

THE MIRROR OF LITERATURE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF CATHOLICISM IN SCOTLAND SINCE 1845

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Give a man a mask and he will tell you the truth. Thus Oscar Wilde in one of his most provocative paradoxes, and it is this paradox that informs the argument about to be advanced. The contention is that in imaginative literature lies the surest truth. It follows that the experience of the Catholic community in Scotland since 1845 is best rendered and transmitted in the fictions which that people has composed while grappling for the clearest definition of its identity and situation.

It is only initially shocking that fiction should be our safest medium for unearthing fact. Underlying the Aristotelian defence of art against Platonic proscription is the insistence that art paradoxically embodies a higher truth than any mere factual replication of the world can achieve. Such fictions, if lies, are holy lies - in Newman's words, from shadows and types to the truth. Few will deny that we learn more from Dickens than from Mayhew, that in a flagrant fairy tale like **Great Expectations**, with its array of characters unashamedly purloined from the Brothers Grimm (country bumpkin showered with gold, fairy godmother, ice-cold princess, threatening ogre), we nevertheless come closer to the sociological realities of 19th century England than any compilation of blue books or historical records could lead us. Hence the title of this argument, for how better than in the mirror of literature can we truly come to know ourselves? Use the mirror, not, like Narcissus or the wicked Queen in Snowwhite as an instrument of flattery, and it will faithfully reflect the features, good and bad, of the beholder.

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To tell the whole story of this literature in a few thousand words is clearly an impossible task - detail must be sacrificed to the demands of the broader canvas. The more sensible procedure is to take certain representative figures from the various strands that make up Scottish Catholicism, and employ them to trace the development of the Catholic community from the immediate post-Famine experience, the arrival in the West of the wild, impoverished Irish, to the contemporary crisis of religion affecting Scotland along with every other advanced country in the western world. In locating these figures against the backcloth of the two great images of the Church currently competing for our allegiance, the hope is that we shall better illuminate this crisis and perhaps even move towards its solution.

TWO CATHOLIC IDENTITIES

We are today, particularly in Scotland, the sharers of an identity crisis affecting priest and people alike, and the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) is the convenient chronological marker, articulating rather than initiating tendencies long at work among us. Before Vatican Two, Catholics still tended to live, at least officially, in accordance with the ethos of the Council of Trent (1545-63) when the Catholic Church gathered its forces for the counter-attack upon the Protestant Reformation. Catholics were taught to regard themselves as carriers of a pattern, their sole duty to preserve the inheritance bequeathed to them before entrusting it in turn to the next generation. Who were *your* ancestors? In the Sixth Circle of the **Inferno**, Dante is challenged by the man of history, the disdainful aristocrat, Farinata, forever obsessed with yesteryear. It is the characteristic, all-sufficient question of the zealous traditionalist, living wholly in and for the past - a question posited on the assumption that the person interrogated will, in answering, provide all the information needed to define him/herself for purposes of recognition and response: tell me your forefathers and I'll tell you who *you* are.

For more than a century following the Famine, the Catholics of Scotland, especially at their most heavily concentrated in the West, would have had no difficulty in answering Farinata's question, content, moreover, that the answer would have fully defined their situation. This is most certainly not the case today. Farinata's is no longer regarded as the essential question, based as it is on the assumption that personal identity is to be found in terms of a tradition of which the individual is merely the passive recipient, momentary embodiment and temporary trustee. Such a mindset reflects a period when faith routinely prevailed, fortified by habit and buttressed by obedience. Today the all-important question is the anti-traditional, individualist challenge: never mind your ancestors, who are you? And the response is

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increasingly couched, not in terms of a body of beliefs providentially bequeathed by the past, but a set of concerns existentially thrown up by the present. Where one came from is no longer so unhesitatingly accepted as the sufficient clue to where one is going. Forget your origin, tell us your destination; who are you, *now*? It is a question that institution as well as individual, church as well as churchgoer, must pause to answer.

Hence the identity crisis signalled by Vatican Two. From being the docile carriers of a pattern, Catholics became the perplexed participants in a process. All previous councils had been convoked to deal with specific issues and particular doctrinal crises: is Christ God or man, what does it mean to say that Mary is the mother of God, what is the Pope's role as vicar of Christ? They all had to do with the identity of other people. Vatican Two, by contrast, in calling for a redefinition of the Church, challenged each Catholic to look inward and declare who he/she is - not, who is Christ, Mary, the Pope, but, far more disconcertingly, who are *you*?

