so thoroughly. Both systems, too, expunged free will as a fundamental component of the human being. Still, in the background of these philosophies lurks the ghost of a particularly perverse variety of whig historicism. Marxism and Darwinism inherently abhor the past as a period of lesser existence out of which humankind has thankfully evolved; such a belief was something that the Revivalists themselves abhorred in return.


58 Review of *By What Authority?*, by Robert Hugh Benson, *Catholic World* 81 (June 1905), 403.


60 See, for example, three other selected instances on pp. 47, 333, and 389.

61 Writes Martindale: “Considered as a story, doubtless the book is overloaded and episodic” (*Life*, I, 361).

62 See pp. 33-4 and 398-401.

63 Of course, Shakespeare also represents his heroines as moving around with a good deal of freedom, often in time periods even earlier than the Elizabethan era. Juliet, for example, who, as a young girl one would think would be restricted in her movements, is nevertheless capable of a clandestine rendezvous with Friar Lawrence. Lady Macbeth, though less mobile, would be an example of a headstrong woman who operates with an advanced degree of autonomy. Still, it seems to me that historical novels carry with them a more stringent requirement for verisimilitude. Though, as has already been observed, historical novels are full of fiction, I believe that the more effective historical novelist is the one who can make a character come alive while still retaining the basic characteristics of a person from the time period. Mary Corbet, in my opinion, is slightly overdrawn in this respect.


Significantly, Benson began the first draft of *Oddsfish!* while in seminary at Rome, not long after the publication of *By What Authority?*. See Martindale, *Life*, I, 71.

Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1954), 120.


It is said that a contemporary reviewer of Benson’s works commented that the women in Benson’s novels are there only to help or hinder the conversion of the male protagonists. I, along with nearly every other critic that has studied Benson, agree wholeheartedly with this statement.

Robert Hugh Benson, *Oddsfish!* (1914; reprint, ed. with a foreword by Anne Freemantle, New York: All Saints Press, 1962), 3. All further references are cited parenthetically in the text.

St. Augustine had offered a theo-historical interpretation in *The City of God*, reading historical events in light of his knowledge of God’s Word.

This device invites us to consider a whole host of strange events that might otherwise undermine the credibility of a third-person narrator. See pp. 258-9 for an account of a miraculous healing of the king’s hand.


When proposing to Dolly, Roger says, “Scripture tells us that a woman must leave her father and cleave to her husband.” The reference is to Genesis 2:24, the correct version of which reads: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.”

Anne Freemantle, foreword to *Oddsfish!*, xi.

CHAPTER 3

CONFRONTING THE PRESENT: BENSON AND AESTHETICISM

Et tout le reste est littérature.
—Paul Verlaine, Jadis et Naguère

Oscar Wilde said that sunsets were not valued because we could not pay for sunsets. But Oscar Wilde was wrong; we can pay for sunsets. We can pay for them by not being Oscar Wilde.

—G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy

Any mature representation of imagined form, any mature endeavor to communicate such representation to another human being, is a moral act—where ‘moral’ can, unquestionably, include the articulation of sadism, of nihilism, of the bringing of unreason and despair. ‘Art for art’ is a tactical slogan, a necessary rebellion against philistine didacticism and political control. But pressed to its logical consequences, it is pure narcissism.

—George Steiner, Real Presences

Writers of the Edwardian Era found themselves in the wake of a unique movement in the history of art known as Aestheticism, a doctrine that has come to be embodied in the quaint axiom, “art for art’s sake”. Proponents of this philosophy, including Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater, and Aubrey Beardsley, sought an art in which pure aesthetic form transcended moral considerations. The traditional formula “To please and to instruct” was reduced to pleasure alone. Beauty, for the aesthetes, could and did exist apart from morality, and the aesthetes pursued it passionately. As a young Cambridge student in the 1890’s, Robert Hugh Benson was exposed to the dogmas of Aestheticism at the peak of their popularity. Over time, Benson developed a disdain for Aestheticism and its
theories. In 1907, he published a work entitled, *The Sentimentalists*, which traced the fall and redemption of a quintessential 1890's aesthete. *The Sentimentalists* was Benson's effort to confront head-on a fashionable movement that he deeply distrusted as being contrary to Christian principles. Ironically, however, Benson nurtured a taste for decadent writers like the Frenchman J.K. Huysmans, and the Englishmen Frederick Rolfe and Walter Pater. He savored their books time and again, and he praised them to friends. Benson even exhibited signs that he himself was being lured by an Aestheticism he claimed to reject. While the message of the *The Sentimentalists* is clear, Benson's complex relationship with the artistic theories of the *fin de siecle* is murkier. This chapter will explore the two primary dimensions of Benson's confrontation with Aestheticism and seek to discover a resolution to these seemingly contradictory impulses.

A Strong Repulsion: *The Sentimentalists* and Benson's Rejection of Aestheticism

Aestheticism, in many ways, finds its roots in Romanticism, though it is a kind of perverted form of Romantic thought that many English Romantics, especially early ones like Wordsworth and Coleridge, would not have recognized. The Romantics were fond of categorizing the artistic process in terms of preternatural inspiration—an unknown, ineffable power visits the artist and moves him to write. The author is at least partially passive in this process and does not himself fully understand the source of his inspiration. Echoing the *daimon* and the Epic Muse of Ancient Greece, the artist experiences a kind of ecstatic possession by an Other who grants him the boon of poetry. (One sees here, too, the connection with the poet as prophet idea.) Wordsworth's
“correspondent breeze” (*The Prelude*, 1850, 1.35), Coleridge’s “one intellectual breeze” (“The Eolian Harp” 47) and Shelley’s “invisible influence, like an inconstant wind”¹ are all variations of this belief in inspiration apart from the poet’s own act of will.² “A man cannot say, ‘I will compose poetry,’” argues Shelley.³

This Romantic theory of quasi-divine inspiration, when (mis)appropriated by later neo-Romantic disciples, seems frequently to result in a peculiar type of extremism in which art produced by the conscious will of the artist is decried as weak and inauthentic. The “unpremeditated song” is valued more highly than the work of art developed in light of a specific purpose and in accordance with pre-established rules. Questions of purpose in the psychology of the artist seemed inevitably to gravitate towards questions of purpose concerning the art itself. Shelley’s “A man cannot say: ‘I will compose poetry’” mutates into Keats’s “we hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us.”⁴ If true art pours forth from the preternatural or subconscious impulses of the artist, then one cannot and should not burden such art with issues of social responsibility nor expect it to be anything other than what is dictated by the mystical impetus of the artist himself. Such thinking, in its most radical manifestation, culminated in the Aestheticism of the end of the nineteenth century and the proverbial “art for art’s sake.” All art, claimed Oscar Wilde, is entirely useless. The purpose of art is, quite simply, to *be* art.

The ministerial approach of Benson and his fellow Revivalists stands in vehement contrast to the doctrines of Aestheticism. Benson, Chesterton, and Belloc wrote with a purpose and believed in the efficacy of art as a tool of ministry and communication to a wider public. In a public lecture delivered on February 8, 1914 at Cathedral Hall, Westminster, Robert Hugh Benson addressed the topic of “The Modern English Novel.”
The exact transcript of the speech is unavailable, but a summarized account appears in *The London Times* of the following day. In the lecture, Benson proclaimed, "Every writer has a gospel to preach, for nobody wrote without a desire to produce some effect upon those who read." Benson makes it absolutely clear, in direct opposition to Aestheticism, that the best art is actually that which reflects a clear purpose and message. C.C. Martindale offers a helpful assessment of Benson's understanding of purpose in art:

> Since the "really Real" is spiritual, and the spiritual is purposeful, therefore the best art, as expressive of the best and most real life, is the most purposeful, and "art for art's sake," is, in the ordinary meaning attached to that dictum, which implies that the artist paints or writes or gesticulates purely from unpurposeful impulse, an idle saying.

Chesterton shares Benson's apparent disdain for pure Aestheticism, preferring instead art which communicates clearly with the reader:

> The artist is a person who communicates something. . . . But it is a question of communication and not merely of what some people call expression. Or rather, strictly speaking, unless it is communication it is not expression. . . . The artist does ultimately exhibit himself as being intelligent by being intelligible. I do not say by being easy to understand, but certainly by being understood.

Thus, Benson and Chesterton did not consider art that had a clear purpose to be poor art. In fact, they considered purpose and general communicability to be an indispensable characteristic of genuine art.

Oddly enough, however, the Revivalists' theory of art with a purpose was not unique to them during the Edwardian period. A great volume of literature at the turn of the twentieth century would be considered, by certain modernist critical standards, "propagandistic." The scientific romances of H.G. Wells contained clear social messages, as did many of the dramas of George Bernard Shaw. Even a few of the novels
of Joseph Conrad can be viewed as engaging in polemics. With the influence exerted by Aestheticism during the last decade of the nineteenth century, it is little wonder that numerous Edwardian artists sought to recuperate a purposeful art. Consequently, to accuse Robert Hugh Benson of propaganda (as critics often do) is, in one sense, merely to situate him historically.

It is important to note, too, that the theory of a purposeful art appears indicative of Christian artists like Benson regardless of time or place. When an artist entertains the belief in his own responsibility to a higher power, propositions such as “art for art’s sake” and the understanding that art is merely for the sake of the artist seem to ring untrue, at least in their unqualified forms. St. Paul writes in the Epistle to the Colossians, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (3:17). Admonitions like this one exert a powerful pressure on the conscience of the Christian artist. Art is not a selfish act; rather, it is a consecrated one. It carries with it not only social responsibility, but personal responsibility to God as well. Aside from this theological approach to art, centuries of tradition offer the Christian artist admirable examples of art with a purpose. The Bible, for one, is a collection of stories, poems, and letters that Christians interpret as conveying clear messages about God, man, and the world. Of course, there are ways of expressing one’s purpose that may be more artistic than others, as Chesterton appears to suggest in the passage quoted above. An artist may mean well and his message may be viable, but he may still execute his technique poorly. (Furthermore, the distinction between the Catholic author and the author who happens to be Catholic remains salient.)
Mauriac and Greene seem to hint that if one is overly purposeful, or at least if one is purposeful in the wrong ways, it can lead to bad art.

Echoes of the tension between Aestheticism and the Edwardian Revivalists can be heard in the now famous James/Wells dispute. A thoroughgoing evaluation of the James/Wells dispute would be complicated, and it would exceed the bounds of the present study; however, a few general comments on the subject and its relationship to Revivalist theories of art are here in order. The debate between Henry James and H.G. Wells concerned the nature of the novel itself. Simply put, was the novel a means of engaging pertinent social issues with an eye to shaping the future, or should the novel be practiced as a form of high art? The flipside of this question concerns the role of the author in composing a given work. Should the author be free to urge the reader in a certain direction, or should the author concern himself solely with crafting the most refined aesthetic object possible? As is well known to students of literary history, H.G. Wells argued for the former ideas, Henry James for the latter. For Wells, novels were "the only medium through which we can discuss the great majority of the problems which are being raised in such bristling multitude by our contemporary social development." Moreover, Wells believed in what he termed a "governing conception," an over-arching idea that gave form and purpose to a novel. James, in contrast, considered life to be "all inclusion and confusion" and art to be "all discrimination and selection," and as a result, the goal of the artist is to focus on the art itself. As is also well known, James largely won the dispute, and the repercussions of his victory have influenced theories of the novel ever since.
In an article on Chesterton’s relationship to the James/Wells dispute, John Coates observes that Chesterton’s conceptions of art were more akin to Wells’s than to James. Coates notes that “Chesterton’s insistence on the ‘plan of the idea that is straight like a back-bone and pointing like an arrow’ has very much in common with Wells’s notion of a governing conception.”

Chesterton’s belief in the necessity of communication on the part of the artist also substantiates Coates’s claim. Furthermore, Wells believed in “putting ideas into readers heads,”—such a thing could not be prevented. This, in turn, echoes Benson’s belief that “nobody writes without a desire to produce some effect on those who read.” It is not surprising that Benson revered Wells as “that amazing genius,” due largely to the fact that Wells had a clear goal in his novels and pursued it directly.

Clearly, then, Benson and the Revivalists held to a conception of art that eventually fell into general disfavor with the defeat of Wells and the triumph of James. (The Revivalist emphasis on a broad communicability also contrasted sharply with the modernist techniques of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Ezra Pound whose oftentimes esoteric literary experiments, while taking the elite critical world by storm, have failed to produce a corresponding wideness of appeal in the population at large.) But the James/Wells dispute also reminds one that the Edwardian Period marks a definitive shift in the theory of the novel.

Other aspects of Benson’s own theory of art also contrast greatly with the principles of Aestheticism. Another brief but cryptic insight into Benson’s aesthetics is found in his book, Papers of a Pariah. In this collection of essays cast in a fictional framework, Benson adopts the persona of “one who regards the Catholic Church from without, not from within, though with a favorable eye.” Paradoxically, the book becomes a kind of
apologetic for the Catholic Church and its dogma vis-à-vis the thoughts of a religiously inclined non-Catholic. In an essay “On the Dulness of Irreligious People,” the persona writes: “Now we have not been talking about religion (nor even about art, which I hold to be a kind of religion in solution)” (15). It is tempting to mistake this statement as yet another permutation of what had become a nineteenth century truism; namely, that art, in the absence of orthodox religion, was capable of acting as a substitute for lost faith. Art, dreamed Matthew Arnold, might be the new salvation. However, in light of Benson’s seeming opposition to the religious reverence towards art practiced by the aesthetes, this proves highly unlikely. One explanation recalls the earlier discussion of purpose in art. Art is religion in solution because art is a poignant means of embodying, illustrating, and symbolizing divine truths. In good art, one can see, and even experience, the truths of God. This explanation can be extended, though, to include a more generalized and mystical view of beauty. Benson seems to have in mind the Christian (and subsequently Romantic) notion that in beauty, one can glimpse and partake of the divine. “He had no difficulty,” writes Martindale, “in ‘precipitating’ the divine” from the beauty around him. In a letter to a friend, Benson writes:

I will tell you frankly that I am amazed at your moral poise, and admire it myself. You have an extraordinary love of beauty, and do not seem to find it perilous. You walk on the very knife edge, and do not seem to be giddy. . . . I like enormously the picture of a man who has a very keen perception and is yet pure. Of course, I think that many people cannot follow that way; it is too strait, but I have not the smallest doubt that it is the highest way, and have known quite enough people who do follow it.

