

## ANALYSIS

“The Man Who Saw through Heaven” (1927)



Wilbur Daniel Steele

(1886-1970)

This story is Realism that develops into an ironic Modernist allegory of religious history. Mrs. Diana, named after the Greek goddess of the hunt, is searching for her husband Reverend Hubert Diana. The narrator is employed by her insurance company to protect her and the other women in her group of missionaries while they search for Reverend Diana, missing in darkest Africa.

The narrator feels responsible for the disappearance of Reverend Diana because he, an observer, was the one who took him to an Observatory in Boston, where the Reverend “gazed through the floor of Heaven” and lost his religious faith—ironically, just before he set sail as a missionary to Africans. In the tradition of Melville and Twain, Steele satirizes (1) the condescending presumption of Christian missionaries to other cultures; and (2) the literal-mindedness of many Christians adhering to “the old-time religion.” Reverend Diana and his group of missionaries sail, ironically, on the *Platonic*, a name evoking the dualism of Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher who, ironically, was more wise in metaphysics than the modern Reverend. Had he been able to think Platonically, Reverend Diana would never have lost his faith.

The astronomer at the Observatory is a friend of the narrator, identifying him with a scientific outlook. “He was young,” indicating that the scientist, like the preacher, still has much to learn. The astronomer is named Krum, consistent with his materialistic view that a human is a mere crumb in the cosmos and, in slang, with the narrator’s feeling like a “crum” for shocking the Reverend out of his faith. “Accept as he would with the top of his brain the fact of a spherical earth zooming through space, deep in his heart [Hubert] knew that the world lay flat from modern Illinois to ancient Palestine” and that the sky is the floor of Heaven. Ironically also, Krum acknowledges the limitations of his knowledge, whereas the Reverend takes Krum’s offhand speculative metaphor as fact.

Steele criticizes both literal-minded conservative religion and the subversion of religion by liberals. In order to keep the Church “abreast of the times,” with “modern’ congregations, especially urban ones, a certain streak of ‘healthy’ skepticism is no longer amiss in the pulpit; it makes people who read at all more

comfortable in their pews.” This satirical line might have been written by Nathaniel Hawthorne in “The Celestial Railroad” (1843). By all means, above all the clergy should make people feel comfortable. Like Hawthorne, Steele here is satirizing liberalism and the onset of what is now called “Postmodernism.” In the allegory, Diana and Krum are the extremes of oldfashioned religion and modern science in opposition: “the two faces remained in confrontation.”

Unable to think Platonically or figuratively, Diana is trapped in the physical dimension--the materialistic outlook of Krum—as when he struggles to reconcile the transition to Heaven with the speed of light—as if physical laws are necessarily the same in all dimensions. The telescope, literal-minded science, is a “trap that had caught him, black rods, infernal levers and wheels.” Infernal because it has destroyed his faith in God, much as some primitives believe a camera will steal their souls. Krum tells Diana that there may be no end to the number of universes or “categories,” a suggestion comparable to the “string theory” popular in physics today: “After all what are bigness and littleness but matters of comparison.”

It is ironic that Krum is so casual about what is so momentous, evidence of a shallowness that makes him both a counterpart and opposite to the deeply obtuse Reverend. Krum thinks he sees the Truth simply by gazing through a telescope, whereas Diana goes searching for the Truth for years in the wilds of Africa. Krum carelessly suggests to Diana that our “cluster of universes” may be a ring “worn carelessly on the—well, say the tentacle—of some vast organism...in another system of universes—which in turn--” With his somewhat adolescent sci-fi enthusiasm, Krum imagines many other dimensions and a cosmic monster with tentacles longer than galaxies yet he is unable to imagine any governing intelligence in Nature--a God. Diana, never having taken a literature course, takes Krum’s sci-fi metaphor literally and is never able to escape the monster thereafter, just as, until now, he never escaped his literal interpretation of the conventional metaphor of Heaven.

