Jimmy Porter and the Gospel of Commitment

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TWENTY years is not a long time for an "angry" play to hold its heat, nor is it too short a span to protect such a play from dating. Yet if the social sources of *Look Back in Anger* seem rooted in the distant past, the eloquence of its tirades is as marked as ever, and is likely to remain so. However unadventurous its Ibsenian structure and plotting, John Osborne's play still captivates — perhaps because we are finally as uncertain as we were twenty years ago as to what *Look Back in Anger*[1] says.

What I intend to present is a reading of the play premised on the notion of Jimmy Porter as an existential hero-in-the-making, a secular Christ who appears to stand at the play's end with all he needs to become the sort of social savior Osborne seems to think his country badly needs — creating in the process a palpable "improvement" on the Biblical Christ, the hostage of churches and therefore woefully deficient. I base my argument on no ingenious pointing-out that Jimmy Porter's surname suggests — among other things — the role of burden-carrier; nor do I expect to make Biblical allusions beyond what aspects of the life of Christ are generally familiar to a literate audience. I claim no triumph over prior criticism. But I would term this primal Osborne hero Messianic in a most deliberate and carefully-arrived-at sense: that of someone destined to preserve the best of Englishness by playing a redemptive part in the shaping of his country's future.

Yet Osborne does not appear to know exactly *how* his hero may accomplish this enormous task. Still, I would read his ending as neither despairing, on the one hand, nor

vaguely and sentimentally romantic on the other. Jimmy and Alison, back together again, are the complete ingredients for a better tomorrow, the play seems to be saying; whether they bring one about or not remains to be seen.

A reading of the play's five scenes will demonstrate the interworking of its dramatic elements, both the obvious and the less apparent, once the existence of those elements has been clearly established. In its opening stage directions, for instance, the joint motifs of the animal counterparts for Jimmy and Alison — the evident bear and squirrel, respectively — and of the play's milieu as a "zoo" or "jungle" are adumbrated (p. 9); the audience cannot miss noting the presence of these stuffed animals, which the actors refer to and even employ as surrogate selves; the bear, we notice in the text, is "tattered," while the squirrel is "soft, woolly." Squirrel and bear are therefore precisely what Alison and Jimmy are described as, yet represent toy creatures capable of communication only in a children's-literature or cartoon world. Indeed, the atmosphere is said to be "all cloud and shadows" (p. 10): some definition is patently overdue. And Cliff is described as "relaxed" — an adjective which is not applied to Alison until the ending of the play. In a sense, then, the play may be described as a process of replacement of a male "natural counterpart" (p. 10) — with sexuality embodied separately — by a female figure encompassing both attributes. In that process, presumably, the rough bear is gentled, the soft squirrel tested by adversity.

So much has largely been noted before. Less obvious, though, is the context of sacrifice in which all of these changes occur. The second Alison is now also "tattered" by loss, like Jimmy; and the loss has been her "first" (p. 92). Ironically, that loss is triggered by a gain, a gift: it is Jimmy's child (and all their future children) that she loses, that they lose; and Jimmy prophesies, even calls for, that loss like the Old Testament God of Abraham. It is as if the play points out the obvious, that squirrels and bears cannot breed in the normal way; the posterity of Jimmy

and Alison must therefore be spiritual if it is to exist at all. And finally, we must note that Jimmy Porter preaches a gospel of sacrifice — a kind of spiritual/physical pinching to see if you're awake, a wounding to see if you're alive — but primarily for other people. Himself having already gone through the process (directly and empathetically), he can define living essentially as the consciousness of loss.

One thinks, perhaps, of the trapped fox of legend, rather than of squirrels and bears — the creature which gnaws away a limb to free the body. Yet Osborne makes it clear that Jimmy desires more than to simply exist: he wants also to do, to act. It is here that the parody-Christness of Jimmy operates. Like most writers who reject an institutional Christianity (Brecht comes to mind as an even more striking example), John Osborne presents a system that is, in essence, the improved version of what it throws away. Out with the genteel Christ of the tame established Church, and in with the figure who cleansed the temple of money-changers — the passionate spokesman for social change.

