RELIGIOUS IRONY AND FREUDIAN RATIONALISM IN DENNIS POTTER’S THE SINGING DETECTIVE (1986)

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Abstract

This article explores the Christian dimension of Dennis Potter’s The Singing Detective (1986) and its relation to psychoanalytic ideas. Most critics read Potter’s drama as a psychoanalytic text, with reason. But Potter himself emphasised the religious aspect of the main character’s plight which he did not think could be reduced to human dimensions. The article describes the antagonism between the religious and the psychoanalytic in this work, highlighting the ways in which the former serves to undercut the authority of the latter. I then consider whether attempts by contemporary psychoanalysts to understand religious experience in a positive light might supply a basis for a non-dualistic reading of Potter’s work. I conclude that while accounts of religious experience that draw upon Winnicott’s notion of ‘transitional phenomena’ have a limited applicability to The Singing Detective, an important function of its religious dimension is to offer a religious critique of Freudian rationalism.

I REMAIN, somehow or other, against all the odds, a Christian. It’s what I actually in the end believe in. Even though intellectually I am appalled by the very baldness of such a statement. I know that, at root, somehow, somehow, that is what I turn and respond to. That’s what tortures or torments me.

(Dennis Potter. Interview with John Cook2)

This article is partly about The Singing Detective and partly about the criticism it has elicited.3 The Singing Detective is Dennis Potter’s greatest work. The greatness was recognised early. Nicholas Shakespeare, commenting on the third episode, called it ‘the most compelling television drama I have ever seen’. The novelist, A. S. Byatt, also reviewing it before the series had finished,
called it ‘an extraordinary work of art’. One of Potter’s biographers compared it with *Hamlet* and *Ulysses*. It stands at the centre of the two interviews about his own works that Potter gave before his death in 1996 and it figures prominently in the four major biographies of the writer that appeared during the 1990s.

The body of criticism that *The Singing Detective* has elicited is commensurately complex. Since Rosalind Coward’s 1987 article, well over a dozen articles have appeared. Those concerned to show the underlying unity of the series assign a central place to the course of psychotherapy that the main character undergoes. This is partly because the psychotherapy is a powerful force in driving the plot forward and partly because the work as a whole is ferociously complex in its formal design, and the psychotherapeutic narrative is the only obvious organising centre around which all its narrative strands can be woven. The main claim I wish to make is that the drama also contains a religious narrative that cannot be reduced to the psychotherapeutic or psychoanalytic one. I want to argue that Potter’s masterpiece is best understood in the light of his theological dualism (the idea that we inhabit two distinct realms, material and spiritual). Potter’s psychoanalytic critics see only the first of these. I shall argue that Philip Marlow, the central character in *The Singing Detective*, undergoes two cures: a psychological one that has been comprehensively described elsewhere; and a spiritual one that has received, at best, glancing notice.

That said, I must emphasise that it forms no part of my case to deny the centrality of psychoanalytic ways of thinking in Potter’s drama. The plotting of the psychotherapeutic narrative and its ramifications into every aspect of the central character’s life is ingenious in the highest degree and to see it clearly is, perhaps, our greatest achievement as viewers. One measure of its richness is how little overlap there is in the accounts of it given by three practising psychoanalysts (David Bell, Irving Harrison and William Jeffrey).

Neither would I wish to underestimate Potter’s affinity with some of the basic tenets of psychoanalysis. I merely wish to alert the reader to the importance of Marlow’s spiritual cure, figured in Biblical terms which, owing to their religious nature, have nothing to do with Marlow’s personal past and to show how these collectively adumbrate a counter-interpretation at variance with the psychoanalytic one.

This is a new claim about *The Singing Detective*, but it is one that accords with Potter’s remarks about it in an interview he gave to *The New York Times*, on the eve of the American network premiere of the series:

My characters may be stretched, may be anguished, may be bizarre, may be driven absolutely round the bend…. But what they’re driven round the bend about aren’t material things, not even a particular political ideology, although
sometimes that might be true. They’re trying to be sovereign human beings, sometimes against impossible odds. The dominant motif in nearly all my work is of someone saying, ‘God, are you there? And if not, why not?’