In doing so, it cancelled the comforting certitudes conferred by the Council of Trent, that dogmatic retaliation by the Catholic Church against the hitherto victorious forces of the Protestant Reformation. Exploiting all the resources of Baroque art and the militant prowess of the newly-founded Jesuit order, the Council of Trent, accepting the Protestant challenge, launched the counter-attack that was to plunge Europe into religious war for a century and a half. Europe became an armed camp, with each side entrenched in a conviction of its own rightness and of the pernicious falsehood of its opponents. Such a mentality excluded simultaneously self-questioning and tolerance. The Council of Trent told Catholics with undebatable certitude who they were: the people of God whose sole duty was to keep the faith and crush the heretic.

Since Vatican Two, Scottish Catholics find themselves schizophrenically torn between competing and contradictory solicitations; Trent summoned them to be soldiers, while Vatican Two calls upon them to be pilgrims, walking the road to heaven alongside those whom they had long since been accustomed to regard as enemies. Trent confronts Vatican Two, and there can be no compromise or coexistence between them - we embrace the one only in repudiating the other. You cannot simultaneously defend a fortress (as Trent demands) and make the pilgrimage required by Vatican Two: if you are entrenched behind barricades making sure that no enemy can get at you, you cannot also be out in the open sharing the same road with your separated brethren. There can be no harmonisation between such starkly opposed models of the Church. Tridentine ecclesiology is based upon the concept of the armed camp, Tridentine theology upon a harsh division of the world into

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sheep and goats, elect and reprobate. Within the fortress are the people of God, outside the legions of darkness: ye are a separate people, come from among them. Where else but upon the battlefield could such opposites meet? Our only verbal encounter can be in the arena of polemic and invective - we have nothing to say to each other beyond mutual anathema, for if *we* are the people, then *you* must be spiritual trespassers, alien and unwelcome.

'THE BLACK COUNTRY WITH THE COLD HEART'

This is why the historical experience of immigrant Irish and, to a lesser degree, defeated Highlanders, has set a stamp upon Scottish Catholicism. The most important single event for the development of the Catholic Church in Scotland took place in Ireland. The famine of 1845 led to an Irish influx into Scotland, and to this day the West bears the imprint of this migration. For good and ill alike, we are what we are today in consequence of that distant agricultural disaster - from it stem most of our merits and many of our shortcomings. The newcomers had to be tough to survive: destitute, ill-educated, despised and feared as Romish interlopers, they cultivated a defiant solidarity, a tribal sense of kinship, as the sole means of preserving cultural and religious identity in an environment that often was, and was always perceived to be, hostile - 'the black country with the cold heart', as Patrick MacGill (1891-1963), earliest fictional recorder of the immigrant experience, described Scotland. The native reaction to the intruders was as understandably predictable; when the scourge of wandering, famishing Irish began, so, too, did the fear that Glasgow would become a city of paupers and the plague. The Irish were a triple threat: to native employment, to the poor rates, to community health. They were accused of their afflictions, found guilty of being victims. When the cholera epidemic of 1848 ravaged Glasgow, bad sanitation and the worst overcrowding in Europe were responsible, but, the Irish being the principal sufferers, it was easy to identify them as the agents of the plague - death proved complicity. They were regarded as improvident, intemperate and unreasonable, the mammoth task of civilizing them intensified to despair by one last insuperable obstacle - they were not simply savages but Romanized savages, and in their advent the Protestant Scots descried a plot to annex Scotland as a papist colony. The lament of contagion, of eugenic disaster, tolls like a bell from 1845 onward - in Carlyle, in Andrew Lang, in reports to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, perhaps most remarkably and revealingly of all, in their co-religionist, the Highlander Fionn MacColla, as vehement as any Presbyterian Scot in deploring the contamination of his country by these aliens.

The Irish reacted to the hostility as any new, unwelcome group of immigrants invariably will. They knew, long before Yeats told them, that they were the

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indomitable Irishry and they would not be moved. The results were easily predictable: the fostering of a set of virtues that mirrored perfectly the ethos of the armed camp, the beleaguered minority, the fortress under siege - courage, endurance, loyalty, a hardness of character that spoke a refusal to be broken or cowed, along with an unwavering fidelity to their spiritual leaders. The shortcomings are often the obverse of these virtues. The battler is seldom distinguished for sweetness, mildness or conciliatoriness. We are often belligerent, sometimes truculently defensive, occasionally suspicious to the point of paranoia - when we look out over the ramparts, it is to scan the ground for an enemy, not to hail an emergent friend: how could there be friends out there?