One must remember Jimmy's ironic occupation, the role he has donned like homespun: seller of sweets from a market stall. Like the people addicted to sweet things in John Steinbeck's *The Wayward Bus,* Osborne's society likes that which has been sugar-coated, glamorized, obscured. It is rather like the girl whose letter appears in the newspaper Jimmy is reading: she wants to give in to her boy friend, but keep his "respect" as well. "Stupid bitch," Jimmy calls her (p. 13); he is himself capable of sublimation — if substituting food for sex is precisely that: "Oh, yes, yes, yes, I like to eat. I'd like to live too," he tells Cliff — as if living were an ambition for the future (p. 12).

All these appetites — dulled on "sweets": like the Bishop of Bromley Jimmy claims to be reading about, it is a world of Christians refusing to worry about the poor, but dutifully making H-Bombs instead (pp. 13-14). Or, in a further example, a woman gets mauled at an evangelical rally by enthusiastic "Christian Soldiers" (p. 14). No

wonder Jimmy finds Sundays meaningless — a faithless ritual of "reading the papers, drinking tea, ironing," by which means one's life passes quickly by (pp. 14-15). Yet he wants a version of what that injured female wanted — "enthusiasm" — a fact he recognizes by his parody-cry of "Hallelujah! I'm alive!" — and by his proposal that they all "pretend" to be living human beings (p. 15).

Alison, says Jimmy, is so indifferent (a crime with respect to which Jesus was particularly violent of speech) that she would even get used to Paradise after five minutes there (p. 16). In her company, he spends Sundays of dulling calm, deceptive "peace":

> Nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasm. Just another Sunday evening. (p. 17)

Jimmy, a cultural Tory, listens to Vaughan Williams and longs for the days of Empire. Though he knows his impression of prouder days in England is largely false and though the contradiction with his principles is obvious, still by comparison "it's pretty dreary living in the American age" (p. 17); one can easily see Jimmy coming into his own in *The Man Who Would Be King,* for example.

Even Jimmy's own past had its moments — as with his mistress Madeline (!), an older woman with whom "the delight of being awake, and watching" was a constant, epic "adventure" (pp. 18-19). But present-day relics of Empire — like Alison's family — are unacceptable too; the very thought of them makes Jimmy fantasize himself as a Roman, "Sextus," who loses his wife, the "Lady Pusillanimous," to "those beefcake Christians" (p. 22) — just what that Christian Helena (True-Cross finder?) will shortly do to him!

It is the women who have brought us to this pass, he seems to say; Jimmy's misogyny expresses itself in a tirade that culminates in his bewailing "the eternal flaming racket of the female" — whereupon the church bells begin to ring outside, as if on cue (p. 25). I would not ignore the refer-

ences to "flaming," "hell," "God," etc., in this play any more than I would do so in reading Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story,* but one need hardly rely on them to establish at this juncture the fact of Jimmy's connection of femaleness with the Church (or draw the corollary connection between his notion of "life," "enthusiasm," and maleness). There is no gainsaying the sexist residue in Jimmy's character, even after love has burned away the grosser excesses of his rage.

And burning is literally what Jimmy does to Alison a moment later, when his roughhousing with Cliff causes the hot iron to fall against her arm (p. 26); he later admits that the act was deliberate (p. 33). Yet in a parallel cruelty, Alison rejects love's demands (p. 27) and admits to Cliff in Jimmy's absence that she had "pretended not to be listening" (p. 28) when he had poured out his heart to her. This deliberate coldness made Jimmy "savage," of course; Cliff calls the mutual process "tearing the insides out of each other" (p. 28). Osborne (just as strategically as in the case of the church bells earlier) follows this remark with the revelation of what Jimmy is still ignorant of: that Alison is pregnant, and cannot tell Jimmy yet for fear he would think it a device for gaining control over him.