It is these things that ‘aren’t material’ that I wish to focus on in this essay. Freud famously thought that the quest for a non-material realm was not compatible with psychoanalysis. Nothing in Potter’s depiction of Marlow’s psychotherapy suggests that he would have disagreed. The point he was making in the New York Times was similar to Hans Kung’s claim (in On Being a Christian) that ‘The man who believes… is primarily interested… in the reality itself… He wants to know whether and to what extent his faith is based on illusion or on historical reality. Any faith based on illusion is not really faith but superstition.’ Philip Marlow is such a man, and I want to suggest that in the course of the series not only does he change his attitude to his past; he receives what amount to evidences of grace.

In this article I want to do three things. First, I want to define the limits of psychoanalytic authority in The Singing Detective: these are limits that I take Potter to be drawing. Second, I want to describe the drama’s Christian dimension by tracing the vicissitudes of some of its numerous Biblical allusions. Finally, I consider whether attempts by contemporary psychoanalysts to understand religious experience in a positive light might supply a basis for a non-dualistic reading of Potter’s work.

Potter’s reliance on psychoanalytic ideas in The Singing Detective can be quite overwhelming. The more familiar we are with them, the more they seem to explain. The plotting, for instance, seems massively indebted to the Freudian conception of dream-work. It comprises four layers: the world of the hospital ward and all its goings-on; the world of Marlow’s childhood; and the two worlds inside Marlow’s head, a stalling work-in-progress called The Singing Detective (in fact, a revision of a detective novel that Marlow published some years previously) and an extended paranoid fantasy that develops into a compelling thriller involving substantially the same characters as the work-in-progress. The four worlds are linked by chance visual details, apparently insignificant words or phrases or sometimes simple sounds such as birdsong. As Robert H. Bell has remarked, ‘Reality, imagination, memory and hallucination cross-pollinate. Though each world is rendered with remarkable detail, all are ultimately subordinate to a highly-determined psychic drama.’

A single example may be helpful. At the beginning of the second episode, an elderly patient is admitted to the hospital and assigned the bed next to Marlow’s as Marlow begins to develop a dangerously high temperature.
Old George refuses to change into pyjamas and get into the bed. His wife slaps him on the face and tells the matron to do the same if he proves troublesome: ‘Give him one. The only way to deal with him. I know.’ (p. 65). The phrase ‘Give him one’ reminds Marlow of a row he witnessed as a child between his parents which unfolds in the next scene. On that occasion, his grandmother urged his father to ‘Give her [his wife] one.’ At that point in the drama George becomes a version of Marlow’s mother, beaten into submission by an old woman; but George quickly takes on other identities. Alarmed by his high temperature, Marlow whispers to George to call a nurse, but George does not hear him. Marlow then suffers a hallucination in which George lip-synchs a song his father sang, *It Might As Well Be Spring*. As George’s face dissolves into Marlow’s father’s, the scene changes: we are in a miners’ social club in the 1940s. Marlow’s father, lip-synching the same song, receives the ‘wildly enthusiastic applause’ of his peers. It is followed by a piano solo played by Mrs Marlow, *The Rustle of Spring*. As if to illustrate the idea of that title, the camera moves to a forest dell. We see the young Philip observing a couple making love in the forest. The woman we will later recognise as Nicola, Marlow’s wife or ex-wife. The man is unidentifiable. It anticipates a scene in the next episode where Philip will witness his mother having sex with her lover, Raymond Binney. Towards the end of the episode, we see Philip high up in a tree telling himself that when he grows up he’ll ‘find things out’. He is interrupted by the sound of a cuckoo, a reference to his psychiatrist Dr Gibbon, the ‘cuckoo man’, but also to his cuckolded father who with horrible appropriateness performs *Birdsong at Eventide* in the next scene.

The unfolding of the plot appears disconnected until the viewer looks for the Freudian mechanisms of condensation (‘give him one’), displacement (George becoming Marlow’s mother and father) and secondary elaboration (the switch from Mrs Marlow to Nicola in the scene in the forest dell), that give shape to the dream-work.12

But the debt to Freud appears to go even further than this. For Marlow’s difficulties stem from childhood sexual trauma. His understandable reluctance to accept his mother’s sexual nature has blighted his relationship with Nicola towards whom he professes a highly sexualised misogyny. It has also sapped his powers as a writer. The more familiar we become with his work-in-progress and his thriller, the more we understand how reliant they are on his early, real-life experience. They are attempts to throw that experience out of focus with ‘clues’, ellipses and ‘mysteries’.