The perception of beauty, together with moral purity—a freedom from overindulgence—is to him a pathway to truth.
William Blake expressed the mystical aspect of beauty long before Benson claimed it as his own: “To see a world in a grain of sand,/ And a heaven in a wild flower;/ Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,/ And eternity in an hour” (“Auguries of Innocence” 1-4). Quite tellingly, Benson chose these lines as the epigraph to the opening story of his first book, The Light Invisible. The book is a collection of short vignettes set in the fictional framework of Benson’s discussions with a mystically-oriented priest to whom “Divine Truth... presented itself in directly sensible forms.” Benson purports to have recorded his conversations with the priest “so far as [he is] able” (vii). In the first of the stories, “The Green Robe,” the priest begins by theorizing about the analogous relationship between artistic and mystical perception. It is quoted here at length:

“No,” he said presently, “it is not faith that I mean; it is only an intense form of the gift of spiritual perception that God has given me; which gift indeed is common to us all in our measure. It is the faculty by which we verify for ourselves what we have received on authority and hold by faith. Spiritual life consists partly in exercising this faculty. Well, then, this form of that faculty God has been pleased to bestow upon me, just as He has been pleased to bestow upon you a keen power of seeing and enjoying beauty where others perhaps see none; this is called artistic perception. It is no sort of credit to you or me, any more than is the color of our eyes, or a faculty for mathematics, or an athletic body. “Now in my case, in which you are pleased to be interested, the perception occasionally is so keen that the spiritual world appears to me as visible as what we call the natural world. In such moments, although I generally know the difference between the spiritual and the natural, yet they appear to me simultaneously, as if on the same plane. It depends on my choice as to which of the two I see the more clearly.” (4-5)

This passage is indispensable to understanding Benson’s view of art for two reasons. First, to Benson the artist is one who is temperamentally predisposed to a certain form of heightened perception—one who sees and enjoys beauty “where others perhaps see none.” Such an idea is not a particularly novel one; in fact, it is a thoroughly Romantic one in many respects. Contrary to strict neoclassical views of art in which an artist can
be fashioned through hard work and scrupulous attention to established rules, artistic perception is to some degree inherent in the psyche of the artist. Second, and perhaps more importantly, is the vibrant sacramentalism of the priest's description. This sacramentalism is foundational to all of Benson's work. According to the sacramental system of the Church based on the Incarnation of Christ, God not only transcends His creation, but is also immanent in it. Therefore, the beauty of the natural world is a window to the divine because in some inexplicable, mystical way, the natural world is actually infused with the supernatural. Though slightly different, the artist is analogous to the mystic because both perceive divine reality in intensified ways. Parallels to the Romantics are, of course, evident; however, whereas the Romantics, in many cases, pursued an amorphous mysticism with an ambiguous end (one thinks here of the unnamed demiurge of Shelley's "Mont Blanc"), Benson's sacramental art and mysticism are directed towards the Christian God. Thus, art is once more consecrated by its very real interaction with a very real God. As Janet Grayson observes, for Benson, "Fiction conveying a religious idea was tantamount to a sacramental and as such was conveying truth as nothing else could." It is, of course, difficult to reconcile such a doctrine with Aestheticism.

Benson's sacramentalism is important also in that every act of description by the Christian artist becomes a kind of extended meditation on God. Benson's novels are rife with lengthy and sensuous passages of description, especially about nature, which some critics have claimed distract from the flow of the novel as a whole. Many read like poetic digressions from the main narrative—lyrical interludes of charm and beauty. But while they may disrupt the smooth flow of the novel, these descriptive passages
reinforce the presence of the supernatural in that novel and, by extension, in the world at large. The presence of God is revealed through an artistic rendering of His natural creation.

Again, however, one sees in Benson the Romantic love of beauty balanced by the counter-Romantic reaction to its extreme form. Though he believes that writers like Blake, and Keats with his “Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty,” are hinting at something genuine and right, he is unwilling to accept these concepts as the final word and seems anxious about slipping into aesthetic extremism. In the same letter quoted above, Benson continues by touting the dangers of servile submission to beauty, and offers instead the simple faith in the revealed truth of the Catholic Church. It is worth quoting at length:

For sheer dull morals I take my orders, as I take my faith, from the Catholic Church. Don’t you? I have a kind of passion for dull facts; I admire a man who lives in uninspiring duty as immensely as I admire an OX; and I deny with all my power that a man’s sense of beauty is identical with that heavenly thing; hence while certainly the Beautiful is the Good, one’s own conception of the Beautiful is not at all the same as one’s own conception of the Good, still less with Good itself. Therefore, I disagree profoundly with those who say that what they think to be beautiful is bound to be right.

On the other side, I am sorrier than I can say, and without a TOUCH of superiority, for the man who is led wrong by beauty. He is like leaves—I cannot bear to see such a whirling fall; and how many there are! They fly so exquisitely on rosy wings far above me; and then, without warning, they are in the mud flats. If only they will understand that they are in the mud, and that they are ugly and shattered—oh, what won’t I do?—muddy myself, suffer shame—anything. But I despair when they insist on looking at their broken wings and saying how lovely they are; when they declare there is no mud, and that the mud itself is lovely too, or that it is better to fly and fall than not to fly.²⁶

For Benson, the only true and fixed standard of Good is the revealed doctrine of the Church, for these, he would argue, are objective and divine. He admits that in a kind of
Platonic way, "the Beautiful is the Good"; however, earthly perceptions of beauty are highly subjective and therefore should not be conflated erroneously with that which is objectively (because dogmatically) right. Moreover, beauty itself can sound a kind of siren-song for the unwitting traveler, luring him down a path which eventually terminates in a skewed perception of the world, where one insists that "the mud itself is lovely too." One perceives in this caveat a protest against not only the dangers of Aestheticism, but also against the Decadence commonly associated with it.

Benson's most powerful statement against the excesses of Aestheticism is his novel, *The Sentimentalists*, published in 1906. The novel is the story of a certain *poseur*, Christopher Dell, who is reformed spiritually and psychologically through the harsh intervention of a secretive mystic, John Rolls. Dell, an embellished composite of Frederick Rolfe (with whom Benson developed a friendship) and two other men Benson knew at Cambridge, is an aesthete in every way, a dandy in the line of Oscar Wilde:

> Beyond the single candle on the white and crumby table-cloth, stood a man a year or two older than himself and a couple inches taller; one hand was hidden in a buttoned-up Chesterfield coat, the other, with a silver ring upon it, rested with finger-tips on the cloth; a bowler hat with a caved-in top lay beside a knotted black-thorn near his hand. The man's face, as Dick saw it in the candlelight, was smoothshaven and long; he had a long nose that appeared slightly pressed into his thin cheeks; his black hair was neatly parted in the middle; his full-lipped mouth and projecting chin seemed tilted in a kind of tragic appeal, and his sharp black eyes looked at him under half-lowered lids.

Benson takes great pains to portray Chris as the aesthete extraordinaire. His mannerisms are repeatedly compared to those of an actor. He eats, for example, "as a suburban actor would eat... with dramatic swiftness" (8). He is guilty of "glaring theatricality" (11) and "had all the faults of an overdrawn portrait; there was not a movement of his that was not an exaggeration" (20). "There was a glimmer of footlights about his
personality” (22). Chris carries a copy of Boccaccio with him at all times (7), and he suffers from neuralgia, depression, and headaches—other odd but common features of decadent heroes like Huysmans’s Des Esseintes in *A rebours*. Moreover, there is an androgyny or effeminateness about Chris, a sexual ambiguity stereotypical to decadent protagonists. He is “an effeminate ass” (22), and Benson later compares him to “an hysterical woman” (61). Chris is described as a Roman Catholic “at heart” (124), but he is also quick to come to the “defense of the truth of all religions.” Chris’s religious synergism knows no bounds as he keeps “a white bust of Hermes with a red lamp before it” just across the room from “a blue lamp before the image of the Mother of God” (12). He is intelligent, cranking out articles about his travel experiences to pay the bills, but idiosyncratic, too. He is capricious and non-committal about the important things in life, and painfully serious about the unimportant. He harbors a mysterious past in a Paris workhouse, and there are hints of sexual deviance as well. Benson even alludes to Oscar Wilde directly as Chris asks, “‘Who was it who said that nature imitates art?’” (55).²⁹

Chris, in the traditional fashion of the aesthete, also has his way with women, and in the course of the story, he falls in love with and becomes engaged to a respectable but whimsical girl, Annie Hamilton, the daughter of a conventional English country family. When Annie’s mother discovers Chris’s sordid history, however, she forces the couple to break off the engagement. Dick Yolland, a Catholic priest and friend of Chris, begs Mrs. Hamilton to extend God’s forgiveness to Chris and to allow the relationship to continue. She is unwilling to do so, and in a climactic moment verging on melodrama, Chris renounces God in a fit of anger and depression. “‘Who is God? God?’” screams Chris, falling to his knees (162).
Chris retreats into a private world of frustration and self-pity. Dick yearns to help his friend, so in an effort to rehabilitate Chris, Dick introduces him to Mr. John Rolls, a strange mystic who lives in isolation in a large and lonely country house complete with Gothic touches ("It has galleries, a court, a moat, a King's room, a Queen's room; it had a hall, but that's gone; and it has a ghost" [130]). As it turns out, Mr. Rolls has a troubled past of his own, having contributed to the death of his wife through his own immoral behaviors. Rolls determines that in order to cure Chris of his spiritual malady, Chris must be "broken to pieces" (186). Previous attempts to reform Chris have failed because, argues Rolls to Dick Yolland, "innocence and love are not sufficient" (192). Rolls agrees to take Chris on as a servant, and in his characteristic way, Chris romanticizes his role as assistant gardener as an opportunity for raw primitivism, a chance to work the soil. Chris believes that he is "a child of nature, spoilt by the miserable conventions of an artificial society" (268-9), and in keeping with his continual posturing, Chris carefully devises a new role for himself:

Yes! he had composed his new attitude at last; it all fitted in beautifully; he was to be an exquisite recluse, speaking in a low voice, looking with deep regretful eyes, understanding men and things, realising the hollowness of life and the joys of the interior spirit; a silent intimate of this distinguished old man [Rolls]; pointed out to visitors as a man with a history—a history preserved as it were in lavender—whispered about in corners, perhaps even at Hinton. (225)

Chris cannot escape his performative tendencies, even when he understands that he has been brought to Rolls's house as "a patient" and "a psychical convalescent" (224). Chris, of course, is emblematic of Aestheticism as a whole, and in passages like this one the reader fathoms the implications of embracing this philosophy uncritically. Chris has opted for an artificial version of himself so many times—he has repeatedly privileged
social form over his own personality—that there exists little truth at the core of his being. All that remains for Chris is the opportunity to create a new role for himself as circumstances change. He is the masks he wears and nothing more. Art has prevailed, but at what cost to Chris?

This idea is reinforced throughout the novel by Benson’s continual attention to mirrors. Frequently, Chris pauses to gaze at himself in a mirror. Chris “pos[es] a moment before a tall glass” while out shopping (19), and moments later when riding home in a hansom cab, he is “eyeing himself in the corner-glass with that peculiarly solemn and mask-like expression of the male sex before a mirror” (20). John Rolls’s house is also full of mirrors and mirror-like objects. The moat is “as still as a mirror—a mirror of bewildering green and blue and rose” (180), and “an oily mirror of rosy sky” (191). At Rolls’s estate, Chris resides in a small room with “a looking glass” (202); and in one of the key scenes in the book, Chris stumbles into another room where “he found a tall mirror, iridescent and dusky with age”. In a moment of true vulnerability, Chris peers into the mirror and begins to question his identity:

[Chris] posed before it for a few moments, advancing first one foot and then the other, folding his arms, letting them drop languidly, staring with an infinite variety of expressions into the eyes of his own ghostly replica. “Who are you?” he cried softly at last. “You stranger from the land of dreams! From where do you come? whither are you going? What is the true soul—the very self—behind those—er—those shadowed eyes?”

He leant forward till the melancholy face touched him with the icy smoothness of old glass; then he grew slightly ashamed, and just a little frightened. (222)

On one level, the presence of mirrors throughout the text provides Chris with numerous opportunities to gaze at himself admiringly, thus emphasizing his intrinsic vanity. But on another level, the mirrors act as symbols of Chris’s inner duplicity. Which is the real
Chris, the projected image or the corporeal being casting the image? Chris himself is not sure as he lurches forward, almost hoping for a tangible, sensory solution to his identity crisis but bumping his head on the glass instead. For Chris, who has concocted as many identities as there are reflections when one stands between two mirrors, "the true soul", "the very self" seems lost forever.\(^\text{30}\)

After a month of working for Rolls, Chris has had enough of what he perceives to be Rolls's unkind and undeservedly servile treatment of him, and he begs to be let go.

Striking back with sheer force, Rolls confronts Chris with razor-sharp language:

"You had better go back to your women and your beast's life, and forget that you ever thought yourself a man. It is probably the only thing you can do now. Perhaps you will have learnt not to brag; that is one lesson at any rate. You can go back and write your stuff, if you want; but you will not forget this—that you are not man enough to hold a spade. Or you may blow your brains out and go to hell; I should expect that of you. It would be characteristic; I wonder you have not done it before; I should have thought you feeble and stupid enough for it. You can take your choice." (272)

Chastised, Chris—with a mysterious robot-like obsequiousness—remains with Rolls; but he is eventually driven to the breaking-point. Late one night in a fit of despair, Chris attempts suicide, but he is prevented at the last moment by the waiting Rolls and Yolland.

Chris is redeemed through Rolls's spiritual therapies, and at the end of the novel, a transformed Chris attends a garden party in honor of the marriage between Annie and her new husband, Lord Brasted, thereby exhibiting his own newfound forgiveness. In order to emphasize Chris's redemption further, Benson employs a creative narrative technique. He writes about the party in first person from the point of view of one of the
guests attending. An "I" emerges, an unidentified character with no knowledge of previous events, to offer a new description of Chris:

He stood there waiting until the two men had spoken a word or two, and then he stepped forward, smiling. I notice then how very pleasantly his face lighted up, and how very white his teeth were. He looked like an actor, and yet he was not at all theatrical in his bearing. (327)

This comparatively objective point of view has the effect of reinforcing Chris's rehabilitation. Even a person entirely unaware of Chris's history declares him "not at all theatrical in his bearing," which is precisely the mark of redemption for which the reader has been waiting. Chris has ceased performing, and the outward image being projected coincides with a healthy inner-self.

Benson's characterization of Chris is so stereotypical (a fact which he readily admitted) and the contrast at the end of the novel so complete, that the message of The Sentimentalists is clear: The life of the aesthete is empty and purposeless; and by extension, so is the philosophy behind it. This theme is underlined by the disease metaphors that run throughout the book. A brief glance at selected chapter titles is enough to indicate Benson's feelings regarding Aestheticism and Decadence: "An Attack of Feverishness," "Infection," "A New Disorder," "The Hospital," "The Operating Table," "A Recovery." All of these titles are metaphorical since—aside from Chris's stereotypical neuralgia—infections, hospitals, and surgeries never appear literally in the text. Chris's disease is a spiritual one for which only a spiritual cure will suffice. In a letter dated October 8, 1907, Benson writes in regard to The Sentimentalists:

I am getting both praise and blame. I wrote it deliberately with a view to a certain class of poseur whom I come across continually—wanting to show them what wicked idiots they are. I do agree that, apart from the
supernatural, their reformation, psychologically speaking, is impossible. But by grace they are cured again and again.31

Chris Dell reappears in the sequel to the novel, The Conventionalists, where he himself has become a kind of mystic in the line of John Rolls, helping Algy Banister to find his own vocation as a Carthusian monk. Chris has developed into an eloquent and mature spiritual guide, “an old inhabitant” of mystical realms of experience “knowing all about it, perfectly familiar. . . with unexplored woods and paths.”32 His vocation is to live in Rolls’s house, “‘to do his little jobs, and say his prayers’” (131). Benson’s depiction of a spiritually advanced Chris in The Conventionalists broadcasts his message of God’s redemptive grace perhaps louder than anything in The Sentimentalists alone could do.