The references in this play to love as "fire," and as a matter of guts and devouring, and to life as premised on such a loving, are reminiscent of the mystical devotional poetry of an earlier time. Jimmy's "private morality," says Alison, is "pretty free" but "very harsh too" (p. 30); when Cliff calls Jimmy "just an old Puritan at heart" (p. 31), he is not wide of the mark. Jimmy's and Cliff's game of bear and mouse yields to a love-game of bear and squirrel (pp. 32-34) that is almost embarrassingly intimate; but the shocking revelation that Jimmy and Alison do in fact love one another desperately (and the further chance of the revelation of Alison's pregnancy) is destroyed by the Ibsen-timely phone call from Helena, one of Jimmy's "natural enemies" (p. 35).

Jealous of Alison, Jimmy has become "predatory" (p. 36); as Helena approaches, the imagery of animal existence becomes overwhelming. Incredibly, Jimmy addresses Alison, "If you could have a child, and it would die" — then she might "become a recognisable human being." He describes her passion in lovemaking as that of a "python. She just devours me whole every time, as if I were some overlarge rabbit;" then he points to "that bulge around her navel" as his devoured self, seeing yet not seeing that in fact it is him there (p. 37). He exits (ending Act I) after saying he is "buried alive down there, and going mad" (p. 38), surely about to be eaten into non-existence. John Osborne's uses of pregnancy in *Look Back in Anger,* as merciless as an abortionist's, are almost chillingly intellectualized; if John Steinbeck again comes to mind, it is as the author of *Burning Bright.*

Act II marks time, and clarifies. Helena is here, "the gracious representative of visiting royalty, . . . of . . . middle-class womanhood" (p. 39). Helena finds Jimmy's antagonism "horrifying . . . and oddly exciting" (p. 41), yet clucks over the tripartite ménage she has joined. Great dollops of expository past are ladeled out, then Alison describes the impression Jimmy first made on her:

> It had been such a lovely day, and he'd been in the sun Everything about him seemed to burn, his face, the edges of his hair glistened and seemed to spring off his head, and his eyes were so blue and full of the sun. (p. 45)

And she describes him further as going "into battle with his axe swinging round his head — frail, and so full of fire." She has fallen in love with the Jimmy she has helped choke off; now they are remnants, not even what they once were — "poor silly little animals," "all love, and no brains," "full of dumb, uncomplicated affection for each other." Now it is just what Helena calls it — a "menagerie" (p. 47). Alison's vision of a Christ-Apollo has turned into a neighborhood zoo.

In Jimmy's eyes, it is the pull of family and friends that keeps Alison from becoming a living being. Baiting Helena

before his wife, he refers to her friends as being like "chocolate meringues" — "Sweet and sticky on the outside . . . inside, all white, messy and disgusting" (p. 49). It is Christ's image of the whited sepulcher, but molded of sugary corruption like most of the play's negative quantities; Jimmy here has attitudes on sex specifically in mind, with false spirituality its outward sign. A page later, he threatens to recite a poem called "The Cess Pool," after Dante and Eliot (p. 50), and presumably on quite the same sort of subject. But it is when Helena announces that she is taking Alison to church with her, and Alison mocks her husband using just the godlike terms in which she has praised him mere moments before, that Jimmy reaches his peak of invective — assaulting on behalf of his lost "chivalry" not only Alison's mother ("She's as rough as a night in a Bombay brothel, and as tough as a matelot's arm") but Alison herself. But if Alison's mother calls forth the most splendidly articulate insults from Jimmy, her daughter elicits only fatigue: her weight on "that poor old charger of mine" — "the old grey mare that actually once led the charge against the old order" — was "too much for her. She just dropped dead on the way" (pp. 51-52). Self-pity? Yes. The question is the degree of justification.