Marlow’s entire mental life seems to be an attempt to get to grips with his Oedipus complex. His dream-thoughts take him back to the circumstances surrounding his parents’ separation and his mother’s suicide. If his fictional women are versions of his mother, the Singing Detective is patterned after
his father whose singing was revered. Mr Marlow senior proved to be a bad
detective, however, inasmuch as he failed to notice his wife’s affair with
his singing-partner, Binney. His fictional double’s other career compensates
for this. These stories are Oedipal in the Freudian sense because what is at
stake in all of them is Philip’s attitude to his parents. Ultimately Binney/
Finney is only a complicating factor. It could even be said that Potter
subscribes to the Freudian idea that sanity ultimately rests on achieving a
relatively satisfactory resolution to the Oedipus complex. So long as Marlow
cannot use his fiction to place himself and his parents in a better set of
relationships he is doomed to depression and loathing. We first see him do this
in his paranoid fantasy. The moment when Nicola plunges a breadknife into
Finney’s back is like the moment in fairy tales when a wicked beast is finally
routed: it enables Marlow to feel a bond with Nicola and, behind her, with
his mother. And though he feels it on his own account, as her husband,
it also represents a victory for his father.

Lastly, there is the cumulative effect of placing Marlow’s psychotherapy
with Dr Gibbon at the centre of the series that casts an aura of Freudian
rationalism over the whole. Marlow’s recovery seems to depend on his
coming to new terms with the traumatic events of his childhood. It comes
about as a result of understanding. The adult’s capacity for judgment prevails
over the child’s urge to ‘act-out’.

This Freudian dimension must be grasped if we are to understand Potter’s
work. It misleads only when it is presented as exhaustive. For The Singing
Detective also has a Christian dimension. Although it is far less conspicuous,
it seems to me to be just as important as its psychoanalytic counterpart.
The Christian dimension can be difficult to get hold of in isolation from the
work’s overarching ethical message. Potter’s Christian preoccupations typically
appear in highly over-determined contexts: there is no shortage of material
for the critic interested in other aspects of the drama to consider. Worse
(from the point of view of my present task), in interpreting any particular
scene, Christianity can often be ignored at minimal critical cost. It is only
when we look back over the series in its entirety that the importance of
its numerous Christian references forces itself upon us. It is to a small
subclass of those that I now turn.

II

Anyone with a modicum of Christian awareness will recognise that
The Singing Detective has a humorous and rather tricky ‘way’ with Biblical
quotations. Consider first the following lines spoken by Marlow when he first
encounters his consultant and his team on the ward round.
Christ, I’d—I’d like to get out of it. I don’t want—I can’t—listen—I can not stand it really truly cannot stand this any more. I can’t get on top of it or see clear of it or think straight or—or—tell what it is from what it isn’t—and—and—(Rising panic) And if I don’t tell someone, if I don’t admit it—I’ll never never get out of it, never beat it off and nevernevernever—

Talk about the Book of—the Book of Job

A Biblical reference like this one is ideal for Potter’s purposes as it is likely to go unnoticed. In the catalogue of literary clichés, after all, Job is to suffering what Hercules is to strength. Many will be content to leave the matter there. Those who will not may at first be struck by how inappropriate the reference seems. Job’s afflictions had no discernible cause in his actions or his life but arose for some inscrutable divine reason. His innocence is affirmed by the Biblical narrator, by Job himself and even by God. Yet Marlow regards himself as guilty (‘if I don’t tell someone, if I don’t admit it…’). But the Bible offers a second criterion by which Marlow might wish to compare himself with Job.13 According to Biblical scholars, Job is an exemplary sufferer (and a model for others) not because of how much he suffered but because throughout his afflictions he directed himself constantly towards God. This is the Book’s real relevance here: through it, the viewer is put on notice that Marlow’s cure will entail his opening himself up to God as well as to men.

The situation itself is quintessentially religious. At this, his lowest moment, Marlow is illustrating the Christian idea that in order to gain the kingdom of God you have to lose everything and in these few lines he lays himself bare before the consultant and his staff. The consultant’s reply ‘Would it help to talk to the padre?’ is more apposite than we might realise.