A Strange Attraction?: Another Side to Benson’s View of Aestheticism

Benson’s distrust of Aestheticism would appear plain and straightforward were it not for a peculiar and almost paradoxical attraction that he exhibited towards the movement, and especially towards a number of authors frequently considered to be quintessentially decadent—specifically, Walter Pater, Frederick Rolfe (who enjoyed masquerading as Baron Corvo), and the French author, J.K. Huysmans. Benson continually lauds these authors in his letters and stories, and regularly re-read certain of their works with pleasure. Naturally, Benson read a host of other writers and admired many; but these three authors seem to receive special and continued consideration in Benson’s mind. Thus, despite Benson’s seeming rejection of Aestheticism, he nevertheless entertained a somewhat bizarre attraction to decadent writers. The question, of course, is why? Why did Benson feel himself drawn to writers with whom he was unable to identify in so
many ways? Even more singular is the fact that Benson’s books show little, if any, direct similarities with the canon of authors he held in such high esteem. If Benson had no intention of adopting techniques similar to those of the authors he admired, what was it about their books which drew him irresistably?

With one of these three writers, Frederick Rolfe, Benson actually sustained a brief and turbulent friendship. Benson was a huge admirer of Rolfe’s controversial novel, Hadrian VII, the story of an unknown Englishman who ascends to the papacy. Once Pope, the Englishman makes a number of idealistic and sweeping changes, much to the chagrin of a calcified and closed-minded Catholic hierarchy. The novel is highly autobiographical and egotistical, with the main character reflecting many of Rolfe’s own characteristics. Moreover, it is written in a typically decadent style, a prose of saccharine flamboyance and almost impenetrable density: “There are few more nerve-shattering spectacles than this of a lithe and graceful young gentleman in scarlet behaving, without any warning, exactly like a monkey on a stick, manifesting the same startling descendent and ascendent angularity, the same imperturbable inevitable intolerable agility.” Similar sentences plague the entire work. Benson was swept away by this work, keeping it on his nightstand by his bed at all times; and as a result, Benson wrote a rather flattering letter to Rolfe praising him for his book. Out of this letter came more letters, and out of these letters, a brief friendship ensued which included a bike tour across England and the occasional exchange of ideas and manuscripts. The two even talked of collaborating on a book about St. Thomas of Canterbury. The friendship eventually dissolved in a series of anger-filled
correspondences. Still, Benson admired Rolfe’s *Hadrian VII* a great deal, declaring it
to be a book he always wanted by his side.

The other two writers, Pater and Huysmans, though Benson’s affiliation with them
was only by way of their works, also exerted a profound influence on Benson’s mind.
Particularly, Benson loved Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*, writing home from seminary in
Rome to have his copy sent to him. Benson also adored Huysmans’s *La Cathédrale*
and *St. Lydwine of Schiedam*, and eventually suffered through his earlier “satanic”
novels like *La Bas*. Huysmans, like Rolfe, also wrote in the turgid, almost mind-
numbing style associated with many of the decadent writers. Pater’s style is slightly
more accessible, though it, too, is thick and complex at times. Benson’s works share
none of the characteristics of these novels. He did not attempt to emulate the style of
Rolfe, Huysmans, or Pater. And yet, Benson displayed a lifelong fascination with these
decadent works. What exactly was the attraction?

On the one hand, Benson’s attraction to these three writers can be accounted for by
the writers’ own interest in Catholicism. *Hadrian VII*, though misunderstood by and
controversial to many Catholics, nevertheless emphasizes the power of the Church to
reform the world, a theme which Benson himself reiterated time and again. As for
*Marius*, the novel concludes with Marius dying in the arms of Catholics in Rome,
implying a desire for the Catholic Church if not an outright commitment to it. Benson
surely recognized this ending as a symbol of the desire in every human being for
reconciliation with God and Church. Likewise, Benson undoubtedly applauded
Huysmans’s gradual journey towards Catholicism, even if, in the words of T.S. Eliot in
reference to Baudelaire, he “entered through the back door” of Decadence and Satanism.
On the other hand, one still wonders if Aestheticism did not, at certain times in his life, exert a greater influence over Benson’s imagination than he himself would care to admit. In the personal letter quoted above, for example, in which Benson ostensibly cautions his friend against the dangers of beauty, he himself becomes rather carried away with spinning his own beautiful image:

On the other side, I am sorrier than I can say, and without a TOUCH of superiority, for the man who is led wrong by beauty. He is like leaves—I cannot bear to see such a whirling fall; and how many there are! They fly so exquisitely on rosy wings far above me; and then, without warning, they are in the mud flats.  

One mustn’t overlook the poetry here. Even when declaiming an unhealthy addiction to beauty, Benson is beckoned by it himself. He is at once attracted to and unsure of the power of beauty. Certain biographical details would also seem to indicate a latent attraction to Aestheticism as a possibility. When residing at the Cambridge Rectory in 1905, Benson took pains to decorate his room in what many considered to be outrageous taste. Janet Grayson describes the quarters of the priest:

The sitting room was done in garden colors, hung with jungle green canvas, rumored to be Gobelins. Everywhere were bowls of lilies and roses and poppies and walls covered with art-nouveau and photographs of friends; tall wooden candlesticks and Madonnas dripping with Rosaries and moonstones; a mahogany writing desk with piles of letters fallen over as if left in haste, and a big oak chest he tried but failed to cover with scarlet leopard skin, which now lay in a heap at its side. The floor he laboriously stained making the boards look like oak. He was proud of the results, and said so.

This description of Benson’s room hardly seems the likely abode of a Catholic clergyman. Many claimed that his decorative style was too decadent, though he promptly denied it. Still, despite Benson’s denial, it is difficult to dismiss the indulgent tendencies of such eclectic decor.
One recent study by Ellis Hanson posits an implicit connection between Decadence and Catholicism. On the one hand, "Roman Catholicism is central to both the stylistic peculiarities and the thematic preoccupations of the decadents. When they defined their own styles... the decadents often emphasized Christianity and the spiritual quality of language. ... Huysmans defines his conversion to decadence as an essentially Roman Catholic revolt against the materialism of his age." Hanson's argument here seems to be a basic restatement of the not uncommon argument that the decadents and aesthetes, in keeping with their own Romantic roots, adopted much of the rhetoric of orthodox Christianity in their battle against a prevailing naturalism in literature. Slightly more provocative is Hanson's suggestion that the Catholic Church itself incorporates an element of Decadence which, in contrast to the iconclasm and puritanical impulses of Protestantism, attracted writers like Wilde, Pater and Huysmans to Rome:

Catholicism is itself an elaborate paradox. The decadents merely emphasized the point within their own aesthetic of paradox. The Church is at once modern and yet medieval, ascetic and yet sumptuous, spiritual and yet sensual, chaste and yet erotic, homophobic and yet homoerotic, suspicious of aestheticism and yet an elaborate work of art. For English decadents Christianity was the last hope of paganism in the modern world. In the Crucifixion they found the suffering of a great criminal and individualist... They discovered grace in the depths of shame and sainthood in the heart of the sinner. In chastity and the priesthood they found a spiritualization of desire, a rebellion against nature and the instincts, and a polymorphous redistribution of pleasure in the body. In the elaborate stagecraft of ritualism they celebrated the effeminate effusions and subversions of the dandy. Under the cowl of monasticism was a cult of homoerotic community.

This recognition of the paradoxes in Catholicism, indeed of the very "paganism" of Catholicism, was acknowledged by Benson. "I desire to be a pagan," declared Benson while reading *Marius the Epicurean*. He cherished Rolfe's paganism, for "all sound Catholics are that." Even in *The Sentimentalists*—Benson's alleged antidote to...
Aestheticism—he talks of “Catholic paganism”: “He [Chris] remembered the curious thrill [of Rome] with which he realised the splendid Catholic paganism of it all” (134-5).

However, Hanson’s study fails to apply to Benson and the Edwardian Revivalists in some important ways. First, authors like Benson, Chesterton, and Belloc receive little, if any, attention. Second, though the study by its very title, Decadence and Catholicism, purports to be an examination of the cross-pollination of these two modes of thought, Hanson seems more interested in decadents who flirted with Catholicism (Huysmans, Pater, and Wilde) than with Catholics who may have flirted with Decadence. Catholics like Benson admitted the pagan elements of Catholicism and even celebrated their presence in the Catholic faith as evidence of Catholicism’s redemptive and assimilative powers within cultures. In a letter drafted while in Rome, Benson writes: “Marius has arrived safely, and I have flown through the first volume. It is extraordinary how out here one feels that all that was good in the old religions has been taken up and transformed in this.”^43 Rather than struggling to abolish all vestiges of paganism, early Catholic fathers simply adopted aspects of the pagan faith and redeemed them for their own Christian purposes. Benson clearly rejoiced in and savored the aesthetic pomp and circumstance of the Catholic Church—he was a ritualist at heart—but he scoffed at the decadent and immoral behavior commonly associated with Aestheticism proper.

Thus, as Grayson proposes, “Hugh’s aestheticism was the ritualist in him speaking, and little more than that.”^44 When it comes to Benson’s odd attraction to writers like Rolfe, Pater, and Huysmans, it seems more likely that he commended what he took to be their Catholic longings, while at the same time, he appreciated the beauty of their observations. Huysmans was “an artist anyhow!” Benson once wrote,^45 and he was a
true artist because he found beauty where no one else could, and because in the end, that beauty led Huysmans to the threshold of the divine. When treated this way, beauty expressed the good, the right, the higher reality. When swallowed in large, gluttonous, unthinking gulps, beauty could lead one astray. This is what Benson himself came to realize in the course of his flirtation with Aestheticism. Evelyn Waugh writes about Benson: “Superficially he was an aesthete, but the Catholic church made little aesthetic appeal to him. . . What he sought and found in the church was authority and catholicity.” Waugh’s description of Benson as a superficial aesthete is accurate, but he drastically underestimates the artistic richness of the Church and the pressure it exerted on Benson’s imagination. Though Benson did not become a Catholic because of the beauty within the Church, he was grateful for the perspective on beauty the Church granted him, and he savored the Church’s pageantry to the end.
Chapter Notes


2 Coleridge does, in fact, admit the role of the will in the composition of poetry: "The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of the man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control (laxis effertur habenis) reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities" (*Biographia Literaria; or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. George Watson [London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1975], 173-4; italics mine except for Latin). Thus, Coleridge sees the will as having a primary part to play in the poetic faculties, though even he acknowledges that the control exerted by the will is "gentle and unnoticed."


8 See Donald Read, *The Age of Urban Democracy, England, 1868-1914*, rev. ed. (London: Longman, 1994), 418. According to Read, even some of the "old-fashioned" critics of the day were concerned about the decline in "serious literature."

9 I believe we see here yet another difference between the Romantics and the Edwardian Revivalists. The difference is perhaps best revealed in the form of a question: To what degree does the submission of an artist to a higher authority affect his/her art? The Romantics were accountable to no one but themselves, whereas Christians, at least theoretically, are accountable in their actions to God. George Orwell claimed that
Christian artists were unduly hampered by their inability to think outside the box of orthodox Christianity, but an artist like Chesterton would seem to cast doubt on this statement.

10 A number of concise and helpful summaries of the dispute exist, as well as some more detailed analyses. See, for example, John Coates, "The Ball and the Cross and the Edwardian Novel of Ideas," The Chesterton Review 18 (Feb. 1992), 49-81; and Anthea Trodd, A Reader's Guide to Edwardian Literature (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1991), 101-107.

11 Naturally, we should note the implicit assumption here that "high art" and direct social commentary are in some way mutually exclusive. See Wayne C. Booth's chapter in his The Rhetoric of Fiction, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 67-86, dealing with the modernist notion that "All authors should be objective."

12 Qtd. in Trodd, Edwardian Literature, 106.


14 Qtd. In Ibid., 52.

15 Ibid., 54.

16 Qtd. in Ibid., 51.


19 One must be wary, of course, of immediately assigning this utterance to Benson himself, especially when Benson reminds the reader in his preface that he "must confess [him]self unable to sympathize" with the some of the fictional writer's thoughts (vii). Still, Martindale, for one, appears comfortable in this case with treating the thoughts of the persona as being one with those of Benson. Two considerations would seem to justify this. First, there is typically little distance between Benson himself and his implied author in many of his novels (one of the main criticisms leveled against Benson and perhaps the primary source of the charges of propaganda); thus, even though Benson tries to distance himself from his persona, it is easy to doubt the sincerity of his claim. Second, and more compellingly, the statement generally coincides with what else is known about Benson's theories of art. Therefore, it appears safe to follow Martindale's lead and to attempt to explicate this short but highly suggestive utterance that art is religion in solution.

21 Qtd. in Ibid., 318.


23 Robert Hugh Benson, The Light Invisible (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1904), vii. All further quotations are noted parenthetically in the text.

24 Grayson, Life and Works, 142.

25 For example, Grayson writes: “A plot-line is frequently sacrificed to long descriptive passages, beautifully crafted, but distracting.” Ibid.

26 Qtd. in Martindale, Life, II, 318-9.

27 See Grayson, Life and Works, 92, n. 5.

28 Robert Hugh Benson, The Sentimentalists (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1906), 4. All further citations are noted parenthetically in the text.

29 It is also interesting that when Mrs. Hamilton is looking for something to read, she chooses Walter Pater’s Renaissance.

30 The reflections of the “blue and green and rose” in the mirror-like moat also embody the tensions of Wildean Aestheticism. Does nature imitate art or does art imitate nature?

31 Qtd. in Martindale, Life, II, 58.

32 Robert Hugh Benson, The Conventionalists (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1908), 130. All further citations are noted parenthetically in the text.

33 Frederick Rolfe, Hadrian VII (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1982), 266.

34 Grayson, Life and Works, 82.


36 Ibid., 59.

37 Qtd. in Ibid., 318-9.

38 Ibid, 84-5.

39 Ellis Hanson, Decadence and Catholicism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 5.
40 Ibid., 7.


42 Qtd. in Ibid., 82.


44 Grayson, *Life and Works*, 93, n. 9.

45 Qtd. in Martindale, *Life*, II, 336.

CHAPTER 4

CONFRONTING THE FUTURE: BENSON'S LORD OF THE WORLD

Writers who travel into the future, good or bad, are all delightful.
—Hilaire Belloc, "On Fantastic Books"

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
—W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

The king shall act as he pleases. He shall exalt himself and consider himself
greater than any god, and shall speak horrendous things against the God of gods.
He shall prosper until the period of wrath is completed, for what is determined
shall be done. He shall pay no respect to the gods of his ancestors, or to the one
beloved by women; he shall pay no respect to any other god, for he shall consider
himself greater than all.

