

To and from Rome: John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Robert Lowell as Catholic Writers

by Anthony Haynes



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Scope of Topic

The aim of this Bookmark is to introduce the work of three poets, all of whom were in some sense Roman Catholics, and to suggest how their Catholicism influenced their work. This focus is based on a belief that much of what is interesting and successful in these poets' work derives from their Catholicism - which is not to say that one need be a Catholic in order to respond to the poetry.

Donne, Hopkins and Lowell's Catholicism influenced their work in various, often subtle, ways. This can hardly be illustrated using a broad brush and so this Bookmark does not attempt to provide a general survey of each poet's work. Instead, much of what follows consists of reasonably detailed analyses of selected poems.

BOOKS TO READ

John Donne: Selected Poems, edited by Richard Gill, Oxford University Press, 1990

Gerard Manley Hopkins: Selected Poems, edited by Peter Feeney, Oxford University Press, 1994

Robert Lowell: Selected Poems, Faber and Faber, 1965

NOTES

John Donne

Donne (1572-1631) was born into a Roman Catholic family, but by 1605 had converted to Anglicanism. In 1610 he wrote *Pseudo-Martyr*, a prose work which attacked Catholic resistance to an oath imposed by James I, and in 1615 he was ordained as a priest in the Church of England. He ended his days as Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral.

Despite his apostasy (i.e. his departure) from the Roman church, many readers have felt that Donne's imagination remained, at least in part, a Catholic one. One poem that is interesting to look at in this light is 'Holy Sonnet 7':

At the round earth's imagined corners, blow
Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise
From death, you numberless infinities
Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go,
All whom the flood did, and fire shall o'erthrow,
All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
Despair, law, chance, hath slain, and you whose eyes
Shall behold God, and never taste death's woe.
But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space,
For, if above all these, my sins abound,
'Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace,
When we are there; here on this lowly ground,
Teach me how to repent; for that's as good
As if thou hadst sealed my pardon, with thy blood.

In the first eight lines, i.e. in the octave, the poem looks ahead to the Last Judgement, when the souls of the dead will be reunited with their bodies. The text encompasses virtually the whole of history, from the "flood" in Genesis (the first book in the Bible) to the "fire" of Revelation (the last book). In the last six lines, i.e. the sestet, the concern of the speaker changes: he appeals for the souls of the dead to remain asleep while he repents here on earth. In the final line, the speaker thinks of the crucifixion of Christ as an offer – or virtually a guarantee – of redemption from sin.

The change between the concern of the octave and that of the sestet is reflected by a change in feeling and style. The sestet seems strongly Protestant in feeling: the switch to the first person occasioned by the use of "me" and "my" emphasises a central concern of Protestantism, namely the individual's relationship with God. In contrast, the use of plurals and the repetition of "all" in the octave provide a sense of collective experience – a quality traditionally associated more with Catholic worship.

The octave is more visual than the sestet. The word "imagined", for example, carries a specifically visual sense, meaning something like "seen in the mind's eye". Donne's reduction of the globe to two dimensions, as in a map, makes it easier to visualise the entire scene of the Last Judgement in a single image. Given that the visualisation of religious scenes has traditionally formed an important part of Catholic worship, this visual language may be said to contribute to the Catholic feel of the octave.

At least one other aspect of 'Holy Sonnet 7' is relevant here. Europe in the era in which Donne lived saw the development of an artistic style known as the baroque. This style, which was associated with painters such as Caravaggio and sculptors such as Bernini, was associated with works of art that were typically bold, imposing, theatrical and full of movement. Although by no means an exclusively Catholic style, the baroque was strongly associated with the Catholic movement known as the Counter-Reformation and made its greatest impact in Catholic areas of Europe.

The relevance to 'Holy Sonnet 7' is that the octave exhibits many baroque features. Examples include the scale of the vision ("numberless infinities"), the movement ("arise, arise . . . and to your scattered bodies go"), the noisiness ("blow your trumpets"), and even the sheer length of sentence. These baroque features provide a further indication that Donne's sensibility remained in important ways a Catholic one.

In 'Holy Sonnet 7' the tension between Catholicism and Protestantism seems clearly organised. The Catholic sensibility is allocated eight lines, the Protestant the other six; there is the word "But" at the beginning of the ninth line to signal the change in view; and the change is underlined by a change in the rhyme sounds.

The tensions in Donne's poetry are not always so clearly structured or easy to define. Yet a sense of tension, in some form or other, is strongly characteristic of Donne's work in general. Several factors contribute to this sense, but the struggle within Donne between Catholicism and Protestantism would appear to be one of the most important.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Hopkins' religious journey ran in the opposite direction to John Donne's. In 1844 Hopkins was born into an Anglican family, but in 1866 he converted to Roman Catholicism and in 1869 he began training to become a Jesuit priest. He remained a Jesuit until his death in 1889.