The hallucination that Marlow suffers immediately afterwards drives the point home. He sees the ward staff and Sonia (the character from his work-in-progress) break out into a song and dance routine of ‘Dem Bones’, with its allusion to Ezekiel 37 (‘Shall these bones live?’):

Ezekiel cried, “Dem dry bones!”

“Oh, hear the word of the Lord.”

Now, of course, an important function of these Biblical allusions and their related associations is to make us laugh. The point we must not lose sight of through our laughter is that, whatever his doctors or we ourselves may think about the matter, Marlow cannot help seeing his predicament in starkly religious terms; but the humour obscures that from view.

The ‘padre’ arrives in the second episode in the shape of the psychiatrist, Gibbon. Quite quickly he urges Marlow not to see himself by analogy with a Biblical leper. ‘The temptation’ he tells Marlow,
is to believe that the ills and the poisons of the mind have somehow or other erupted straight out onto the skin. ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ you shout, ringing the bell, warning us to keep off, to keep clear. The leper in the Bible, yes? But that is nonsense, you know. Do you know? Well—one part of you does, I’m sure.

Most viewers will be buoyed along by the humanitarianism of Gibbon’s argument, but the metaphor of Biblical leprosy is appropriate for reasons he seems unaware of. When Biblical lepers shouted ‘unclean, unclean’ they meant first and foremost that they were *ritually* unclean (see e.g. Leviticus 13:45). The leper in the Bible had to be separated from men not only for fear of contagion but also because his symptoms showed that he was separated from God (that is one reason why it was under the jurisdiction of the priest, not the physician).

This sense of having been cut off from divine witness is carried over in the most striking moment in Marlow’s first meeting with Gibbon. Gibbon asks Marlow to tell him the ‘sort of things he would rather have written about... if [he] had had the talent’.

MARLOW: Forget it. I have. Long ago.
DR GIBBON: Tell me.
Marlow stares. And then, all at once, mysteriously, some sort of hostility, some level of tension, seems to leave him.
MARLOW: I would have liked to have used my pen to praise a loving God and all his loving creation.
DR GIBBON: Really?
MARLOW: (*Gratingly*) Moreover—I would have liked to have seen hosts of radiant and translucent angels climbing along spinning shafts of golden light deeper and deeper into the blue caverns of heaven. Ho. Ho. But then, I’ll tell you something even more unlikely—I also wanted to play what used to be called inside right for Fulham and England—

For the first time Gibbon has coaxed Marlow into letting down his guard. Gibbon’s initial word of reply to Marlow (‘Really?’) has the effect of prolonging the moment and crediting it with a significance that Marlow cannot quite destroy. When Marlow moves back onto the attack—through his grating tone and his use of the word ‘Moreover’, a word he had sneered at Gibbon for using earlier on—he cannot resist amplifying his ecstatic vision. And the footballing reference, full of bathos, is too weak to stifle it.

When we ask ‘what is the Biblical significance of such a vision?’ we find that it is consistent with everything that has come before it. Visions of angelic hosts are rare in the Old Testament while in the New Testament they
are associated with the Annunciation but more often with the Second Coming and the Last Judgment. The following verses from the 13th Chapter of St Matthew’s Gospel are typical:

The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

(vv. 41–43)

It is, then, the possibility of being saved that causes Marlow’s hostility and tension to leave him.

Salvation is at the centre of a contest of Biblical quotations that occurs in the fourth episode when Dr Finlay and his fellow Evangelicals enter the ward to sing hymns to the patients without regard for whether the patients want to hear them or not.

MARLOW: We don’t want this crap! Leave us alone!

Finlay snaps.

DR FINLAY: (Yell) Shut your mouth!

Constitution amongst his colleagues. Finlay, face twitching, pulls himself back from the brink, but only just.

Those who do not want to take part in (Gritting teeth) celebrating Our Lord Jesus Christ do not have to take part. Those who are not for us are against us. Those who (Near yell lack the good manners (Yell) and who lack the grace—(Controls himself again.) They should remain quiet so that—so that—others can enjoy the service (Gasp of suppressed rage) and partake in the peace which comes from the Personal Love of Our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

MARLOW: (Yell) And afterwards we can all pick up our beds and walk out of here!