—The Book of Daniel 11:36-7

In 1910, G.K. Chesterton published a sociological piece entitled What's Wrong with
the World. One particularly memorable chapter, "The Fear of the Past", speaks of the
Edwardian obsession with the future. Chesterton writes:

The last few decades have been marked by a special cultivation of the
romance of the future. We seem to have made up our minds to
misunderstand what has happened; and we turn, with a sort of relief, to
stating what will happen—which is (apparently) much easier. The
modern man no longer preserves the memoirs of his great-grandfather;
but is engaged in writing a detailed and authoritative biography of his
great-grandson. . . . This spirit is apparent everywhere, even to the
creation of a form of futurist romance. Sir Walter Scott stands at the
dawn of the nineteenth century for the novel of the past; Mr. H. G. Wells stands at the dawn of the twentieth century for the novel of the future.¹

Though not entirely hostile to this growing love affair with the future, neither does Chesterton find it to be completely healthy. "The modern mind," argues Chesterton, "is forced towards the future by a certain sense of fatigue, not unmixed with terror, with which it regards the past. . . . And the goad which drives it on thus eagerly is not an affectation for futurity. Futurity does not exist, because it is still future. Rather it is a fear of the past; a fear not merely of the evil in the past, but of the good in the past also."² Chesterton himself distrusted this headlong rush towards futurity—"we have not got all the good out of" the ideas of the past³—but he nonetheless perceptively documents a very real passion for futurity during the Edwardian Era.

This interest in futurity contributed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the popularization of numerous types of fiction set in the future. H.G. Wells, especially, wrote prolifically, turning out scientific romance after scientific romance, many of which are set in the distant future. In *The Time Machine*, for example, published in 1895, Wells catapults his hero ahead more than 800,000 years to the year AD 802,701. He followed this novel with a host of other futuristic adventures, including *Anticipations* (1901), "A Dream of Armageddon" (1901), *The Discovery of the Future* (1902), *The Food of the Gods* (1904), *In the Days of the Comet* (1906), *The War in the Air* (1908), and *The World Set Free* (1914). Other forms of futuristic fiction also appeared. A rise in utopic fiction and the emergence of the dystopic novel at the end of the nineteenth century paralleled Wells's massive output of futuristic science fiction. Indeed, Wells's early novels, *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*, were essentially dystopic in spirit and "harboured a fundamental mistrust of the mechanistic-
Though, as numerous critics have pointed out, Wells's vision of the future gradually shifted towards a more optimistic perspective, dystopic fiction caught on widely, leading to the two great dystopic works of English literature—Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*. Even another, more lowly class of pop fiction belies the Edwardian enchantment with the future. As rumors of war became increasingly common, the so-called “invasion novel” attracted the attention of English citizens. Invasion novels, unlike Wells's *Time Machine*, did not look to the distant future, but rather to the near future, portraying frightening scenarios in which England is attacked and occupied by foreign armies, mostly from Germany. Nevertheless, these novels employed some of the same devices used in other forms of futuristic fiction, including the extrapolation of current events to their extreme ends. Whether Edwardians were truly afraid of the past as Chesterton suggested, or were simply carried away by the spirit accompanying the dawn of a new century, it is clear that a great number of Edwardians exhibited a strong fascination with the future and what it might contain.

Adding to this corpus of futuristic fiction were two novels by Robert Hugh Benson, *Lord of the World* and *The Dawn of All*. Of all Robert Hugh Benson's novels, only *Lord of the World* is readily available today. Originally published in 1907 and purporting to take place some time around the year 2000, *Lord of the World* relates the rise of the Antichrist and the subsequent persecution of the Catholic Church. *Lord of the World* clearly owes a great debt to the dystopic novels of the time, and the specific influence of H.G. Wells is also evident. But in other ways, *Lord of the World* may also be termed an
"apocalyptic novel" in that it draws not only on the dystopic and science fiction traditions, but on the Christian eschatological heritage as well.

Benson’s novel is currently enjoying a newfound popularity, likely due to the widespread attention garnered by the best-selling *Left Behind* series written by evangelicals Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. Indeed, the *Left Behind* series is the latest in a long line of fundamentalist books and films depicting the end of the world that extends back to the early twentieth century. The apocalyptic furor brought on by the popularity of these books has driven many readers to rediscover Benson’s novel; yet the circumstances of this rediscovery lead to some potentially sticky interpretive traps. For the past 70 years, apocalyptic fiction has been successfully dominated by premillennial fundamentalists like LaHaye and Jenkins. With such complete supremacy often comes a significant adjustment in popular expectations of a given genre. Readers approaching Benson’s novel for the first time may be tempted erroneously to superimpose their own predetermined hermeneutic templates for evaluating and understanding apocalyptic fiction. But while even the most uncritical reader cannot escape the clear Catholic bias of *Lord of the World* (in Benson’s fictive future, “Protestantism is dead”), the real pitfalls lie not in the superficial differences between Benson’s novel and other popular twentieth-century portraits of the end times, but rather in the subtle underlying differences arising both from Benson’s Catholic eschatology and his personal inventiveness. Strangely, there is much that premillennial fundamentalists might find familiar in Benson’s novel, for Benson anticipates some of their themes and characterizations; but there lies beneath *Lord of the World* a great deal more that distinguishes it from the barrage of twentieth century apocalyptic fiction that followed it.
In fact, Lord of the World bears only a stock resemblance to the mass of popular apocalyptic literature written—mostly by Protestant fundamentalists—throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Benson’s novel proves to be a rather bizarre admixture of science fiction, theology, Edwardian culture, and parable. While it draws roughly on traditional elements of Christian eschatology, its fundamental purpose lies not in forecasting the future but in commenting critically on the present. Accordingly, Benson creates a vision of the end times that differs significantly from what one usually encounters in other twentieth century novels of the apocalyptic genre. A good portion of this chapter, then, will be an attempt at classification. What exactly are the multifarious strands that converge to make Lord of the World what it is? To answer this question, it will be helpful to approach the novel by examining two of its more distinctive aspects. First, this chapter will examine Benson’s depiction of Julian Felsenburgh, the Antichrist character in the novel. Second, this chapter will attempt to pinpoint Benson’s eschatology and purpose in writing the novel (for the two are related), particularly as they apply to the rather ambiguous ending of the book.

Lord of the World is Benson’s most enduring novel. The story, of course, depicts the rise of Antichrist in the world, his subsequent rule, and what is perhaps the earth’s ultimate destruction. At the same time, the book traces the concurrent decline of the Catholic Church as a result of the Antichrist’s advent, and the struggles of a few faithful to sustain hope in a rapidly changing world. The novel begins with a prologue in which two Catholic priests, Father Percy Franklin and Father Francis, pay a visit to an elderly Mr. Templeton. The exact year is unspecified, though one gets a sense that the story
takes place sometime around the turn of the twenty-first century. Mr. Templeton, who is “over ninety years old”, rarely leaves his underground house “some forty feet below the level of the Thames embankment.”11 The environment of this subterranean abode, though not entirely unpleasant, is wholly artificial and practical. The room in which the priests sit is painted a shade of green “prescribed by the Board of Health” and is lighted with “artificial sunlight.” The temperature of the room is controlled with precision so that it is exactly 18 degrees Centigrade. The furniture is “constructed...according to the prevailing system of soft asbestos enamel welded over iron, indestructible, pleasant to the touch, and resembling mahogany.” An electric fire burns in the room as well, and hydraulic lifts transport visitors up to the street level where they can catch volors—a kind of flying machine akin to airplanes (in 1907 mass air transit was still the stuff of science fiction)—that will take them to their destinations with incredible speed.12

Mr. Templeton proceeds to narrate for the two priests the main historical events that have occurred over the course of the twentieth century. In 1917, says Mr. Templeton, the Labour Party pushed their socialist agenda on England and eventually managed to institute a communist state: “The new order began then; and the Communists have never suffered a serious reverse since” (xi). The Established Church, continues Templeton, was abolished in 1929, ten years after the abandonment of the Nicene Creed, and the House of Lords soon followed in 1935. A Free Church arose for a time, but was unable to withstand renewed attacks by German Higher Criticism in the 1920’s. The Free Church grew progressively more liberal, rejecting the infallibility of the Scriptures and the divinity of Jesus, and so, too, slipped into non-existence. Eventually, all England was divided between the supernatural Catholics and the materialistic communists. New
Poor Laws contributed to the downfall of the Monarchy and the Universities, and in the
‘50’s and ‘60’s, the Necessary Trades Bill nationalized all professions, an Education Act
ingrained “dogmatic secularism”, and capital punishment was eradicated (xiv). Marx’s
doctrines were fully embraced in 1989, and England just managed to become a part of
“the final scheme of Western Free Trade” (xv).

Earlier wars led to a great deal of geographical reconfiguration as well. America
prevented England from taking part in the “Eastern War”, and so Britain lost the
colonies of India and Australia. Powerful in her own right, America proceeded to annex
Canada. At the time of the story, the world is divided into three great regions—the
Eastern Empire, spanning from the Ural Mountains to the Bering Straits; Europe,
including western Russia and Africa; and the American Republic, consisting of North
and South America and the Pacific Islands. As for religion, all that remains is
Catholicism, Humanitarianism, and a handful of small Eastern sects. “Protestantism is
dead,” and “practically all Christians who have any supernatural belief left” have
recognized the need for a central authority to guard against “disintegration”. These,
then, have flocked to the Catholic Church. Humanitarianism, Catholicism’s great foe, is
“becoming an actual religion in itself, though anti-supernatural. It is Pantheism; it is
developing a ritual under Freemasonry; it has a creed, ‘God is Man,’ and the rest. It has
therefore a real food of a sort to offer to religious cravings” (xvii). The secular religion
of Humanitarianism is now in the majority (it has spread all over Europe and America),
and Catholic freedom of expression has been regulated accordingly. Only Rome and
Ireland remain as unadulterated Catholic strongholds. The world has accomplished
under the auspices of democracy what, according to Templeton, should have been
accomplished under the guidance of the Catholic Church—namely, the abolition of an over-developed sense of nationalism. As a result, a European parliament is about to be ratified, and Esperanto is already prevalent as a trans-national language.

The primary narrative begins with a discussion between Oliver Brand, an English government official, and his wife Mabel. A possible invasion is threatening Europe at the hands of the Eastern Empire, motivated it seems by religious fanaticism, and an unknown American by the name of Julian Felsenburgh has been sent with other American diplomats to help negotiate peace between Europe and the East. No one seems to know who this Julian Felsenburgh is, but Oliver surmises that he must be a competent linguist since he has addressed at least five crowds already. Oliver and Mabel, especially Oliver, are also ardent Humanitarianists: “God, so far as He could be known,” thinks Oliver, “was man” (7). Oliver maintains a powerful hatred of the “superstition” of Catholicism, vehemently opposing the fact that Rome and Ireland have been left to Catholics.

Out on an errand one morning, Mabel observes a tragic volor accident. She is listening to the screams of the victims when suddenly Father Franklin pushes through the crowd to minister to the dying souls. Moments later, however, the “ministers of euthanasia” also arrive to put the wounded out of their misery, and Mabel’s heart seems comforted by this. Still, she finds it difficult to forget the image of the priest bending over the dying people with crucifix in hand. She shares her religious discomfort with Oliver when she returns home, but he reminds her that Christianity is superstitious nonsense. She is content with his explanations of the ridiculous nature of faith and retires to her room to rest.
Shortly thereafter, Father Francis relinquishes his faith in favor of Humanitarianism. Father Franklin attempts to persuade him to remain within the Church, but Francis insists on leaving Catholicism forever. At the same time, details about the mysterious Felsenburgh continue to circulate. A group of English priests discusses him over dinner one night. Some claim Felsenburgh is a Freemason, while Percy tells of meeting an American Senator who noted Felsenburgh’s “extraordinary eloquence” and his “quite unusual methods” (33). Biographies and photographs claiming to be genuine representations of this elusive character turn up on newsstands everywhere, and despite Felsenburgh’s relative obscurity and unknown origins, everyone appears to be talking about him.

Some days later as Oliver Brand is addressing a crowd of people gathered in Trafalgar Square to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the passing of the Poor Laws Bill, Oliver is shot at by a Catholic assailant. The Catholic is immediately trampled and strangled to death by the infuriated crowd. Oliver, however, sees his own willingness to suffer for the cause as vindication of the communist spirit. Though religious folk of earlier days had warned that communism was incapable of inspiring nobility in people, Oliver’s shooting has helped to prove them wrong. Meanwhile, news of Felsenburgh continues to pour in. He has taken control of proceedings in the East, and after attending a conference in Paris, Oliver calls home to tell Mabel that Felsenburgh has succeeded in bringing peace to the East. Oliver then invites Mabel to come and join him in London, for Felsenburgh will be visiting there shortly.

Unbeknownst to Oliver and Mabel, however, Oliver’s aging mother, raised a Catholic and recently taken ill, decides to be reconciled to the Catholic Church. Despite
the fact that a Catholic had recently tried to assassinate her son, Mrs. Brand calls for
Percy Franklin to make her submission. Oliver and Mabel catch him in the house, but
Mrs. Brand convinces her son to allow the reconciliation to proceed. Later that night,
Percy witnesses the arrival of Julian Felsenburgh in London. He enters the city
triumphantly flying on a volor, seated in a single chair as on a throne. Massive crowds
that had moments earlier been near hysteria in anticipation are suddenly struck dumb
with a profound silence as Felsenburgh, the bringer of peace, hovers overhead. The next
morning, a newspaper account tells more fully the events of the preceding night, and
even goes so far as to make explicit the parallel between Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem and
Felsenburgh’s entry into London.

Not long after Felsenburgh’s advent, Percy Franklin takes a trip to Rome. There, he
finds “an extraordinary city. . .—the one living example of the old days. Here were to be seen the ancient inconveniences, the insanitary horrors, the incarnation of a world given over to dreaming. The old Church pomp was back, too” (111). This antiquarian Rome, with all of its high art and human imperfection jumbled together, is clearly meant to provide a stark contrast to the pragmatic, sterile environments of the rest of the world. While in Rome, Percy meets the Pope, known affectionately as *Papa Angelicus*, to whom he reports on events in England. Percy also witnesses the Pope saying Mass, with all of its splendor and pageantry. Immediately after the Mass concludes, however, news reaches Percy that “‘Felsenburgh is appointed President of Europe’” (135).

Meanwhile, back in England Humanity-Worship is proceeding at lightning speed.
Because man has fundamental spiritual urges that cannot be long ignored, ceremonies are to be established which allow for formal worship of the God in all men. The
apostate Father Francis, familiar with ritual from his Catholic days, volunteers to lead and organize this new religion of Humanity. The year will be divided by four main celebrations—the Feast of Paternity, the Feast of Maternity, the Feast of Life, and the Feast of Sustenance. Francis, speaking to Oliver Brand, rejoices that in Felsenburgh there is at last a tangible Savior, “‘One that can be seen and handled and praised to His Face! It is like a dream—too good to be true!’” (155).

As plans for the Feast of Paternity go forward, Father Percy Franklin is declared Cardinal-Protector of England in the wake of the previous Cardinal’s death. At Christmas, he is summoned to Rome to attend the Pope at the Christmas Mass, and while there, he receives an inside tip that Catholics back in England are plotting to destroy the Abbey where the next Feast of Life will take place the following day. Frantic with fear, Percy rushes back to England by volor that same evening. While crossing the Alps late that night, the smooth flight of the volor is disrupted by a huge rumbling outside and overhead. After some tense moments, Percy and his fellow Catholic priests discover that they have just passed an army of two hundred volors. The Catholic plot has been discovered, and the mass of volors are on their way to destroy Rome in retaliation. Rome is utterly decimated, and as a result, the floodgates are opened in England and the systematic persecution of Catholics begins.