Helena's cool respectability, "genuflecting sin jobber" as Jimmy calls her (p. 53), is winning the day; Jimmy strikes out in panic as a result: he predicts Alison's mother's bodily corruption in excessive terms, and promises to write a book about "us all" that will be "recollected in fire and blood. My blood" (p. 54). When Helena, ignoring the martyrdom Jimmy is describing, protests that his response to Alison's mere going to church is excessive, Jimmy wonders whether she even understands. But his wife does: Alison interjects, "Oh, don't try and take his suffering away from him — he'd be lost without it" (p. 54). As Alison sees but Helena may not, Jimmy has made himself Christ of his own substitute religion, and Alison's betrayal is therefore apostasy.

Jimmy means it; he calls Helena "this saint in Dior's clothing" (she is by profession an actress , a pretender) — not only a "cow," but now "a sacred cow as well!" He describes her to Cliff as "an expert in the New Economics . . . of the Supernatural. It's all a simple matter of payments and penalties." Maintaining this economic imagery throughout, and applying the notion of capitalistic exploitation to spiritual affairs, he assaults the religious revival and its "apocalyptic share pushers" who are betraying "Reason and Progress" and "free inquiry." "Tell me, what could be more gilt-edged than the next world! It's a capital gain, and it's all yours." Then he shifts to the use of outlandish sanitary-engineering imagery, saying that Helena in her "romantic" hearkening back to the "light" of the Dark Ages is like someone who prefers living in "a lovely little cottage of the soul;" away from twentieth-century reality and "all the conveniences we've fought to get for centuries." She would rather "go down to the ecstatic little shed at the bottom of the garden to relieve her sense of guilt" (pp. 55-56). If the handling of a social theme is Ibsenian, the obsessions are Luther's. But Helena is unmoved.

Jimmy's view of life, seem from a vantage point somewhere to the rear of Yeats' mansion, inextricably connects corruption, sex, and death. He and Helena court one another with insults, among which sources (ultimately) of sexual excitement is the claim that Helena's never having seen someone die constitutes "a pretty bad case of virginity" (p. 58). He then offers a heartfelt memory of his own father's death by way of corrective: he remembers the dying man's "sweet, sickly smell," his commitment to causes, like the Spanish Civil War, that his mother would not share in, and how by the age of ten his dying had made Jimmy an expert in "love . . . betrayal . . . and death" (p. 58). These are, of course, the elements of life for Jimmy, the inverted values of a self-made Christ — one quite inescapably human, and only in spirit divine.

In a last appeal to Alison, he asks if she will desert him without caring what "people do" to him (the posture of Christ in the Garden), then abruptly flies into another rage, calling her "Judas" — at which Alison, "blood" having been drawn at last, hurls to the floor the cup she has been holding: A mock-sacrilege, in effect? At any rate, it is ironic that Alison only wants, she says, "a little peace." "Peace! God! She wants peace!" Jimmy gasps; in his eyes, Alison's "peace" is death: is killing him. This Christ, if he is one, brings not peace but a sword! Again like the Albee example cited earlier, he uses violence (in his case, primarily verbal) to get through desensitized skins (p. 58-59). With Jimmy offstage, Cliff says that their household has always been "a very narrow strip of plain hell," but that Helena has made it worse. Helena's response is simply to assert authority over Alison, now "numbed and vague" (p. 60), so that when Jimmy asks Alison (with "eyes burning into her") to go with him to the bedside of a dying woman friend, she denies him — moving instead to the sound cue of church bells (like the servant responding to the speaking-tube in the last scene of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*). Jimmy has lost; throwing his bear downstage, where it rattles and groans in falling, he collapses on his bed in despair.

Scene Two of the second act, the play's slow movement, consists largely of Alison's discussion with her sympathetic father. As he is male and born to what Jimmy is in search of (p. 68), it is difficult to argue with the Colonel's reflection that Alison likes "to sit on the fence because it's comfortable and more peaceful" (p. 66) — Alison's apparent lukewarmness exactly. As for Jimmy, Alison says that this "spiritual barbarian" thought he had a "genius for love and friendship" (p. 67), yet she almost breaks down and stays after all, as though she accepted his assessment after everything that has happened. She does leave the squirrel as a token of herself, and only Helena's return in the midst of her own tears firms her resolve to leave (p. 68). Cliff

and Alison agree that she is "conventional" in going without seeing Jimmy again, leaving instead a note repeating her wish for "peace" (pp. 70, 72). Upset over his deathbed vigil, Jimmy returns to refuse to be "overcome with awe because that cruel, stupid girl is going to have a baby!" — as Helena has just told him. In an ending of now-familiar responses, Helena, who has telegraphed the action moments before by lying down on the bed while clasping the bear to herself, responds to Jimmy's epithet, "evil-minded little virgin", with a slap, then a passionate, bed-bound kiss. But Jimmy feels only "pain" and "despair" (pp. 72-74).