(Finlay convicts himself from the start with his paraphrase of Matthew 12:30 (‘He that is not with me is against me’). For in the next two verses, Jesus states that those who speak against the Son of Man shall be forgiven (but those who speak against the Holy Ghost shall not). Finlay lacks the cardinal virtue championed by The Singing Detective, humility. He is as fraudulent as the old schoolteacher who claims to be able to look into the hearts of her charges with the sight of God. The hymn that he and his fellow Evangelicals sing has little to do with peace or consolation. It begins with the Biblical admonition that ‘Life at best is very brief’—an unpleasant message to disseminate in a hospital ward—and goes on to warn that all must turn to Jesus or face an eternity of damnation.)
But what of Marlow’s quotation? If Finlay quotes Jesus in order to lay claim to divine authority, Marlow quotes him in order to mock that authority. But here again the Bible wins out. For what happens next is that he tells Gibbon the story of young Mark Binney and having thus ‘confessed’, he gets up from his wheelchair—the modern equivalent of a Biblical ‘bed’—and walks. This is perhaps the most important example in the entire work. When Jesus cures the man ‘sick of the palsy’ and tells him to take up his bed and walk, he explains that his intention was not simply to cure the man but to show him that his sins had been forgiven (Mark 2:9). The physical cure is significant chiefly because it betokens spiritual renovation. In the terms of Potter’s New York Times interview, Marlow’s steps are a sign that God is there.

It is one of the strengths of The Singing Detective that Potter allows his viewers to engage with this doctrinal Christianity in a completely playful way. The Biblical allusions that I have described often appear during Marlow’s most unhinged moments. Most work by suggesting an affinity between Marlow and a variety of (usually famous) Biblical characters in situations of ultimate calamity: Job at the nadir of his sufferings; Ezekiel’s vision of the Valley of Dry Bones; Moses, allowed to see, but not to enter, the Promised Land; the Heavenly Hosts inaugurating the Day of Judgment; and (when he resembles a poster-boy for ‘The Agony and the Ecstasy’), Christ on the cross. The disproportion between the two narrative orders is so marked that we might be tempted to view Marlow’s Biblical preoccupations in terms of a running joke. Potter almost certainly wanted that to be an option for the viewer. But we are also at liberty to treat the allusions as clues concerning the nature of Marlow’s plight. These all suggest that he is tormented by the prospect of damnation and hopes for union with God. And perhaps most crucially of all, collectively, the thread of Biblical allusions that runs throughout the series offers a very different account of Marlow’s recovery.

Religiosity per se is no virtue for Potter. The two characters who lay claim to religious authority explicitly—Finlay and the old schoolteacher—are exposed as self-deceiving frauds. Their obsession with religious revelation is merely a form of self-aggrandisement at others’ expense. Marlow’s religious preoccupations are of a different kind. Some, it is true, are helped along by overmedication and dehydration (and this is typical of the way Potter plays down the immediate significance of religion); but others he seems to enter into quite willingly. The vision of the angelic hosts which he describes to Gibbon, the blasphemous swagger of his counter-assault on Finlay, evoke the sacred and at the same time make us wonder how far Marlow understands his own relation to it. He gives the sacred its due, it seems, when he admits its forms into his mind without trying to master them. Humour and mystery are part of its baggage. It is as though for Potter, the mythic reach of the
Christian revelation is such that it is always to be experienced as mad but that that does not make it any less true.

A question that might be asked is whether the psychoanalytic and the religious combine to offer some greater moral in The Singing Detective or whether they merely co-exist as conflicting discourses in the series’ heteroglossia. I suggest that Potter is saying that our relation to the transcendent is not the same as our relation to our personal past (however unknown to us that too may be). It does not require and is not susceptible of rational apprehension in the same way. The past is to be understood; it is something we must come to terms with by acts of judgment. The Christian revelation in contrast is to be approached humbly and in fear. This is the bedrock on which Potter’s theological dualism rests. A psychoanalyst might catalogue the Biblical voices in Marlow’s head as, say, products of the ‘murderous superego’ postulated by Melanie Klein. But Potter pre-empts such interpretations by making those voices the instruments of a weird, terrifying but ultimately benign providence.