Mabel, her religious tensions soothed for the time being by Humanity-Worship, now becomes discouraged when she realizes that this new religion has not brought the Peace it had promised. The adherents of her new religion, it turns out, “were no better than Christians, after all, as fierce as the men on whom they avenged themselves” (207). Almost entirely disillusioned, Mabel even considers suicide as a viable option. The next
day, however, at the Feast of Maternity, Mabel is present when Felsenburgh himself speaks and is swept away by his electrifying charisma. At the conclusion of the feast, a mass of “ten thousand voices hailed Him Lord and God” (228).

As the end of the story approaches, Percy is made Pope after Rome and all its hierarchy is destroyed. He escapes to Nazareth, hiding there while he struggles to gather the remnants of the dying Church. The new Pope, out riding at sunset one night with a priest, pauses to ask the priest the name of a particular area. The priest ominously replies that it is Megiddo—“’Some call it Armageddon’” (244). Back in Europe, Felsenburgh convinces the masses that there remains only one impediment to ultimate Peace—the existence of small factions of Catholics here and there. As a result, the oppression and persecution of Catholics is stepped up. At last, a newly appointed Cardinal betrays the location of the new Pope, and Felsenburgh orders a fleet of volors to Nazareth to eliminate the Supreme Pontiff and to eradicate Catholicism forever. The ending is somewhat ambiguous; however, this much can be said: Just as the Pope is saying Mass, the fleet of volors arrives with the intent to destroy the Pope and the College of Cardinals. And with that, the book concludes.

Julian Felsenburgh: Antichrist

Divinity scholar Bernard McGinn has asserted that “Benson’s picture of Antichrist can be judged the most serious Catholic presentation of the Final Enemy in the twentieth century.” This is saying quite a lot, considering that the novel was published within the first decade of the twentieth century. (Benson, it seems, was one of the first English writers to conceive of the notion of depicting the Antichrist through the medium of a

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Benson's portrait of Julian Felsenburgh as Antichrist is a complex combination of Christian tradition and personal inventiveness. In many ways, too, Benson prefigures elements of the Antichrist that would later become conventional at the end of the twentieth century in the works of premillennial fundamentalists.

Felsenburgh is introduced early in the novel as a conversation piece between Oliver and Mabel Brand. As McGinn points out, Benson does not interest himself in the psychology of the Antichrist throughout the novel. At no time does the reader enter the mind of Felsenburgh; instead, Benson relies on fictional newspaper accounts and the testimonies of characters like the Brands to create an atmosphere of awe and mystery surrounding the Antichrist. Discussing a possible invasion from the East, the Brands speculate about this elusive arbitrator who has only recently emerged onto the public stage in an effort to soothe national tensions:

"I don't understand in the least," she said. "Who is this Felsenburgh, after all?"
"My dear child, that is what all the world is asking. Nothing is known except that he was included in the American deputation at the last moment. The Herald published his life last week; but it has been contradicted. It is certain that he is quite a young man, and that he has been quite obscure till now."
"Well, he is not obscure now," observed the girl. (4)

Oliver and Mabel do not even know this strange man's first name. "'Has he any other name?'" asks Mabel. "'Julian, I believe. One message said so,'" Oliver replies (5). Again and again throughout the narrative, questions are raised as to the true identity and origins of Felsenburgh. In a similar conversation between priests later in the novel, one priest inquires: "'Who is this Felsenburgh?'" "'He's a mystery,'" another retorts (33). Later, Percy Franklin struggles to discern which of three separate photographs claiming to be Felsenburgh is the genuine item (34-5). And despite the fact that Felsenburgh is
constantly speaking to crowds ("This is at least the fifth crowd he has addressed") marvels Oliver [5]), he speaks directly in the novel only once; and even then he merely utters a few lines (226). All of this contributes to a feeling that, with Felsenburgh, we are peering into the unknown and the unexplainable. He is shrouded in an eerie sort of mystery throughout the book, a fact which creates in the reader not only a sense of narrative suspense, but also a sense of uncanny supernaturalism. Who is this odd person that commands such authority?

This effect is intensified by a common Bensonian device—the attention to silence. In all of Benson’s novels, silence often speaks louder than words. Benson regularly attends as much to the gaps in conversation as he does to the words themselves, and to the absence of sound in a given circumstance as to its presence in others. Although his use of silence signifies different things at different times, frequently Benson directs the reader’s attention to silence in order to indicate the presence of something deep and ineffable, sometimes evil. Rudolph Otto writes of such a phenomenon in his classic tome, The Idea of the Holy: “But in neither the sublime nor the magical, effective as they are, has art more than an indirect means of representing the numinous. Of directer methods our Western art has only two, and they are in a noteworthy way negative, viz. darkness and silence.”

Silence, continues Otto, “is a spontaneous reaction to the feeling of the actual numen praesens.” In Lord of the World, Benson repeatedly emphasizes Felsenburgh’s power to create a kind of magical silence through his presence alone. A newspaper account of Felsenburgh’s entrance into London notes this strange ability. Immediately after Felsenburgh ascended to the podium,

“There then occurred a curious incident. The organist aloft at first did not seem to understand, and continued playing, but a sound broke out from the

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crowd resembling a kind of groan, and instantly he ceased. But no cheering followed. Instead a profound silence dominated in an instant the huge throng; this, by some strange magnetism, communicated itself to those without the building, and when Mr. Felsenburgh uttered his first words, it was in a stillness that was like a living thing.” (88; italics mine)

The newspaper reports that moments later the “strange heart-shaking silence fell again. Many were weeping silently, the lips of thousands moved without a sound” (88-9).

Wherever Felsenburgh travels, the same silence follows him. One expects the raucous crowd to hail their coming savior with shouts of acclamation, but instead they are struck dumb by a “profound silence. . . . that was like a living thing.” Clearly, Benson uses such descriptions of silence to point to the otherworldly quality of Julian Felsenburgh and to spark in the reader a feeling of discomfort and fear.

Benson also employs a technique common in conventional preternatural tales of all kinds in order to hint at the underlying character of Felsenburgh. Immediately after being reconciled to the Church and asking Father Franklin for Holy Communion, Mrs. Brand spontaneously redirects the conversation to Felsenburgh, repeating the question that nearly everyone in the novel at some point seems to ask:

“Who is this man?”
“Felsenburgh?”
“Yes.”
“No one knows. We shall know more to-morrow. He is in town tonight.”
She looked so strange that Percy for an instant thought it was a seizure. Her face seemed to fall away in a kind of emotion, half cunning, half fear. (70)

Father Franklin attempts to reassure Mrs. Brand after she inquires whether Felsenburgh can “harm” her, “But the look of terror was still there.” The priest wonders if “the old woman” is “out of her mind,” but also admits that even to him the name of Felsenburgh “seemed. . . sinister” (70). As it turns out, Mrs. Brand has had a terrifying dream about
Felsenburgh, which she relates to Father Franklin. In the dream, Mrs. Brand is a child wandering in a great house, all the while burdened by an inexplicable sense of fear. It is dark, and she approaches a door with a light below it. Inside she hears talking, but she is paralyzed as she senses that behind the door is Felsenburgh, and she dares not enter the room (71).

The dream is highly symbolic, of course, and reverberates with a number of biblical echoes—most prominently, the images of the child as a simple seeker of truth and light as a metaphor for that truth. (Benson also invests Mrs. Brand's dream with some Gothic touches—a lone woman wandering through the darkness of an old house—in order to further create a sense of dread and apprehensiveness regarding Felsenburgh.) Interestingly, however, Benson alters the normal biblical pattern of the little child emerging from the darkness of sin and confusion into the light of God's truth. In Mrs. Brand's dream, there is a light behind the door, but she prefers to remain in the darkness of the hallway rather than embrace the light of Felsenburgh's room. The dream, then, provides a key to understanding Felsenburgh's role as the Antichrist. He appears to have the truth, but behind his pleasing exterior lies death and destruction. The devil is indeed disguised as an angel of light. By approaching the Antichrist indirectly through dreams and other secondhand accounts, Benson succeeds in creating an emotional tension in the novel. Merely insinuating the depths of evil which lurk below the refined facade of Felsenburgh is far more disturbing to readers than would be a flat and forthright acknowledgement of demonic power.

This sense of duplicity with which Benson endows Felsenburgh is a key element of his characterization, an element that has become almost commonplace in later twentieth-
century apocalyptic novels. Felsenburgh appears on the surface to be an astonishing specimen of purity and goodness, but underneath, perceptible only to Christians like Percy Franklin, lies a fount of evil and horror waiting to bubble over. The Antichrist’s outward gifts are numerous. Felsenburgh possesses stupendous oratorical skills, for example. Oliver notes that “He must be a good linguist” (5), and Percy speaks of his “extraordinary eloquence” (33). In fact, as one newspaper puts it, he is “probably the greatest orator the world has ever known. . . . All languages seem the same to him; he delivered speeches during the eight months . . . in no less than fifteen tongues” (86-7).

Felsenburgh, too, has commanding charisma. “He was the kind of figure that belonged rather to the age of chivalry: a pure, clean, compelling personality, like a radiant child” (35). All of Felsenburgh’s power “lay in His personality. To see Him was to believe in Him, or rather to accept Him as inevitably true” (232). Oliver struggles to explain Felsenburgh’s magnetism after his first public appearance in England, telling Mabel that “It is just personality” (102). Felsenburgh is also the most successful politician ever, singlehandedly averting war with the East: “Mr. Felsenburgh had accomplished what is probably the most astonishing task known to history” (86). And, not surprisingly, in order to achieve such great things, he must exhibit “the most astonishing knowledge, not only of human nature, but of every trait under which that divine thing manifests itself” (87). The mere repetition of words like “astonishing,” “extraordinary,” and “greatest” is enough to demonstrate the superhuman qualities of Julian Felsenburgh, at least in the eyes of all but the few remaining Catholics.

Many of the characteristics present in Benson’s portrait of Felsenburgh had recently begun to emerge in popular considerations of the Antichrist throughout the decades.
surrounding the novel’s publication. In 1884, Sir Robert Anderson, head of investigators at Scotland Yard and author of *The Coming Prince*, a popular premillennial treatise bolstered by voluminous historical facts and calculations, claimed the Antichrist would be a “transcendent genius.” Likewise, Isaac Haldeman, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Manhattan, in 1910 cast the Antichrist as a smooth politician, an eloquent public speaker, a military mastermind, and an effective economist. However, it was not until the later twentieth century that many of these speculations about the Antichrist’s outstanding abilities truly gained momentum. In 1967, for example, John F. Walvoord, president of Dallas Theological Seminary and author of *Armageddon, Oil, and the Middle East Crisis*, described the Antichrist as “a brilliant man intellectually and a dynamic personality.” Hal Lindsey, author of the best-selling *The Late Great Planet Earth*, suggested that the Antichrist would possess “superhuman psychic powers, brilliance, and strong personal magnetism.” Another popular Protestant author, James Boice, speculated that the Antichrist would have “the oratorical ability and youth of a Kennedy, the intelligence of an Einstein, the moral stature of a Ghandi, as well as the administrative and military ability of an Eisenhower or MacArthur.” Thus, in many ways Benson prefigured developments in Antichrist thought and characterization that would later be popularized by premillennial fundamentalists in their fiction and non-fiction. Whereas pre-twentieth century portrayals had often emphasized the diabolism of the Antichrist, Benson was one of the first novelists to represent the “Final Enemy” as an attractive, charismatic, eloquent man capable of drawing the masses to himself.

Benson also prefigured later twentieth-century apocalyptic novels with his depiction in *Lord of the World* of the convergence of all religions (with the notable exception of
Catholicism and certain Eastern sects) into a single religious system, Humanitarianism.

Humanitarianism is, in essence, humankind’s worship of itself. It is a kind of pantheism in which God is understood to be present in every individual.

It was, in fact, the Catholic idea with the supernatural left out, a union of earthly fortunes, an abandonment of individualism on one side, and of supernaturalism on the other. It was treason to appeal from God Immanent to God Transcendent; there was not God transcendent; God, so far as He could be known, was man. (7)

The world religion of Humanitarianism, guided by Julian Felsenburgh, develops into “a kind of Catholic anti-Church” (xx) in which peace and “Universal Brotherhood” reign supreme. Felsenburgh creates a religio-political order that has succeeded where Catholicism should have. Such a notion of Antichrist’s influence does have a rudimentary biblical precedent. Daniel 11:42, for example, states that “He will extend his power over many countries.”21 On the whole, however, the idea of a world order governed by Antichrist is an emphasis of later twentieth-century Protestant writers. Lindsey, for instance, predicted that the World Council of Churches and “liberal Judaism” would occupy primary positions in the merger of all major world religions. Another fundamentalist prophecy writer, Hilton Sutton, argued in 1981 that “All of the man-made religious orders of this world are headed into one massive religious system.” And as might be expected, apocalyptic novelists picked up on the trend. One apocalyptic novel, aptly titled 666, even portrays liberal Catholics and liberal Protestants joining forces to establish the “Church of the World.”22 Hence, once again Benson proves to be one of the first novelists in the apocalyptic genre to depict a religious world order under allegiance to Antichrist.
Additionally, Benson’s link between technology and the Antichrist represents in embryonic form an idea that would be developed in later apocalyptic writings of the Atomic Age. In many ways, Benson’s science fictional inventions—volors, aerial bombardment, houses of euthanasia, instant messaging—are part of a larger Wellsian trend that was popular during the Edwardian Period. At the same time, however, Benson creatively marries these technological wonders to the Antichrist, a theme that has been touted vigorously in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. For example, Billy Graham, the famous Protestant evangelist, has stressed television as a probable conduit for the eloquent lies of the Antichrist.23 The traditional mark of the beast, 666, has become associated with everything from credit cards to barcodes to microchip implants, as apocalypticists—in a scenario akin to a kind of Orwellian nightmare—have emphasized the mass control over individuals that will be exercised by the Antichrist through technology. Other writers have predicted that the Antichrist will manipulate computer technology to bolster his rule, while still others have suggested that the Antichrist will actually be a computer himself. And as one might expect, some have argued that nuclear weapons will play a role in the Antichrist’s hegemony.24 Though clearly Benson did not foresee all of these technological advancements, Lord of the World does envision the Antichrist availing himself of mass communications and bombing campaigns to maintain control of his kingdom. The high speed of volors allows Felsenburgh to travel around the world settling disputes in rapid fashion. Moreover, Oliver Brand is described as a politician “who was asked to speak in Edinburgh one evening and in Marseilles the next” (2). Though not like traveling from London to New York in a day, it nevertheless hints at a world made smaller by the
introduction of reliable mass transit. Volors can also be conscripted to deliver huge payloads of bombs, enough to destroy a city like Rome in a single night attack, a power which Felsenburgh does not hesitate to appropriate for his own ends. Instant message machines, somewhat like faxes, enable news of the Antichrist’s dealings to reach the Brands with lightning speed, and Percy Franklin first discovers that Felsenburgh has succeeded in bringing peace to the East via a large “Government signal board” in the public square which broadcasts the news in “monstrous letters of fire” (66). Although the science fictional aspects of the novel are minimal, they nevertheless look forward to a more developed connection between science and the Antichrist in future apocalyptic novels.