Hopkins' Catholicism influenced his poetry in several ways, some of the most important of which may be seen in 'Spring':

Nothing is so beautiful as Spring -
When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;
Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush
Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing;

The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, they brush
The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush
With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling.

What is all this juice and all this joy?
A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning
In Eden garden. - Have, get before it cloy,

Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning,
Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy,
Most, O maid's child, thy choice and worthy the winning.

Here the octave evokes the vitality of spring through its sights and its sounds, while the sestet provides a meditation on the significance of the scene. As in Donne's 'Holy Sonnet 7', there is a strong contrast between the two.

A key to the poem is the word "strain". A number of the Oxford English Dictionary's definitions seem to apply. Hopkins no doubt uses it to mean "inherited character", i.e. this spring scene has inherited its beauty and its blessedness from the paradise that was the Garden of Eden. The word probably also carries the meaning of "tune", suggesting that Hopkins can hear in the "echoing timber" a reminder of the melodious music of Eden. In addition, the word seems to have a more negative feel, as when we talk of "strain" in association with pressure or injury: for Hopkins, spring is not, after all, part of Eden, because the world has been corrupted by human "sinning" and stands constantly in need of the redemption offered by the "maid's child", Christ.

At this point, it may be helpful to consider the training that Hopkins received as a Jesuit. Hopkins was rigorously trained in the spiritual exercises devised by the founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius Loyola. These exercises emphasise the importance, when contemplating an event in the Scriptures, of first "composing" the scene and then dwelling on it in order to see its significance. ("Composing" here may be glossed as "visualising vividly in the mind's eye".)

In this poem Hopkins seems to be applying this method to spring: first he composes the scene (and, by writing so richly and evocatively, encourages the reader to do so) and then he articulates its significance. Quite how strong a point this is, is unclear: after all, many non-Catholic Victorian writers (Thomas Hardy, for example) also wrote evocatively and contemplatively about the natural world.

Of more certain significance is the way in which Hopkins handles language in the process. Here we need to consider the importance, in Catholic theology, of the incarnation i.e. the assumption by God of a human body in the form of Jesus Christ. A constant reminder of this is provided in Catholic churches by the presence of paintings and sculptures vividly illustrating the agony of Christ during the crucifixion. In many Catholic writers the emphasis on incarnation expresses itself in an interest in writing about the body. What is distinctive about Hopkins' sense of incarnation is that it seems to have resulted in writing to be experienced through the body.

In 'Spring', this is evident in the sequence of vowels. Try speaking, for example, the second line of the poem. There is a mixture of what are known in phonetics as close vowels (i.e. vowels for which the tongue remains close to the roof of the mouth) and open ones (i.e. vowels for which the tongue is towards the bottom of the mouth). Examples of the former come in "weeds" and "shoot"; examples of the latter come in "long" and "lush". With some of the vowels it is the front part of the tongue that is nearest the roof of the mouth (e.g. in "wheels"), with some it is the middle part (e.g. in "lush") and with some it is the back part (e.g. in "shoot").

The result of all this is that the tongue has plenty of work to do in order to enunciate the line. Thus the reader of the poem is able to experience the richness and vitality of spring, not just because of what Hopkins' words say, but also because of the movements in the mouth that

they require. In this way, the ideas of the poem are made physical - that is, they are incarnated.

It is a commonplace that, in order for Hopkins' poetry to be fully appreciated, it needs to be heard, rather than just seen: but what a consideration of the phonetics of his texts shows is that in order to fully appreciate the role of incarnation in his poems, one needs not only to hear the poems, but actually to speak them.

It is, of course, difficult to make this point convincingly in print. The easiest way to grasp the point is simply to experiment by reading several of Hopkins' poems.

Robert Lowell

While Donne moved from Roman Catholicism to Anglicanism and Hopkins moved the other way, Robert Lowell (1917-77) made the journey in both directions. Lowell, who was born into a traditionally Puritan New England family, converted to Catholicism in 1943, but re-entered the Episcopal church in 1955.

Both Lowell's poetry and his Catholicism were complex matters. Something of their complexity is evident in 'Our Lady of Walsingham'. This is how the poem, which is about a shrine in Norfolk, begins:

There once the penitents took off their shoes
And then walked barefoot the remaining mile;
And the small trees, a stream and hedgerows file
Slowly along the munching English lane,
Like cows to the old shrine, until you lose
Track of your dragging pain.

There is a hint of nostalgia for medieval Catholic England here. The poem begins with a reference to pilgrims in the past and the word "munching" gives a sense of rural charm by associating the lane with the leisurely movement of cattle grazing. But unlike some mid-twentieth century intellectuals, who sought to revive the theology and church of the Middle Ages, Lowell was always a modernist in his Catholicism. Thus it is not surprising that, by the end of the fifth line, the poem is pulled into the present and the "penitents" of the past recede into the background.