III

It might be objected that recent and comparatively new psychoanalytic approaches to religion allow us to consider Marlow’s psychological recovery and his religious experiences in a more integrated manner, as part and parcel of the same process. Certainly, over the last 25 years and more, psychoanalysts have, as a profession, become less hostile to religion than Freud was. For my present purposes psychoanalytic religious revisionists can be divided into two groups. The first attempts to rehabilitate religious belief by arguing that psychological openness—the core goal of psychoanalysis for many today—is itself a species of mysticism. Writers pursuing this line of inquiry often see themselves as continuing in the tracks of the Kleinian psychoanalyst Wilfred R. Bion whose early years were spent in India and whose later writings sought to elaborate the concept of ‘the scientific mystic’. Buddhism is usually the endpoint of their psychoanalytic religious speculations. Insofar as these writers are interested in a religion shorn of ‘history, ritual, authority, obligation and mediation’ (the words of Israeli psychoanalyst Rachel Blass), they have little to say to a work so Biblically preoccupied as The Singing Detective. The other current is more promising. Inaugurated by Ana Maria Rizzuto and continued by William Meissner, writers in this tradition focus on the lived experience of images of God in the human psyche and their vicissitudes across the life cycle. They see the God of the Abrahamic religions as a transitional object, a term coined by the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott to designate phenomena that were neither wholly internal
nor wholly external. A toddler who becomes attached to a comfort blanket or a favourite toy uses it as a transitional object. It becomes, in Winnicott’s words, ‘an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated.’ The blanket or the favourite toy becomes invested with psychic meanings but is at the same time offered to others in the external world who may reshape those meanings.

Meissner points out that many aspects of the religious life build on our familiarity with transitional object relationships. Our picture of God, for instance, depends on our own psychic history and dispositions and the images of the deity that our culture sets before us. Faith, likewise, ‘represents a realm in which the subjective and the objective interpenetrate’. Rizutto has described how the liturgical activities she was initiated into as a Catholic child prepared her for the psychoanalytic idea of the transformation of psychic life through symbols and transitional objects. Rizzuto and Meissner both stress that in one respect religious transitional objects differ from infantile ones. The latter are usually outgrown; ‘decathected’ in Winnicott’s usage. The former, in contrast, acquire fresh significance at each new level of developmental integration because they are never fully subjected to reality testing (unlike the transitional objects of early childhood).

This is a powerful way of conceptualising the interdependence of the religious and the psychological; but it is not, I think, Potter’s way. *The Singing Detective* is striking in its refusal to tether Marlow’s religious imaginings to any psychological developmental story. He changes his attitude to his past and he receives signs of divine forgiveness in parallel—at no point do they appear to be one and the same process. (It is surely significant that after their initial conversation, Marlow never again tells Gibbon about his religious life and that Gibbon seeks to drain religious references of their doctrinal content; both I see as evidence of Potter’s dualism.) Some of Marlow’s religious imaginings could be interpreted as Winnicottian transitional phenomena. The religious ideas that appear in the form of 1940s song and dance routines are, perhaps, the most obvious candidates for inclusion here. They have a playfulness and indeed a transformative power that demands measurement against Winnicott’s notion. But we need to bear in mind who plays as well as to who undergoes transformation. It is delightful for the viewer when the Consultant and his team launch into ‘Dem Bones’ or when Marlow transforms Finlay and his Evangelical choir’s dismal hymn into the Rat Pack’s ‘Don’t Mess With Mr In-Between’ (with its references in the refrain to Noah and Jonah). But it is not delightful for Marlow who experiences them as little short of psychotic disturbances. Marlow never seeks out religion; it comes to get him.
His God is a most unWinnicottian God, owing more to the Old Testament Jahweh: unpredictable, fierce and oddly humorous.

This being the case, we must recognise *The Singing Detective* is not seeking to enlarge the scope of psychoanalysis; on the contrary, it strives to place it within a much larger, mystical context. Potter uses Marlow’s religious imaginings to exhort his psychoanalytically informed viewer to move beyond Freudian rationalism to embrace something like the vision of God offered in John 1:10: ‘He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not.’ It is an invitation many will wish to refuse (including the present writer). But not to see it is to overlook one of the ultimate aims of Potter’s art.

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