Benson’s Antichrist also displays some personal innovations that were fresh at the time, but have not been readily adopted by later apocalyptic novelists. Most notably is Felsenburgh’s origin in America. Traditional Antichrist speculations, due largely to the fact that for 1400 years the existence of America was unknown, pointed to Eastern or European origins for the Antichrist. One popular patristic idea linked the Antichrist with the Jews. Many Church fathers, Hippolytus among them, argued that the Antichrist would emerge from the tribe of Dan, basing their claims on the tribe’s omission in Revelation 7:5-8. The Roman Emperor Nero was also a popular candidate for the Antichrist in the early Church. Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202), a rather unorthodox abbot given to eschatological musings, informed Richard the Lionheart, who was en route to the Crusades, that the Muslim leader Saladin was the Antichrist and that Richard would succeed in vanquishing him. Premillennial writers after Benson (and after World War II) tended to claim European origins for the Antichrist. In typically detailed
fashion, fundamentalist prophecy writers argued that the Antichrist would rise from humble European origins to assume leadership of a ten-nation conglomerate (derived from the ten horns of the beast in Daniel 7) on his way to universal power. Many such authors saw the development of the Western European Union in 1948, followed by NATO and the European Economic Community, as the initial steps towards the formation of the Antichrist’s kingdom on earth. Unlike writers either before or after him, Benson portrays the Antichrist as emerging from obscurity in the small American state of Vermont (102). Only the stress Benson places on this obscurity of the Antichrist’s origins finds either a precedent or a later manifestation. An American Antichrist from Vermont is entirely Benson’s idea.

Benson draws on a number of traditional aspects of Antichrist theology as well. Perhaps most significantly, Benson goes to great lengths to construct an Antichrist that is literally anti-Christ—an inversion and perversion of Jesus Christ’s own characteristics. In doing so, Benson is not only handling the word Antichrist concretely, but also appropriating a long history of Antichrist speculation. Hippolytus, for example, believed that the Antichrist would be the negative mirror of Christ in every way. Since Christ descended from the tribe of Judah, Hippolytus argued that the Antichrist would also descend from a Jewish tribe. Hippolytus further claimed that the Antichrist would bear the labels lion, lamb, and man, and would assemble his own corps of apostles just as Christ did. Benson, following such leads, incorporates into the character of Felsenburgh some clear parallels with Christ. Felsenburgh, for instance, is repeatedly said to be free of any crimes:

Felsenburgh, it seemed, had employed none of those methods common in modern politics. He controlled no newspapers, vituperated nobody,
championed nobody: . . . he used no bribes; there were no monstrous crimes alleged against him. It seemed rather as if his originality lay in his clean hands and his stainless past—that, and his magnetic character. (35)

A newspaper later champions Felsenburgh, also mentioning his ostensible purity:

“Finally, in America, where this extraordinary figure has arisen, all speak well of him. He has been guilty of none of those crimes—there is not one that convicts him of sin—those crimes of the Yellow Press, of corruption, of commercial or political bullying which have so stained the past of all those old politicians who made the sister continent what she has become. Mr. Felsenburgh has not even formed a party. He, and not his underlings, have conquered.” (87)

As Christ was free of sin, so is Felsenburgh; or, at least it appears that way. Felsenburgh is also said to be “‘Not more than thirty-two or three’” years old (102), the age traditionally considered to be that of Christ at the time of his death; and just as Christ entered Jerusalem triumphantly riding a colt, Felsenburgh, in a chapter felicitously named “The Advent,” enters London on a volor to the joy of the crowds. However, one of Benson’s most subtle and compelling bits of detail about Felsenburgh concerns “his grasp upon words and facts; ‘words, the daughters of earth, were wedded in this man to facts, the sons of heaven, and Superman was their offspring’” (230). In some complex way, Felsenburgh has succeeded in uniting reality and language, the Platonic ideal to the linguistic artifact. This detail seems to resonate with Jesus as the Logos, the Word of God. At the moment of creation when God issued the divine fiat, creating the world ex nihilo, form and content, word and material reality, were co-existent. The signifier and the signified were, in a sense, one. In some mysterious way, claims the first chapter of the Book of John, Christ was not only present at the creation, but was also the Word itself, later the Word made flesh. Benson appears to play off of this great mystery of the Logos by suggesting a similar relationship between word and fact in
Felsenburgh. For Julian Felsenburgh, words and facts are somehow mystically “wedded”.

Felsenburgh is continually described using messianic rhetoric, too. The apostate Father Francis, preparing for the Feast of Paternity with Oliver Brand, rejoices: “Oh! to have a Savior at last! . . . One that can be seen and handled and praised to His Face! It is like a dream—too good to be true!” (155). And in perhaps the most poignant of all such passages, Felsenburgh is praised by a biographer as the one deserving of “all those titles hitherto lavished upon imagined Supreme Beings” (232):

He was the Redeemer too, for that likeness had in one sense always underlain the tumult of mistake and conflict. He had brought man out of darkness and the shadow of death, guiding their feet into the way of peace. He was the Saviour for the same reason—the Son of Man, for He alone was perfectly human; He was the Absolute, for He was the content of Ideals; the Eternal, for he had lain always in nature’s potentiality and secured by His being the continuity of that order; the Infinite, for all finite things fell short of Him who was more than their sum. (233)

Felsenburgh is truly the Antichrist, for he is hailed by all but the Catholics as Christ Himself, when in reality he threatens to lead people astray.

But surely the oddest aspect of Benson’s characterization is Felsenburgh’s uncanny likeness to Father Percy Franklin, the future Pope. Repeatedly throughout the novel, Catholics and non-Catholics alike note the bizarre similarity of appearance between Father Franklin and Julian Felsenburgh. When Oliver and Mabel, after returning from Felsenburgh’s London triumph, catch Percy ministering to Mrs. Brand, Oliver is stunned by the likeness between the priest and Felsenburgh: “That [finding Percy Franklin], too, had been a shock to him; for, at first sight, it seemed that this priest was the very man he had seen ascend the rostrum two hours before. It was an extraordinary likeness—the same young face and white hair” (93-4). Near the conclusion of the novel when Percy is
elected Pope, a German Cardinal alludes to a possible supernatural significance in the likeness: “The German had even recurred once more to the strange resemblance between Percy and Julian Felsenburgh, and had murmured his old half-heard remarks about the antithesis, and the Finger of God; and Percy, marveling at his superstition, had accepted, and the election was recorded” (236). This strange likeness underscores symbolically Felsenburgh as the Antichrist whose ideas and methods run contrary to those of God. Since the Pope is the Vicar of Christ, Felsenburgh’s mysterious physical verisimilitude to Percy again demonstrates the Antichrist’s external similarities to the Son of God.34

Benson’s picture of Felsenburgh also draws upon another long tradition regarding the Antichrist. Historically, there has been a double emphasis in the use of the term antichristos, a concept which originated in the First Epistle of John and was developed at length by various patristic writers. In 1 John 2:18, for example, the apostle writes: “Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour.” Here, “antichrist” is used in two distinct, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, senses. John seems to point to the Antichrist, a specific person yet to come who, according to Christian tradition, will seek to persecute the Church in the end times; but he also uses the term Antichrist to refer to those Christians who have turned their backs on the faith. In their destructive attitude, these apostates appear to prefigure in some way the Antichrist of the future. As The New Catholic Encyclopedia notes, “Christian interpretation has traditionally regarded the Antichrist as a person; it is, however, far from certain that the personification is intended to point to an individual at all, much less to any specific person.”35 Patristic theology later reflected this two-sided understanding of Antichrist.
Many Church fathers focused on the personal and individual nature of the coming Antichrist. The *Didache*, a first century Christian manuscript, described a “world tempter” who will arrive claiming to be the Son of God and performing all types of “signs and wonders.” Ireneaus called him a “sinner, murderer, and robber.” However, other early writers concentrated on the second sense of the term, directing their energies more towards the *antichristos* already in the world—those apostates and heretics who stand against the Church. Tertullian, for example, applied the term to the backsliders of his day, as did Cyprian and Origen (though all three also distinguished this use of the term from the Antichrist yet to come). Augustine handled the notion of Antichrist in a similar fashion in *The City of God*, referring both to a particular person as well as to the collective power of evil at work in society.

Benson treats the concept of Antichrist in this double sense in *Lord of the World*. On the one hand is Felsenburgh, the Antichrist and opponent of God. On the other hand, Benson denounces in his novel what he considers to be the anti-Christian trends of Edwardian society—specifically, the rise of communism and the destruction of individualism; the decline of the supernatural in favor of the mechanistic; the spread of liberal theology; and the undue emphasis on God Immanent (pantheism) as opposed to the necessary balance between God Immanent and God Transcendent; in short, all the forces of modernism. These forces, too, suggests Benson, can aptly be termed *antichristos*, for they contradict the teachings of Christianity. Moreover, Benson beautifully weaves together the two senses of the term by representing Felsenburgh as the “Incarnation” of Humanitarianism, or God in man. Thus Felsenburgh is viewed as the capstone or pinnacle of the trends which have coalesced to form what comes to be
known as Humanitarianism, the anti-Church: "'He is probably the first perfect product of that new cosmopolitan creation to which the world has laboured throughout its history'" (87). Or, as Mabel concludes in rapturous devotion: "God was man, and Felsenburgh his Incarnation!" (221). Quite literally, Felsenburgh represents all that in Benson’s view is contrary to Christianity.

Only as the end of the novel is imminent does the evil side of Julian Felsenburgh manifest itself more fully. By the conclusion he looks more like a Nietzschean Übermensch than a smooth-talking, crime-free, peace-making savior of man. A biography documents his axioms: "'No man forgives... he only understands." “It needs supreme faith to renounce a transcendent God.” “A man who believes in himself is almost capable of believing in his neighbor”... “To forgive a wrong is to condone a crime,” and “The strong man is accessible to no one, but all are accessible to him”” (230-1). Most people, however, fail to see the danger in statements like these and are swept away by the charisma of the Antichrist until the very end. Only the Catholic remnant, led by Percy as Pope, continues to systematically denounce the policies of Felsenburgh, but destruction proves to be the ultimate result. Mabel, too, comes to some sort of recognition of Felsenburgh’s duplicity, but only too late. In a moment of disillusionment, she euthanizes herself, and “Then she saw, and understood” (290).

Benson’s Antichrist is a compelling figure of subtle diabolism, incorporating elements of the Antichrist tradition, prefiguring emphases yet to come in later apocalyptic writers, and exhibiting a bit of Benson’s own personal inventiveness. Felsenburgh is attractive and horrifying, inspirational and cruel, and commanding and
petty all at the same time. As Percy Franklin concludes, “It was possible to hate
Felsenburgh, and to fear him; but never to be amused at him” (231).

Purpose and Eschatology: Coming to Terms with Benson’s Ending

Almost from the moment of its publication, the ending of *Lord of the World* has
caused considerable consternation among people of all creeds. One reason for the
confusion is the ambiguity of the closing scene. Critics have differed as to what actually
occurs in the final few pages of the novel. Is the Church obliterated once and for all by
Felsenburgh’s fleet of volors? Is the entire world destroyed or just the Church? Does
the *parousia*—the second coming of Christ—actually take place? Are the faithful
somehow rescued? Is the ending of the novel an accurate reflection of Benson’s own
eschatology? These are just some of the questions that have plagued critics since the
novel’s publication in 1907. As one deeply frustrated reviewer complained: “We do not
pretend to follow Mr. Benson in these somewhat incoherent imaginings. We gather that
the book ends with the end of the world. Judged as fiction, it shows that an emotional
brain of a distinctive character is behind the writing.”

The last line of the novel, if taken literally, seems to indicate that the end of the
world is exactly what Benson intended by the final scene: “Then this world passed, and
the glory of it” (322). Other details would tend to support this interpretation. When
elected Pope, for example, Percy Franklin adopts the name of Silvester, the last saint in
the Christian year. Symbolically, then, Benson seems to imply that Franklin is the last
of the Popes. A personal letter composed by Benson in June of 1907 also appears to
indicate that the novel is meant to portray the end of the world:
I HAVE FINISHED ANTICHRIST. And really there is no more to be said. It just settles things. Of course I am nervous about the last chapter—it is what one may call perhaps just a trifle ambitious to describe the End of the World. (No!) But it has been done. Thus Benson himself describes the final chapter as the “End of the World.” The problem, however, in the words of another reviewer, is that Benson’s “imagination balks at the final cataclysm, and puts it all into the simple sentence quoted above” (“Then this world passed, and the glory of it.”). Benson, unlike the authors of later twentieth century apocalyptic novels who are given to describing graphically the particularities of _parousia_ and persecution, refuses to depict in detail what may or may not occur immediately prior to or just after the passing of this world. One recent critic has suggested that Christ does, in fact, return to collect His followers: “The ending is unclear, but apparently God manifests Himself, and the faithful are taken up into heaven.” However, this critic’s wording sounds dangerously akin to the premillennial dispensationalist doctrine of the Rapture—an idea which Benson, as a Catholic, would likely have disparaged. (Here, too, one sees the danger of interpreting Benson’s novel in light of contemporary apocalyptic novels.) If the second coming does occur, the reader does not witness it firsthand. Nor does the reader glimpse the destruction of Felsenburgh and Humanitarianism. Not even the final demise of the Church is narrated directly, though Benson takes the reader up to the moment immediately before the bombs drop, thereby giving one a greater sense of the Church’s impending doom than of anything which may be threatening Felsenburgh’s political position. But there is no visible _deus ex machina_ at the conclusion of the novel.