Reverend Diana loses his morality even before he begins his mission in Africa. “Such liberty!” Hubert Unbound surrenders “with a strange new ecstasy to the drunkenness of liberty.” Having lost his faith in God, he feels completely irresponsible. He becomes a representative Atheist, arrogant in his unbelief, his character “discolored by his contemptuous pity for others, the mask of his inevitable loneliness and his growing fright.” This is the crisis of Existentialism, the philosophy of lost religious faith originating in Europe, increasing after World War I and becoming a significant force in American culture especially after World War II. Existentialism is capsulized by Hemingway in “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” published in 1927, the same year as “The Man Who Saw through Heaven.” Since the 1960s many outspoken Atheists have claimed that they are not at all frightened of being wrong, though Kurt Vonnegut declared that he felt religious people were “terrifying.”

On Sunday aboard ship, Hubert preaches the word of Krum rather than the word of God, adopting the astronomer’s metaphor of our universe as perhaps contained in a finger ring, among many universes in ascending order of size. Hubert is “a changed man.” He has been reborn into a new faith. As an Atheist, he is an affront to the beliefs of others. Accordingly, after taking a bath, he reveals his new self before his mortified wife and the other genteel Christian ladies. He no longer cares about the feelings of his wife. “Adam-innocent there he stood.” Naked Hubert has become a countercultural rebel, another American Adam ready for Woodstock: “He needed some gesture stunning enough to witness to his separation, his unique rightness, his contempt of match-flare civilization and infinitesimal taboos.” Ironically, as a hip Atheist he is just as self-righteous as he was before as an evangelical missionary—“and beginning to show his zealot claws.” He proudly refuses to “bow down before a God.”

As soon as the ship reaches a port, Hubert is declared insane and imprisoned. Despite his ruling, the French magistrate thinks that Hubert is quite sane and more admirable than conventional religious people. A rationalist himself, he praises Hubert’s rebellion against convention with a gesture indicating that it is “matchless, a beauty, a transcendent” act. Existentialism originated primarily with the French. Hubert’s escape from the magistrate’s negative judgment is symbolized by his escape from prison into the desert, one of the many deserts in American literature influenced by T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” (1922). The magistrate is rational in saying “We must live in the world that seems,” whereas Hubert is “transcendent” in his pursuit of the Truth beyond what seems.

Hubert spends years in “apostolic vagabondage,” now preaching the opposite of what he did before, “preaching the new revelation red-eyed, like an angry prophet.” He is like Hazel Motes, the later evangelist of Atheism in *Wise Blood* (1952) by Flannery O’Connor. “Or was it, more simply, like a man afraid?” The narrator compares the advocate of Atheism to a worm under a rock that flees “the Eye of the Infinite,” then to an ostrich with its head in the ground, as his guide becomes an “ostrich farmer.” At the place where Hubert planned to found a Christian mission, he begins enacting the history of religion from the start by making mud images that resemble the tentacled creature suggested by Krum, evoking the earliest human images of divinity as monstrous: “a religion in the making, here before our eyes.” But his iconoclasm is taboo in this culture too. “Primitive societies without religion have never been found.” (William Dean Howells) Ironically, these black primitives are more advanced than Hubert the white man.

Preaching “there *is no* God” leaves Hubert in denial, with no explanation of existence. He needs a material image to explain the material world: “I find I have to make it somehow concrete... Our wearer...in the following category.” Using the metaphor and terminology of Krum, Hubert reconciles science and religion for himself in a *personification* of almighty forces. “If God did not exist it would be necessary to invent Him,” said Voltaire. However, Hubert’s invention is limited to one “category” or dimension and is implicitly just one of many “wearers” in different categories of increasing magnitude, like bureaucrats in Big Government—monsters beyond our control.

Conservative in his affirmation of religious faith and self-reliance, the narrator is also a liberal in idealizing primitivism: “The Kavirondo are the nakedest of all African peoples and, it is said, the most moral.” Compared to these naked people, the genteel Mrs. Diana becomes ridiculous: “I could see her itching to get them into Mother Hubbards and cast-off Iowa pants.” Overlooked here are the rigid taboos—“the most moral”—grounded in religion that limit the inclinations of naked bodies and are in effect an equivalent to pants. Furthermore, these primitives seeing Hubert as a devil playing God with his mud images—“their maker”—is parallel to Mrs. Diana seeing him as misled by Satan. Hubert becomes known as “He of the Ring” and in his quest he comes full circle.