It is not only the tense that changes between the first line and the fifth. There is also a movement from the plural ("the penitents took off their shoes") to the singular ("you lose / Track of your dragging pain"). Admittedly, this isn't entirely clear from these lines alone: the "you" in the fifth line might refer to a particular person, but equally it might be more general, referring to anyone who walks to the shrine barefoot. Later, however, Lowell does use "you" to refer clearly to one particular person.

In the second half of the poem, Lowell describes the shrine. Aesthetically speaking, the shrine is a disappointment:

Our Lady, too small for her canopy,
Sits near the altar. There's no comeliness
At all or charm in that expressionless
Face with its heavy eyelids.

Lowell does not, however, intend this as a criticism. For Lowell, the shrine's lack of external beauty actually serves to emphasise Mary's internal, spiritual, beauty, which derives not from

her body but from the fact that "She knows what God knows". Thus Lowell writes that the face "Expressionless, expresses God".

It is interesting to read 'Our Lady of Walsingham' in the light of 'Holy Sonnet 7' and 'Spring'. To some extent, this is a matter of contrasts. For example, whereas the octaves of both 'Holy Sonnet 7' and 'Spring' emphasise the visual, 'Our Lady of Walsingham' plays down its importance. In contrast to Hopkins, who preached a sermon on the beauty of Christ's body and its significance, Lowell presents external beauty as a spiritual irrelevance.

There are also parallels to be drawn between the poets, particularly between Donne and Lowell. For example, in the analysis of Donne's poem it was suggested that the move from the collective to the individual represented a change from a Catholic viewpoint to a Protestant one. 'Our Lady of Walsingham' might also be read in this way: the foregrounding of the individual might very well be attributable to the influence of Lowell's former Protestantism.

Just as Lowell's Protestantism seems to have influenced the poetry he wrote during his Catholic stage, so his Catholicism seems have influenced his post-Catholic writing. This is most evident in those poems that critics have labelled "confessional" (by which they mean a kind of poetry that confides in the reader by conveying intimate autobiographical experiences). One such example is the opening of 'Dunbarton':

When Uncle Devereux died,
Daddy was still on sea-duty in the Pacific,
it seemed spontaneous and proper
for Mr. MacDonald, the farmer,
Karl, the chauffeur, and even my Grandmother
to say, 'your Father.' They meant my Grandfather.

He was my Father. I was his son.
On our yearly autumn get-aways from Boston
to the family graveyard in Dunbarton,
he took the wheel himself -
like an admiral at the helm.
Freed from Karl and chuckling over the gas he was saving,
he let his motor roller-coaster
out of control down each hill.
We stopped at the *Priscilla* in Nashua
for brownies and root-beer,
and later 'pumped ship' together in the Indian Summer...

It is likely that Catholicism influenced this style of writing by providing Lowell with two models of confessional discourse, namely Saint Augustine's autobiographical Confessions and the sacrament of confession (in which Catholics confess their sins to a priest). These are probably not close or direct influences: 'Dunbarton' is hardly very moralistic and, overall, the text perhaps sounds closer to the kind of reminiscence one might utter at the start of a psychotherapy session. Yet the Catholic models provide a background to the poem, most likely influencing Lowell in his overall choices concerning the form, subject matter and nature of his poetry.

Conclusion

By juxtaposing Donne, Hopkins and Lowell one sees something of the variety involved in the influence of Catholicism on poetry over the centuries. One important point that links all three poets is that none of them were lifelong Catholics: they all moved either into or out of Catholicism (or both). There have, of course, been plenty of interesting and successful poets who have remained Catholics throughout their lives - Robert Southwell (1561-95) is one example. Yet when one surveys English poetry written by Catholics since the Reformation,

the importance of poetry by converts and apostates is quite striking. Poets who come into this category, and whose work you may wish to explore, include Richard Crashaw (1612-49), John Dryden (1631-1700), Coventry Patmore (1823-96), James McAuley (1917-76), and two living writers, Les Murray and Catherine Byron.

FURTHER READING

John Donne: Selected Poems, edited by Richard Gill, and *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Selected Poems*, edited by Peter Feeney, appear in the Oxford Student Texts series published by Oxford University Press. These editions contain plentiful notes and suggestions for study and further reading.

The choice of poems for Faber & Faber's edition of *Robert Lowell: Selected Poems* was made by Lowell himself. All three books are available in paperback.

Discussion of the poets' work in relation to their Catholicism is found in :

John Donne: Life, Mind and Art, by John Carey, Faber and Faber, 1981;

Gerard Manley Hopkins: a Very Private Life, by Robert Bernard Martin, Flamingo, 1992;

American Catholic Arts and Fictions: Culture, Ideology and Aesthetics, by Paul Giles, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Among numerous introductions to Catholicism is *The Catholic Faith*, by Roderick Strange, Oxford University Press, 1986.

Historical background is provided by *Roman Catholicism in England*, by Edward Norman, Oxford University Press, 1985.

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