Despite the sparsity of details, it nevertheless seems clear that the papacy and the Catholic hierarchy are destroyed. The Pope (Percy) does issue instructions to warn the
faithful in the nearby village of the coming doom so that they might avoid it (311), but
since he has summoned all Church officials to Rome to celebrate the Mass, there is little
doubt that the leadership of the Catholic Church is obliterated. Based on this
catastrophic conclusion, there appears to be an essential pessimism inherent in Benson’s
eschatology. Far different from the popular premillennial novels of the late twentieth
century which are, at least for the faithful, essentially utopian in nature (the true
Christians are usually removed via the Rapture before any of the suffering begins*),
Benson alludes to the total destruction of the Church governing body and the Pope
himself. Not only do the Christians fail to avoid persecution, but by all earthly standards
they are also utterly defeated. Not surprisingly, many have had trouble with Benson’s
seeming pessimism in Lord of the World pertaining to the plight of the Church. One
particularly disenchanted reader, a person that C.C. Martindale, Benson’s biographer,
identifies as “not a Catholic,” wrote an impassioned letter to Benson expressing his
hopelessness:

Hitherto I have clung as I best know to hope in Christianity, but those
chapters seem just to have struck heaven out of my sky, and I don’t see
how to get it back. . . . I have watched the tendency of the suppression of
Christian teaching and dreaded its consequences, but always fled to the
hope that the truth would prevail. Only when I found you, a guardian of
the faith, forsaking hope, except in cataclysm, did my frail shield break
down.45

Catholics, too, however, questioned Benson’s supposed eschatological pessimism. A
reviewer in the June 1908 issue of Catholic World articulated the concern clearly and
even went so far as to offer readers a palliative for Benson’s pessimism in the form of a
recent article in The Dublin Review:

The most interesting question that the book raises in one’s mind is: Does
Father Benson really entertain this gloomy view on the outcome of the
present conflict between faith and unbelief? And, if so, does he represent any widespread opinion? Some ancient exegeses which have declined in favor seem to guide him in his casting of the Church's horoscope; and he seems to have overlooked the text that there shall be one fold and one Shepherd. If any reader should become infected with Father Benson's pessimism, we recommend as a tonic Dr. Barry's article in the Dublin Review for April, where the conviction is expressed that the Church Universal possesses the divine vitality which will enable it to adjust itself to the approaching conditions, and we "need not despair of its leavening with true life the democracy that is looking for guidance, that will not always groan beneath monopolies, nor dream of Socialist utopias bounded by the grave."*46

At least one recent critic has attempted to identify those "ancient exegeses which have declined in favor" that allegedly guided Benson "in his casting of the Church's horoscope." E.F. Bleiler suggests that Benson followed the Prophecies of St. Malachy, a fourteenth century source that predicts the destruction of Rome after a period of great trials for the Church:47 "In the last persecution of the Holy Roman Church, Peter of Rome shall be on the throne, who shall feed his flock in many tribulations. When these are past, the City upon the Seven Hills shall be destroyed, and the awful Judge shall judge the people."48 Lord of the World does, in fact, seem to share this detail about the destruction of Rome with the Prophecies of St. Malachy. However, neither Benson nor his biographers ever refer to St. Malachy's prophecies as a source for the novel, and while there is indeed at least one basic similarity between the prophecies and the novel, there are also some significant differences.49 Moreover, a simpler explanation may exist. Benson's eschatology in the novel is not inconsistent with the doctrine embodied in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. The Catechism also speaks of the Church's final persecution:

Before Christ's second coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers. The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth will unveil the "mystery of iniquity"
in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth. The supreme religious deception is that of the Antichrist, a pseudo-messianism by which man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah come in the flesh.50

The Catechism refers as well to the inevitability of the Church’s “final Passover”:

The Church will enter the glory of the kingdom only through this final Passover, when she will follow her Lord in his death and Resurrection. The kingdom will be fulfilled, then, not by a historic triumph of the Church through a progressive ascendancy, but only by God’s victory over the final unleashing of evil, which will cause his Bride to come down from heaven. God’s triumph over the revolt of evil will take the form of the Last Judgment after the final cosmic upheaval of this passing world.51

At the very least, then, Benson’s eschatological vision in Lord of the World does not contradict the doctrines of the Catholic Church. (In fact, one wonders whether the author of the article in The Dublin Review did not risk falling into this trap.) At the same time, however, while Benson works within the wisdom of the Catholic Church, it is arguable that the novel was never intended to express a complete and finely-tuned eschatological vision. Though Benson obviously construed his novel in Christian terms, he did not set out to prophecy the details of the end times with any sort of futuristic precision. Instead, Benson’s purpose in writing the novel—in keeping with his ministerial approach—was to call people to repentance and reform, both social and individual, in the present. In fact, underlying his novel is not the pessimism of which Benson has been accused, but what might be described as a controlled optimism, a belief that if his warnings were heeded, society could change for the better. In this way, Lord of the World once again differs dramatically from its later Protestant cousins.

A key element to interpreting Benson’s motives behind Lord of the World is contained in his terse preface to the novel. He writes:
I am perfectly aware that this is a terribly sensational book, and open to innumerable criticisms on that account, as well as on many others. But I did not know how else to express the principles I desired (and which I passionately believe to be true) except by producing their lines to a sensational point. I have tried, however, not to scream unduly loud, and to retain, so far as possible, reverence and consideration for the opinions of other people. Whether I have succeeded in that attempt is quite another matter.52

Benson here purports to employ what is essentially a foundational technique of science fiction writers—extrapolation. His goal is to analyze the forces and movements he observes in the society of his own day and to extrapolate them to their logical ends. One famous reader of the novel—Sir Oliver Lodge, the esteemed Edwardian scientist—perceptively categorizes the book along these lines in a personal letter to the author: “I took the book as a parable... not as a prophecy.” Later Lodge writes, “It is the most strongly anti-modernist encyclical I have seen—not excepting the authoritative one that emanated from Rome.”53 This interpretation is surely what Benson had in mind. Lord of the World was intended to be not a concrete prediction of future events, but rather a commentary on the danger of present ones and their possible ramifications for future epochs. The Socialism, liberalism, and solipsism of Benson’s day are his true targets. Indeed, Benson seems to have adopted Lodge’s terminology for the preface of his other futuristic novel, The Dawn of All, a kind of answer to Lord of the World written to appease those people who had interpreted Benson’s first apocalyptic effort less sagaciously than did Lodge.

In a former book, called Lord of the World, I attempted to sketch the kind of developments a hundred years hence which, I thought, might reasonably be expected if the present lines of what is called “modern thought” were only prolonged far enough; and I was informed repeatedly that the effect of the book was exceedingly depressing and discouraging to optimistic Christians. In the present book I am attempting—also in parable form—not in the least to withdraw anything that I said in the
former, but to follow up the other lines instead, and to sketch—again in parable—the kind of developments about sixty years hence which, I think, may reasonably be expected should the opposite process begin, and ancient thought (which has stood the test of centuries, and is in a very remarkable manner, being "rediscovered" by persons more modern than modernists) be prolonged instead.  

The very fact that he saw it fit to compose another novel depicting a contrasting futuristic state is enough to reveal that in *Lord of the World* Benson was not interested in proffering a rigid eschatology. Moreover, in the preface to *The Dawn of All*, Benson seems at pains to stress that his earlier effort was also a parable and that it should be treated as such. And like all parables, the importance lies in the underlying moral and not the outward forms in which it is expressed. Benson also emphasizes in the same preface that *Lord of the World* examined what might happen in the future, a small but important qualification which demonstrates where his intentions truly lay.

The idea of *Lord of the World* as parable contradistinguishes it from later apocalyptic novels of the premillennial breed. Though most premillennial novelists (unlike their non-fiction counterparts) surely do not claim that every minute detail in their visions of the future is absolutely accurate, many nonetheless hold that the basic sequence of events portrayed in their novels is intended to be eschatologically correct. In some ways, premillennial apocalyptic fiction works like an historical novel in reverse. Specific events which are taken to be true based upon a literalist reading of Scripture are mixed with fictional characters and subplots to create a brand of literature which is both fiction and non-fiction together.  

Though Benson does not contradict Catholic doctrine, neither does he purport to predict the future with theological stringency. Of course, a great deal of the difference here derives from the basic distinction between Catholic and fundamentalist Protestant eschatological speculation. Whereas Catholics have embraced
Augustinian amillenialism as an official position, a view which interprets Scripture figuratively (the 1,000 years of Revelation is occurring right now), fundamentalist Protestants are largely premillennial, interpreting Scripture more literally (the millennium will be an actual, futuristic 1,000 years of Christ’s reign on earth). Amillennialism has tended to downplay attempts to discern with fastidious accuracy the details of the end times, while premillennialism has occupied itself in scripting the end with as much meticulousness as possible. Benson expresses this comparative lack of interest in eschatological minutiae through the thoughts of a simple priest near the end of the novel:

This was a very simple man, in faith as well as in life. . . . As to the end—he was not greatly concerned. It might well be that the ship would be overwhelmed, but the moment of the catastrophe would be the end of all things earthly. The gates of hell shall not prevail: when Rome falls, the world falls; and when the world falls, Christ is manifest in power. For himself, he imagined that the end was not far away. . . . Of more subtle interpretations of prophecy he had no knowledge. (246-7)

This passage, perhaps, solves the mystery of Benson’s ending. When the world ends, Christ returns, even though Benson does not narrate the *parousia* in all its glory. But the passage is also critical in that it reflects a basic difference between Benson’s eschatology and that embodied by much contemporary apocalyptic fiction. Benson sticks to basic doctrines of the end and does not claim precise knowledge of other futuristic events.

Even more importantly, underlying premillennial novels is a profound pessimism about the future of the world. Inherent in premillennialism is the notion that the world is in the midst of an irrevocable decline and nothing we do as individuals can repair or avert the approaching cataclysm. The only response, then, is to share the Gospel with as many people as one can in order that they may be counted among the sheep and raptured.
away prior to the period of tribulation. Hence, premillennial novels typically utilize the
devices of fiction in an effort to call people to make a personal choice for salvation.
Tim LaHaye writes: “Our loved ones and friends... need a warning today. God will
thunder judgment upon this generation... It is high time we Christians recognize that we
are in the warning business.” Similarly, another apocalyptic writer in 1974 expressed it
thus:

Christians can relax, if we wish. The rapture will take us off this sinking
ship, and we’ll be spared further grief. But... we can do better than that.
... If believers can show the world a united, triumphant front in these
troubled times, it may just cause some of the world to think. They may
want to know why we are as we are, and we surely can tell them. 56

Lord of the World certainly contains this call as well, but in addition to a personal
prompting the novel includes a social one. The Dawn of All presents us with a Christian
social utopia, a nearly perfect world, a world that “may reasonably be expected should
... ancient thought be prolonged instead.” Premillennial writers would admit no such
possibility for social change on a lasting scale. In Lord of the World, Benson employs a
technique that would later be fashionable in Modernist and Existentialist literature:
Present the audience with a vision of what should not be in the hopes that people will
marshall all of their energy to create a world that should be.

Benson’s purpose behind Lord of the World is not to forecast an exact future for the
world, but rather to comment on present trends in an effort to enact changes. This stands
in stark contrast to much later apocalyptic fiction which aims to predict the end in detail
and focuses more on a personal response as opposed to a personal and social one.
Benson is far more interested in exploring the idea of antichristos as an embodiment of
diabolical forces at work in the contemporary world (in this case Modernism) than in
claiming that these particular forces will inevitably lead to a specified end about which he possesses detailed knowledge. Consequently, one must be wary of applying to Benson’s novel the same hermeneutic that one might bring to fundamentalist novels like the Left Behind series.

Lord of the World is a frequently misunderstood, but exciting and thought-provoking novel. Quite deservedly, it is in the process of being rediscovered by fans of apocalyptic fiction, but we must be careful to approach the novel on its own terms. While it shares some similarities with the mass of premillennial fiction produced at the end of the twentieth century—certain characteristics of the Antichrist and an “historicist” apocalyptic approach that claims to see the final demise in the present circumstances—it is also vastly different in purpose and outlook. In many ways, too, the novel was far ahead of its time in its fictional representation of the Antichrist, predating the first real wave of apocalyptic fiction by at least two decades. Benson weaves together Christian tradition and personal innovation to arrive at an Antichrist that is at once subtle and compelling; and in doing so, he once again reveals his capacity for originality and creativity in delivering a message that is, at base, thoroughly traditional and conservative.
Chapter Notes


2 Ibid., 53.

3 Ibid., 56.


7 The word “apocalyptic” has become an increasingly tricky one as it has taken on a variety of meanings. Derived from the Greek *apokalyptikos*, meaning “to uncover” something hidden, the words apocalypse and apocalyptic have traditionally been associated with the Revelation of St. John in the Bible. *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes that, by extension, the word apocalyptic came to mean any sort of writing that was “revelatory” or “prophetic.” The word has sometimes been used to refer to any writing that incorporates a supernatural element (see, for instance, Leland Ryken, *The Apocalyptic Vision in Paradise Lost* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970], 3 for an example approximating this last approach). And of course, popular conceptions of the word connote writings that depict the end of the world, whether they operate from a scientific or religious foundation. I will use the word in this way, and I will occasionally substitute the word “eschatological”, which can be seen as an approximate synonym for apocalyptic. However, the term eschatological is also more scholarly—a bit more exact in nature—referring to the systematic study of the “end times”. Apocalyptic conjures up notions of cataclysmic destruction, and since this fits Benson’s novel well, I will use it most often. We should also make an important distinction between the term apocalyptic as applied to books of the Bible and the term as applied to literature in general. For people of faith, at least, when used in connection with the Bible, the word apocalyptic suggests prophecies that are divinely inspired and are thus approached in ways that differ (at least in most cases) from those that are clearly fictional in nature. Ambiguity arises, of course, when fictional works base themselves upon the Biblical apocalyptic books. See the discussion near the end of this chapter, pp. 149ff., for some comments on the interpretive implications of such approaches, especially as they relate to *Lord of the World* versus other apocalyptic novels.
A new edition was published in 2001 by St. Augustine's Press. Though far from being conclusive evidence, perhaps even more telling, however, is the fact that the UNLV library recently ordered a copy for its collection.

Some of these books, like the Left Behind series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1998ff.), are clearly intended to be fictional (although the dividing line becomes fuzzy at a certain point) since they are written in novel form. Others, like Hal Lindsey's best-selling The Late Great Planet Earth (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), John F. Walvoord's Armageddon, Oil, and the Middle East Crisis, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), and Charles Dyer's The Rise of Babylon: Sign of the End Times (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1991) claim to be more systematic studies of Biblical prophecies. Frank Peretti's hugely popular This Present Darkness (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1986) and its sequel Piercing the Darkness (1989), though not depicting the end times directly, are nevertheless closely allied with fundamentalist concerns about the devil and his role in the everyday workings of the world. Apocalyptic movies include A Thief in the Night and its many sequels (released during the 1970's), as well as the recent Left Behind movie.

Premillennialism is a doctrine that holds that the millennium spoken of in the Book of Revelation will be a literal 1,000 years in which Christ will reign on earth. When combined with dispensationalism, as it often is, premillennialism also accepts the idea of a Rapture when all believers will be “caught up in the air” to meet Jesus. Premillennialism is accepted by a number of evangelical Christians with fundamentalist backgrounds, but it is by far a minority position in Christendom at large. For a complex constellation of reasons which exceed the scope of this chapter, the vast majority of apocalyptic novels written during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been penned by premillennial fundamentalists, often premillennial dispensationalists. Much of this chapter will be an attempt to delineate the ways in which Benson’s novel differs from the bulk of premillennialist fiction. Incidentally, most Christians (including mainline Protestants and some evangelicals) accept the official Catholic position known as amillennialism, descending from Augustine. Amillennialism interprets the Scriptures figuratively, suggesting that the millennium spoken of in Revelation is the present Age of the Church.

The concept of underground living is clearly a nod to Wells’s The Time Machine in which the Morlocks also reside underground.

Robert Hugh Benson, Lord of the World (1907; reprint, Long Prairie, MN: Neumann Press, 1999), ix-x. All further citations are noted parenthetically in the text.

Bernard McGinn, Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 269. Indeed, while the concept of Antichrist has continued to fascinate Protestant fundamentalists since the 1800’s, Catholics have been noticeably less interested in engaging in systematic thought about the Antichrist; and until recently, there has been a significant dearth of Catholic literary representations of the “Final Enemy.” Benson’s novel, then, participates in what has
largely been a Protestant conversation in recent times—or more precisely, a Protestant fundamentalist conversation. *Lord of the World* also finds itself in a unique position among other Antichrist novels since it predates the golden age of the genre by nearly two decades. Paul Boyer marks the 1930’s as the inception of the “prophecy novel” among premillennial fundamentalists (*When Time Shall Be No More* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992], 106).

14 McGinn points out, however, that certain Russian novelists preceded Benson by a matter of a few years. See *Antichrist*, pp. 263-9.