The special merit of literature as mirror is that it can reflect historical change in unforgettably vivid form. Those who wish to trace the evolution since 1845 of the three major tributaries to Scottish Catholicism - Irish immigrants, Highland Catholics, converts - can do no better than turn to the fictions created by them. These fictions lend themselves to a threefold sequence: the literature of the armed camp, the literature of the ghetto, and the literature of the pilgrimage, of the open way.

LITERATURE OF THE ARMED CAMP

The Tridentine view of the Church, of a society irreconcilably divided by religious war, dominates the literature of the armed camp, the beleaguered and threatened community. It exhibits the resentment of the underdog smarting at injustice and oppression. Its foremost exponents are Patrick MacGill and Fionn MacColla, representing Irish and Highland Catholicism respectively and expressing a resentment at injustice still largely definable in religious terms - a late flowering of this is John and Willie Maley's significantly-named historical play **Gallowglass** (1991), with its deliberate evocation of religious-nationalist struggle. It is true that in the urban setting of the Irish immigrant experience, there are large hints of a socio-economic oppression more amenable to a Marxist analysis of class exploitation than to a Reformation theory of religious hostility, but the division between economic and religious victims is virtually impossible to draw. The children of the dead end, the denizens of the rat-pit in MacGill, the hanged railway labourers in Maley, are unquestionably at the base of the social pyramid, but, above all, they are Irish Catholics suffering at the hands of religious foes. In MacGill's **The Rat-Pit** (1915), Norah comes as a sixteen-year old girl from her Donegal village to work as a potato-digger in Bute and to be seduced, betrayed and finally destroyed, dying in a Glasgow dosshouse crammed with the human detritus of the industrial city and giving the novel its title. When her seducer detects in the negro spiritual the accents of a persecuted people,

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the irony is devastating, for the Irish are Scotland's blacks and the sentimental, self-indulgent seducer is their oppressor, sensitive to suffering thousands of miles away, yet blind to the pain he promotes on his own doorstep. MacGill powerfully records Norah's irreversible descent into poverty, prostitution and death in a text pioneering the literature of social protest - but the victim is, above all, an Irish Catholic girl whose dying prayer is that no more of her kind shall be driven toward the potato-squad, exile, exploitation and death. MacGill presents her as the symbol of a persecuted people, a dire warning of what happens to Irish Catholics when they come to Scotland, the black country with the cold heart.

Fionn MacColla (1906-1975) is even more abrasively sectarian, ferociously partisan, denouncing the Scottish Reformation as a colossal cultural disaster and John Knox as the Judas to all that was best in the true Scottish tradition. Calvinism, on this view, is no more than a refusal to endure human nobility, the ancestor of a sour, rancorous egalitarianism, bent on reducing all people to a common degradation - hence the destroyed churches, the shattered icons, the holy vandalism that is really unholy envy, impotence satanically ruining what it cannot emulate. The worst sin chargeable to Calvinism is that it destroyed Gaelic culture, turning Scotland into the dismal land of Everlasting (K) Nox, coercing the people with the highest general culture in Europe to become Protestant and Anglicized.

MacColla's books are powerful polemics in which great historical wrongs are savoured, bitterly ruminated, as prelude to renewed conflict. He aggressively spurns the dominant implicit cultural assumption that Scottish and Presbyterian are synonymous, that to be Catholic is to be both alien and subversive. But, while it is comforting for a Scottish Catholic to hear the astounding news that he is not necessarily a traitor to his country despite his religion, many will nevertheless feel uneasy about the tone of this vindication. The work, though undeniably powerful, is also harsh, dogmatic, unforgiving, and, in an ecumenical age, many will be reluctant to return to what Milton called the wars of truth, the virulent religious hatreds of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In MacGill and MacColla, despite their very different traditions, the overall tone is one of complaint and accusation, of an implicit appeal to the Almighty to avenge the wrongs of his chosen people by smiting the enemies who have for so long and with such outrageous impunity afflicted them. In such fiction we survey the counter-attack.

LITERATURE OF THE GHETTO

In the literature of the second stage, that of the ghetto, there is still a counter-attack but of a distinctly different kind: religion has ceded to class as the dominant concern, economic exploitation has replaced sectarian malice as the evil to be exposed and amended. The old anger at injustice is redirected against a new enemy: the class exploiter rather than the religious tyrant. Religion, to which everything else had once been gladly sacrificed, is now increasingly seen as either an outdated irrelevance to the lives of the urban poor, Scot or Irish, Presbyterian or Papist; or, worse still, as a device used by economic exploiters to divide and conquer a swindled proletariat. In Hector MacMillan's play, **The Sash** (1974), the ignorant Orangewoman, surname Macdonald, sings the praises of the man who ordered the massacre of her ancestors at Glencoe, and reviles the Pope who sang a Te Deum in thanks for William's victory at the Boyne. Literature must be made an instrument of education, a schoolroom for the poor, a medium for persuading ordinary folk to reject orange and green alike in favour of red, Calvinism and Catholicism in favour of socialism.