What to make of Jimmy and his women? That his wild energy attracts them is clear enough, but what of his feelings towards them? Even the aforementioned Madeline, Cliff says, was "nearly old enough to be his mother" (p. 71). Does he not desire from them, far more than simply sex, an emotional completion that will release him from immaturity, from his arrested development?

It would seem so. Act III's first scene is a deliberate variation on the play's opening, this time with Helena in place, "months later," as contented mistress of the household. Now the papers are full of news of fertility rituals in the Midlands, complete with blood sacrifices; and Jimmy proposes sacrificing Cliff and then making "a loving cup from his blood" (pp. 76-77). Jimmy has sacrifice on the mind, and his thoughts are worth quoting in full:

> . . . After all the whole point of a sacrifice is that you give up something you never really wanted in the first place. You know what I mean? People are doing it around you all the time. They give up their careers, say — or their beliefs — or sex. And everyone thinks to themselves: how wonderful to be able to do that. If only I were capable of doing that! But the truth of it is that they've been kidding themselves, and they've been kidding you. It's not awfully difficult — giving up something you were incapable of ever really wanting. . . . (pp. 76-77)

Lest we miss the application, Jimmy soon is asking Helena some questions. Is she "going to Church?" Doesn't she look "satanic"? Does she feel "sinful"? Jimmy's teasing

extends to wondering whether he himself needs "some of this spiritual beefcake," and with more references to Eliot, he and Cliff begin another of their music-hall routines, this one heavily dependent on sexual content (pp. 78-80). Helena attempts to join in, and to wash Cliff's dirty shirt — but Cliff, who handed Alison his trousers in Act I, now is hesitant about doing so (p. 83). Something doesn't fit, and Jimmy, for all he loves Cliff, is willing to see him leave in order to get from Helena what she cannot give him; Jimmy laments that the big causes are all over with, and that there is nothing to bleed for now, nothing to do "but to let yourself be butchered by the women" (pp. 84-85). But where is the battle, now that these former enemies are lovers? And where is the life, now that the struggle has disappeared from view?

It is as though John Osborne thinks women necessary for the sense of conflict they provide. Jimmy's restless energy, perhaps even his desire for bodily contact, has again (but for the last time) included Cliff, for apparently Helena's presence makes Cliff feel "wrong" in their company — as Alison never did. And though physically tender toward Helena, Jimmy warns her that "when people put down their weapons, it doesn't mean they've necessarily stopped fighting." He is resting in her arms like a "victorious general," sick of the fray; and before Alison returns at the scene's end, he even is happily making plans — to move, to change jobs. Yet his speech to Helena has the effect of a warning: she must not "let anything go wrong," because he has put himself into her hands. For her, he has accepted "peace," and peace is inimical to him. He is a fighter who needs conflict, and needs a source of strength at home. Instead, uncharacteristic softness and conventional ambitions hold sway. Respectability! He will ride with the system, not threaten it. In his most self-consciously Christlike line, he says to Helena, "Either you're with me or against me" (pp. 86-87). It is indeed a warning: the commitments to each other must be total, or else the war will resume.