17 Ibid., 69.

18 In one of the smallest but most paradoxical and profound lines of the novel, Benson writes: “the Spirit of the World had roused Himself, the sun dawned in the west” (8). Felsenburgh hails from the west (America), and to Mabel and Oliver he is the sun bringing light to the world (a clear Christ image—see discussion later in the chapter). However, the image of the sun dawning in the west contradicts the normal physical world. Thus, we get the sense that the entire world of the story is inverted. Felsenburgh and his ideas seem correct, but they’re really contrary to all that is good and right.

19 All qtd. in Boyer, *When Time*, 279. As Boyer also observes, the notion of the Antichrist’s charisma and eloquence is based on a few brief words in Daniel declaring that the Beast would wield “a mouth speaking great things.”

20 Antichrist novels were largely a twentieth century invention, but one thinks here of the demonic aspect of many medieval pictorial representations of the Antichrist.

21 This quotation is taken from the New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984).

22 Boyer, *When Time*, 278.

23 Ibid., 279.

24 Ibid., 281-3.

25 Thomas Menges, in a footnote to his article on Benson’s *Lord of the World*, mentions that Christendom has traditionally believed the Antichrist would come from the West: “Nach traditioneller christlicher Auffassung kommt das Heil (=Jesus Christos) aus dem Osten, das Böse aus dem Westen. (Man denke nur an die Ostung romanischer oder
gotischer Katehdralen, an deren Westseite sich Gerichtsdarstellungen befinden.)
Felsenburgh kommt aus Amerika: "Der Weltgeist hatte sich erhoben, die Sonne war im
Westen aufgegangen." ["According to the traditional Christian interpretation, salvation
Jesus Christ) comes from the East, evil from the West. (One thinks simply of the
Romanesque architecture or Gothic cathedrals, to whose west sides are located
representations of judgment.) Felsenburgh comes from America: "The World Spirit had
arisen, the sun had arisen in the West" (Thomas Menges, „Trauert Nicht Jedem, Sondern
Prüft die Geister": Apokalyptik und Wissenschaftsglaube in Robert Hugh Bensons
Roman „Der Herr der Welt," Inklings-Jahrbuch 11 [1993], 102, n. 6); translation mine.]
Unfortunately, Menges does not cite a source or sources for this claim. Similarly, one
might also cite the tradition present in English poetry in which the west is frequently
representative of death. See, for example, John Donne’s "Good Friday, 1613. Riding
Westward." Regardless of whether Menges is correct or not, the idea of the Antichrist
hailing from America placed the origins of the enemy further west than had previously
been suggested (however, see note 30 below).


27 See McGinn, Antichrist, 45-50.

28 Boyer, When Time, 51. Joachim was wrong of course.

29 Ibid., 276.

30 One main exception to this might be the Illuminati scare of the 1700’s when Thomas
Jefferson was declared by some to be the Antichrist. Here, then, is one example of an
Antichrist with American origins. See Philip Jenkins, "Naming the Beast:
connection between freemasonry and the Antichrist is also reflective of anti-Illuminati
forces in the Church.


32 In a letter composed during the period when Benson was drafting Lord of the World,
Benson even mentions the idea that his Antichrist would “be born of a virgin,” an idea
he failed to utilize in the final draft of the novel. See C.C. Martindale, The Life of
66.

33 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without
him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the
life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not
overcome it. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his
glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1-5, 14).
34 We might note incidentally, too, that by establishing such a strict set of contrasts throughout the novel between Catholicism and Humanitarianism and between the Pope and the Antichrist (despite their odd physical similarities, which actually says more about the masquerading qualities of the Antichrist), Benson firmly disallows any notion of the Pope as Antichrist, a tradition that had been strong since the Reformation and was still powerful enough in the nineteenth century to occupy Newman’s thoughts.


37 Ibid.

38 This also points to another aspect that Benson has in common with many twentieth-century prophecy writers. Benson takes a definite “historicist” apocalyptic approach as opposed to a “futurist” one. The historicist viewpoint emphasizes trends already in society as leading to the advent of the Antichrist, while the futurist trend focuses on the distant future, thereby de-emphasizing attention to particular current events.


40 Qtd. in Martindale, Life, II, 74.

41 W.M. Payne, “Recent Fiction,” The Dial 45 (August 1908), 89.

42 Edward James, “Rewriting the Christian Apocalypse as a Science-Fictional Event,” in Imagining Apocalypse: Studies in Cultural Crisis, ed. David Seed (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 51. One line spoken by Pope Silvester could possibly be interpreted as an allusion to the second coming: “I have had a vision of God,” he tells his assembled cardinals. “I walk no more by faith, but by sight”(312). The Pope may, in other words, have witnessed the parousia in a vision. However, the line may just as well be interpreted to mean that the Pope has had a vision of Christ in Heaven, the Christ he is about to meet upon his death. Consequently, one might still read the ending as the destruction of the Church alone and not Humanitarianism.

43 The Catechism of the Catholic Church denounces any form of millenarianism: “The Antichrist’s deception already begins to take shape in the world every time the claim is made to realize within written history that messianic hope which can only be realized beyond history through the eschatological judgment. The Church has rejected even modified forms of this falsification of the kingdom to come under the name of millenarianism, especially the ‘intrinsically perverse’ political form of secular messianism” (Catechism of the Catholic Church: With Modifications from the Editio Typica [New York: Doubleday, 1995], 194).
Again, precision is necessary here. Within premillennialism there also exist three different views regarding the timing of the Rapture. **Pre-tribulationists** believe that the faithful will be raptured before the suffering begins. **Mid-tribulationists** believe that it will happen sometime during the suffering. And **Post-tribulationists** believe that the Rapture will occur only after the period of persecution. By far, however, most late twentieth century Protestant apocalyptic novels are **Pre-tribulationist**, many actually beginning their stories with the Rapture itself and then detailing the fate of those who remain.

Qtd. in Martindale, *Life*, II, 75-6.


One significant difference between *Lord of the World* and the **Prophecies of St. Malachy** deals with the relationship between the Church and city of Rome. Newman, in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, goes to great lengths, following St. Malachy’s prophecies, to distinguish between the Church of Rome and the City of Rome. Hoping to dispel the Protestant claim that the Pope and the Catholic Church constitute the Antichrist, Newman points to the fact that the distinction between the Church and city is a critical one and concludes that “it was not the Church, but the old dethroned Pagan monster, still living in the ruined city, that was the Antichrist” (Newman, *Apologia*, 114, footnote to line 28). In Benson’s novel, however, the Church and the City are clearly one. Rome the city is Rome the Church. Hence, if Benson did follow St. Malachy’s prophecies at all, he did so only loosely.

*Catechism*, 193-4.

Ibid., 194.

Robert Hugh Benson, preface to *Lord of the World*. The italics in the quotation are mine.

Qtd. in Martindale, *Life*, II, 80.

Robert Hugh Benson, preface to *The Dawn of All* (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1911).

Many premillennialists are highly preoccupied with working out precise details of the end, including specific countries that will take part in the Antichrist’s regime, specific
events which must occur before the Antichrist can arise, the specific number of years the
reign of the Antichrist will last, and the specific sequence of events leading up to the
Final Judgment.

56 Qtd. in Boyer, *When Time*, 300.

57 Perhaps the most ironic misunderstanding of the novel is related by Philip Jenkins in
an article for *The Chesterton Review*: “I was amused to see that my own university
library catalogues this ultimately apocalyptic work in its ‘utopian’ collection,
presumably on the basis that its prophecies sound heartening!” (“Naming the Beast”,
490). This points, I think, to the necessity for the reader to have some understanding of
Christian theology in order to interpret the novel accurately. A truly uninitiated reader,
like the one apparently in charge at Jenkins’s university library, would otherwise have
no basis for discerning the evil Benson aims to caution us against—a sign of the subtlety
of Benson’s Antichrist.
QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Who says that fictions only and false hair
Become a verse? Is there in truth no beauty?
Is all good structure in a winding stair?
May no lines pass except they do their duty
Not to a true, but painted chair?
—George Herbert, “Jordan [I]”

The work of a Beethoven and the work of a charwoman become spiritual on precisely the same condition, that of being offered to God, of being done humbly “as to the Lord.”
—C. S. Lewis, “Learning in War-Time”

The journey homewards. Coming home. That’s what it’s all about. The journey to the coming of the kingdom. That’s probably the chief difference between the Christian and the secular artist—the purpose of the work, be it story or music or painting, is to further the coming of the kingdom, to make us aware of our status as children of God, and to turn our feet toward home.
—Madeleine L’Engle, Walking on Water

Robert Hugh Benson was a charismatic preacher and novelist. When he preached and when he published, people flocked to hear and read him. As Janet Grayson has speculated, Benson’s decline in popularity over the past decades is due, at least in part, to his absence from the public stage. Whereas a kind of celebrity status successfully masked his faults as an artist while alive, his works failed to withstand closer critical scrutiny once the fire of public passion had cooled.¹ Artistically and technically, he was inconsistent. His feverish love of writing sometimes drove him to compose too hastily and therefore sloppily. But one area in which he was always consistent was the message
he brought to his readers. Robert Hugh Benson was above all a Christian artist, writing with a divine mandate to communicate the truths of Christianity in a palatable form to the masses that needed them most.²

But as we have seen in the preceding pages, Benson was also, in many ways, an author with a flair for originality. He was not afraid to try new things. He led a sort of "revisionist" historical charge, and he did so in the form of vivid and exciting art. Through his historical novels, Benson challenged the prevailing historical, religious, and political assumptions of his day, and he made alive to his readers a turbulent past that demanded careful reconsideration. Benson also criticized the fashions of his own contemporary milieu directly, denouncing Aestheticism and Decadence and their implications for the moral, spiritual, and artistic welfare of his readers. At the same time, however, Benson recognized that the beauty which aesthetes claimed for themselves was first of all God’s beauty, and when approached properly, it could be a source of true joy and inspiration. And in perhaps his most creative and risky venture, Benson experimented with a genre that has since become astonishingly popular—apocalyptic fiction. In many ways, Robert Hugh Benson was far ahead of his time.

Though it is unlikely that a large-scale "Benson Revival" will occur anytime in the near future, a good number of his works and ideas certainly deserve greater study and more widespread attention. My own study has regrettably only scratched the surface of this complex and intriguing personality, and it is perhaps fitting to conclude by offering some questions for further investigation. Due to the limited scope of this study, two major areas of Benson’s work have not been discussed. First, an examination of Benson’s myriad supernatural and preternatural tales, contained in his two collections
The Light Invisible and A Mirror of Shalott, would undoubtedly prove a profitable venture. Many have described Benson as a "mystic", and indeed, Benson does show an intense inclination, especially in these two works, towards all things mystical.

Concurrently, Benson exhibited a vivid interest in what might be considered Occult practices, including necromancy, Spiritualism, telepathy, ghosts, and haunted houses, among others. This interest, of course, was distinctly Edwardian in nature, and as such, Benson was part of a larger trend in Edwardian England that included Christians and non-Christians alike. Benson's cautionary novel about raising the dead, The Necromancers, is a particularly compelling assessment of many of these Occult practices. The Necromancers is also interesting in that it reflects the Edwardian preoccupation with investigating the supernatural through scientific means, a movement represented most prominently by the founding of the Psychical Research Society. But while Benson belies a familiarity with this approach in his novel, he also seems to subvert it in some ways, affirming the existence of a knowledge and a reality beyond the bounds of empiricism. What exactly were Benson's attitudes toward science and supernaturalism? Even more thought-provoking is the way in which Benson's purpose behind writing such mystical tales may, in part, have some bearing on recent post-modern discussions concerning the nature of faith and knowledge. By affirming the existence of an "unknown"—a reality which can never be fully apprehended—Benson points to the necessity of faith as a fundamental component of knowledge. Still other questions remain to be answered in relation to Benson's fascination with mysticism and the Occult. What connections and distinctions, if any, can be made between Benson's mystical tales and his so-called Occult tales? Which tales fit into which categories?
How does Benson balance his Christianity with his interest in demonic forces? What were Benson's purposes in writing about the Occult? Can these tales be linked in some way to his ministerial approach? How do Benson’s tales relate to other tales of a similar kind written during the Edwardian period? In what ways do they relate to earlier Romantic tales of the supernatural? From my own perspective, some of Benson’s supernatural tales, especially those contained in *A Mirror of Shalott*, are among his best specimens of writing. Could it be that Benson was most successful as a writer of good old-fashioned ghost stories?

A second major area of investigation not included in the present study is Benson’s psychological novels. Perhaps somewhat weak as prolonged character studies, these novels nevertheless offer revealing insights into the issues and concerns facing Edwardian English culture. Moreover, they are written from a kind of “minority” perspective that has often been overlooked by mainstream critics occupied only with the incipience of modernist literature. Some of these novels touch upon realms of human emotion and experience that have been largely ignored by the vast majority of critics. *The Conventionalists*, for example, the sequel to *The Sentimentalists*, offers a poignant exploration of conversion psychology as Algy Banister struggles internally to come to terms with his faith and his vocation. Many of Benson’s descriptive passages detailing Algy’s religious struggles are powerful and insightful. Additionally, *The Conventionalists* would provide the opportunity for another interesting examination of narrative technique and authorial distance since Benson rather boldly includes himself as a character in his own novel.
Aside from these two broad areas of study, other questions linger regarding Benson as well. Benson was a productive essayist for one, writing articles on everything ranging from the place of Catholicism in England to apparitions of the dead. A study of these essays would likely yield helpful insights into Edwardian culture and the thought of Benson himself. Benson was also a prolific apologist, authoring five works in defense of Catholic doctrine. An assessment of his apologetic works, perhaps comparing them to other popular authors of apologetics like C.S. Lewis, would be an interesting project. A study of Benson's historical novels in light of modern scholarship might also prove enlightening. As we have seen, Benson's historiography in many ways prefigured more recent developments in the field of British history. Similarly, a comparative study of Benson’s historical novels with others treating identical time periods would also illuminate Benson’s place in the historical fiction tradition, as well as the tradition as a whole. And finally, a more comprehensive examination of Benson's place in the Catholic Literary Revival would be fruitful, particularly a study that focused on the differences between Benson and the other Revivalists. I have chosen to emphasize the similarities here, but there are important differences to be explored, too. Why, for instance, despite likenesses in perspective, has Chesterton proved more durable as an object of sustained critical attention than has Benson?

As one can see, Robert Hugh Benson remains an untapped reservoir of Catholic Edwardian thoughts and ideas. Though he will surely never be ranked among the great English novelists, there is much about his works that reward a careful student. He was a passionate writer, unafraid to engage the fashionable intellectual trends he witnessed all around him, committed to calling people back to a truth and a tradition he was convinced
held the timeless answers to humankind’s complexities and frustrations. Whether
recreating the mystery and pageantry of the past or venturing into the unknown future,
Robert Hugh Benson did it all for the glory of God.
Epilogue Notes


2 Grayson writes about Benson’s feelings on the subject of his novels: “Divine truths could not be grasped by the modern anti-Christian mind as a set of propositions; they must be presented indirectly in scenes and attitudes that would not cause them to be rejected out of hand—in concrete images that stick in the imagination, not in abstract ideas that do not” (Ibid., 141).

3 Robert Hugh Benson, The Light Invisible (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1904); and A Mirror of Shalott: Being a Collection of Tales told at an Unprofessional Symposium (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1907).


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