After they learn that Hubert is dead, the search party continues through six villages on a pilgrimage to his grave, culminating “in the apotheosis of Tara Hill.” The word “apotheosis” implies that Hubert has become divine and “the Hill” evokes Calvary, making him in the end a Christ-evoking figure. “Our progress had taken on a pattern.” Hubert now embodies “the human hunger for a symbol to see with the eyes, touch with the hands.” From its “evolution in the womb of fright,” a “concept of infinity” emerges. His mud images of animals correspond to the gods of ancient Egypt, followed by the bull god of Babylon and Crete. Ironically, Mrs. Diana does not see the progress of her husband toward redemption, she sees only “the mud-pie play of a man reverted to a child,” whereas Christ said “Except ye become as a little child ye shall not enter the kingdom of Heaven.”

Hubert is “no longer able to live alone with nothingness”—the Existential state of denial in Atheism. At first his mud images gave form to his belief in nothing, but that proved to be “intolerable.” At Tara he becomes known to the natives as Father Witch. His spiritual quest into the Wilderness exemplifies the instinctive individuation process toward wholeness, a characteristic of literature in the transcendental mode. Tara is a metaphor of the whole earth, enlarging the import: “I wonder if Hubert Diana knew whither his instinct was guiding him on the long road of his journey here to die.”

The first evidence that Hubert has attained transcendence is the change in native attitudes toward him: “Here in Tara they would shout him from the housetops, with a kind of civic pride.” They are “his chosen.” To them he has become a god and is still alive: “If he cared to he could open his mouth and swallow the sky and the stars.” Like Christ, he is “quite dead. On the other hand he was up there. On the other hand he would never die.” A sense of paradox is another characteristic of transcendent consciousness that contrasts with the limitations of rationalism as expressed by the French magistrate. Near death, Hubert finally bowed to God and closed the ring of his quest: “His face was kind. He was happy. He was full-fed”—though physically starving—“very happy, very full fed.”

Although he is Christ-evoking, Hubert is quite different from Jesus. He is not divine, he is not fully aware and he is not crucified on a hill as an exemplar to all the world. Hubert is buried with a pot over his

head. His disciples buried him “up to the neck in mother earth, and the rest of him left out in the dark of the pot for the undertakings of the ants.” He died still mostly unconscious, that is, mostly buried, in a vertical position consistent with literal-minded consciousness. Having followed “the steps of idolatry” in making his mud images, Hubert in the end made one of God in “his own image.”

On one finger of the image is an opal ring like Krum’s metaphor. “This was the hand that was lifted, and over it the head was bent.” A blue opal resembles the planet earth. Hubert has finally circled back and replaced Krum’s monster of our category with a humane God who cares about us—“Marking (yes, I’ll swear to the incredible) the sparrow’s fall.” The allegory of human spiritual history is explicit: “The road that had commenced with the blobs of Ndua—the same that commenced with our hairy ancestors listening to the nightwind in their caves—was run.”

Ironically Krum, supposedly so advanced as an astro-scientist, views supreme power as monstrous just like the most primitive tribesman. The narrator, an insurance agent, assures the distraught Mrs. Diana that although her husband had sunk to idolatry, he had “come up its whole history again” and returned to Christianity. He is saved. He died praying to God as the single “overlord of the cosmic categories.” The narrator translates Father Witch into “Our Father which are in Heaven” from “The Lord’s Prayer.” The natives mistook the word “which” for witch.

The final irony is that, nevertheless, Hubert remains a literal-minded idolater in needing a concrete understandable image of God as human like himself—“Our Father.” Symbolically he is buried with his head in the dark under the pot, still unable to apprehend the magnitude of God. His reductive concept is “convoed by a vast rattling of gourds and beating of goat-hide drums”—still primitive. “The Man Who Saw through Heaven” dramatizes faith in God as a human need that can bring happiness and fulfillment even in the most destitute of circumstances. The story is structured in the Hegelian sequence: thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Whereas the synthesis made by Hubert is literal and primitive, the synthesis implied by the author is wholly spiritual.

Michael Hollister (2013)