While Jimmy plays his trumpet offstage, the final scene begins between Alison and Helena. Ironically, Alison feels guilt for intruding on Jimmy and Helena, not because of "the divine rights of marriage," but because of their mutual "consent." But Alison's presence only underscores the differences between the two women: Helena feels "*ashamed,*" acknowledges Alison's rights, and has always known everything she has done "was wrong," "wrong and evil" (pp. 88-90). But Helena also sees Jimmy as "futile," an anachronism — and Alison agrees — while continuing to believe in "good and evil," even thinking that Alison's loss of her baby is "like a judgment on us" (p. 91). Helena speaks conventional morality, while Alison talks of logic — but knows what an improbable combination of types the right woman for Jimmy would have to be.

That type is not this Helena, who leaves feeling that "you can't be happy when what you're doing is wrong, or is hurting someone else," and doesn't want to "take part — in all this suffering" (p. 93). Like Hedda Gabler, she rejects what is for Jimmy the essence of life — its totality, the sordid and negative included. Says Jimmy, "They all want to escape from the pain of being alive. And, most of all, from love" (p. 93). The church bells start to toll — again. Love, he goes on, "takes muscle and guts." It is a messy operation at best, and "if you can't bear the thought of messing up your nice, clean soul, you'd better give up the whole idea of life, and become a saint. . . . Because you'll never make it as a human being. It's either this world or the next" (pp. 93-94).

One sees at last the existential focus to which John Osborne brings his play: his Christ is for the here-and-now, "like the old bear" lonely and needing someone who knows how to "relax" — because "you've got to be really brawny to have that kind of strength — the strength to relax" (pp. 93-95). And Alison answers Jimmy's speech with her own words, matching Jimmy's, deed for wish: she doesn't "want to be neutral," to "be a saint;" she wants to be "a lost

cause," "corrupt and futile." Her loss placed her finally "in the fire," and in her martyr's burning she found herself finally low, human — impossibly, just what Jimmy asked for — and she "relaxes suddenly" (pp. 95-96). It is completed.

Their loving final speeches are delivered "wih a kind of mocking, tender irony;" they do not simply retreat to the world of squirrels and bears, the world of prior immaturity. Their awareness of "cruel steel traps" awaiting "rather mad, slightly satanic, and very timid little animals" (p. 96) suggests to me that being "futile" together necessarily involves a plan of action, else why the sense of threat? Nothing ventured, whence loss? However immature Osborne's sense of religiousness, I think he dramatizes a nuclear process by which a tremendous energy is seen aborning at his play's conclusion.

The reciprocity in the new alliance of Jimmy Porter and the altered version of Alison is a totally new element in *Look Back in Anger*. Though Osborne does not predict action beyond the play itself, nor even (as, say, Clifford Odets might have) hint at it, the work presents no evidence to contradict the view that Jimmy Porter will grow up at last now that he has what he had always asked for. When all the odds have been changed, we are foolish to bet upon stasis. Or: why should an "angry" play conclude on a note of despair when despair has been long since available, and under less propitious circumstances?

Jimmy Porter, this character who "thinks he's still in the middle of the French Revolution" (p. 90), could make change possible in modern England. In presenting Jimmy's character, John Osborne uses the model of Christ and "improves" upon it: completes it with the harmonics of a loving, albeit conflict-prone, relationship, gives it a focus on the here-and-now, and makes it morally innovative — not subservient to the prescriptive morality of the institutional churches. Ten years later, John Lennon and Paul McCartney would write "A Day in the Life," and set the

themes of Jimmy Porter's newspaper musings to music. Twenty years after, the rhetoric of John Osborne's play, everything below a rant, above a sigh, looks hollow in the hindsight of sold-out revolts and committed churches. Never mind — North Americans will find it poetic enough, as soon as they plumb the depth of their need, and note their vacant cross.

NOTES

[1]All page references are to the Faber edition of *Look Back in Anger*, London, 1955.

Un-Lonely

you are beginning
to digest me
i feel the acid
of your saliva
eating my breasts my belly
my picked ribs are windtunnels
we pull
at my wishbone
it cracks down the centre
neither of us wins
each holds a splintered
fragment of the dream
i could leave now
while i'm still
half-flesh
(or) i could stay
holding your bicarbonate of soda
watching you writhe in the last throes
of my poison
there are worse things
than loneliness

Lorna Uher