The poetry of Tom Leonard (born 1944) may be cited as an outstanding example of this literature of the ghetto, of the armed camp in process of transformation. It gives a voice to the voiceless, reproducing with stunning authenticity the idiom of the city. One of its salient characteristics is a violence forever threatening to explode. It is a volcanic poetry whose eruptions would be gratuitous and excessive were we to forget the beleaguered communal mentality from which it derives. It is a poetry of the deprived, of the underdog, and Leonard is a direct descendant of MacGill, eighty years on and enraged at social injustice rather than religious affront. But here, too, we are still in the armed camp, still waging a war; there is still a siege, still a siege mentality, still enemies to be encountered and bested. The poetic imagination is still very much on the defensive, mistrustful, watchful, resentful - it is the same mindset as MacGill and MacColla, though with a crucial change of adversary. The target is now unwarrantable, self-promoting elitism, a new elect, a modern clerisy, educational rather than religious: not Presbyterian disdain, but the arrogant privileging of certain accents, speech acts, modes of discourse, is what now provokes resentment.

But if religion has clearly fallen from its centrality of importance, it has not completely disappeared; the legacy is still detectible, even if in an inverted, ironic, subversively critical form. Consider, for example, a poem such as 'Impressions' (1975), an account of a mission preached by a thickly-brogued Irish priest to a class of twelve-year olds in a Glasgow Catholic school. The inspiration is, of course, literary as well as personal - Joyce's hell-fire sermon

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in the **Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man** is its openly acknowledged source:

Authentic? Joyce *authentic*? I'll tell you.

But it is also a significant marker in a process of religious disaffection among the young that is at the root of our current crisis.

'Feed Ma Lamz' (1975) is equally subversive as it daringly translates the God of Mount Sinai to the heartland of Glasgow to deliver the ten commandments anew in language appropriate to his new chosen people: 'nay fornirz or communists', 'nay laffn ina Sunday'; but, if the accent is new, the vindictiveness is constant:

Oaky doaky. Stick way it
- rahl burn thi lohta yiz.

The poem exploits the contradiction, embarrassing for Christianity, between a loving, merciful Christ (speaker of the title) and the xenophobic, killjoy Glaswegian despot-god -

Doon nyir hungkirz. Wheesht -

as well as the frogmarching of the commandments to suit the needs of modern society: 'thou shalt not kill' becomes 'nay GBH (septina wawr)'.

But the religious allusions are not always hostile, as the playfulness of 'The Miracle of the Burd and the Fishes' (1975) makes plain (even if the 'burd' in question is a wee Glasgow lassie who has dumped her disconsolate boyfriend). The reference is to one of the great miracles of collective compassion worked by Christ in the feeding of the five thousand, perhaps also to the Glasgow coat of arms associated with the legends of St Mungo. The irreverence here is of a sort that betokens an affectionate familiarity, much in the way that one might tease an old friend. I can remember as a boy hearing the forward line of the Celtic football team described as the Five Sorrowful Mysteries, and only recently new plans to renovate the Jungle at Parkhead were referred to as the seating of the five thousand. Far from malice or enmity, such remarks reveal a sympathy, an affection; it would be foolish and misguided to resent this as an insult to religion.

Faith and football, however much people deplore it, are still interconnected in many working-class areas of the west of Scotland. The old complaint at religious discrimination recurs in the poem, 'Crack' (1975), when Kenny

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Dalgleish of Celtic is pulled down in the box and the penalty kick predictably refused: 'wan mair upfir thi ludg'. The bigotry may be trivial, but it is bigotry nevertheless. Which brings me finally to 'The Good Thief' (1975), a poem uniting with classic economy the cardinal Glasgow preoccupations of football and religion. The drunk supporter is, like his gospel forerunner, headed for Paradise (nickname of Celtic's stadium) and, just as the darkness over the earth at the moment of Christ's death is dispelled by the promise of salvation ('this day thou shalt be with me'), so the threat to the game from the darkness over Glasgow near three o'clock (hour of both Christ's death and the kick-off) is countered by the consoling thought of the floodlights towering over Parkhead: 'good jobe theyve gote thi lights'. Christ is still with the good thief and is, of course, still 'wanny uz'. 'Ma right insane yirra pape'; naturally, the good thief is right - Christ is a pape, what else could he be? He, too, is headed for Paradise - the good thief can see it in his eyes.

Such a poetry is incomprehensible without its religious matrix. But Leonard's work represents a new stage in the disintegration of the old community of faith - a turning away in irritation from the religious mentality that once led to the construction of the armed camp, and the transformation of that fortress into an increasingly secularised ghetto. Religious preoccupations crumble while the young get on with *real* life, turning away in bored unconcern from the Word as from an old, dried parchment, a dead letter with no relevance to modern living. In a once near-tribal society now experiencing dissolution and dispersal, religion, once the most precious of possessions and the talisman of identity, has, for many, become a piece of junk, littering the lumber-room of consciousness, fit only for the trashcan of history. Who were your ancestors? The once all-decisive question now provokes a mere shrug of the shoulders: who knows, who cares?

LITERATURE OF THE PILGRIMAGE

And yet the final stage in the evolution of our literature reveals yet again that extraordinary resilience possessed by Christianity since its earliest days. In this phase can be seen an escape from the ghetto, whether sectarian or social, into the open world, the unconfined space of the pilgrimage. Muriel Spark's escape was perhaps the easier, in that her ghetto was not the parochial enclave of immigrant urban Irish. Born a Jew (in 1918), educated at a middle-class Presbyterian school for girls, she converted to Catholicism when she was thirty seven years old. She observed, indisputably, the identity between the two subject peoples, is an outsider, an exile, twice over - a Jew in Christendom, a Catholic among Calvinists. She is aware of the shared experience of discrimination, the parallel prejudices, and tells us so in her first novel, **The Comforters** (1957), when she describes her new co-

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religionists as doomed, like her kinsfolk, to be suspected and misunderstood by the modern world. But for her there is no longer any sense of being in a fortress, religious or social; like Abraham, she is out in the open, and her fiction is that of the pilgrimage, the open-ended search. She seeks but has not yet found. Truth is tentative, a promised land still to be attained. The religious problems in her texts (and she is, above all, a religious novelist) are of a kind with which Augustine and Aquinas would have felt completely at home - whereas the problems evoked by MacGill and MacColla would have seemed to the great saints merely the parochial particularities, the local difficulties, of a relatively unimportant sub-section of the faithful whose sad lot it was to live separated from the universal church in benighted regions.

She is interested in sin rather than society, in grace rather than class or sect, in destiny rather than money and career, in the fate of the soul rather than the fortunes of the body. She deliberately throws down the gauntlet to the modern secular world in a sentence such as this from **The Portobello Road** (1985), in which a Catholic friend comments upon a girl who has just been murdered: 'She was at Confession only the day before she died - wasn't she lucky?' Well, wasn't she? It is a sentence and a sentiment that take us back to the bizarre mentality of the Circumcellions of the 4th Century, to an outlook thought to have vanished forever. Earlier in the story we read this astonishingly anachronistic sentence: 'He looked as if he would murder me and he did'. The narrator, we discover with a start, is a female ghost - death is most certainly not the end of the matter for Spark as it is for the conventional modern novelist. 'I never trust the airlines from those countries where the pilots believe in the after-life', remarks a character in **The Driver's Seat** (1970). People who really believe in eternity will (and should) have a very different view of things from those who believe that we die once and forever. The whole plot of **Memento Mori** (1959) is based upon the idea of a group of very old people receiving mysterious phone calls reminding them that they must die. It turns out that the mystery is never solved (how could it be?), since the caller is Death himself. Remove the phone and it is the world of Chaucer's **Pardoner's Tale**. Such a literature is a return to the medieval world-view in which this life is simply a transit-camp to eternity - it revokes our whole programme since the Renaissance onward of finding the meaning of life in the worldly, the temporal, the here and now. The action in a Spark text is always viewed *sub specie aeternitatis* - it is a God's-eye view of existence and destiny. Here is a literature that is profoundly religious, but with no hint of the sectarian animosities that have riven Scotland for centuries. Armed camp and ghetto have alike disappeared; wit and intelligence have replaced anger and resentment. Spark's quarrel is with the modern world, the world we live in, not the redundant world of Trent, Calvin

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and Knox that we are fast leaving behind. Our hope is that this will be the harbinger of a new, religious-based literature promoting intelligence over emotion, letting the dead past bury its dead. It is the latest reflection in our mirror, and it admonishes us to be done with ancient quarrels and, in the idiom of Vatican Two, turn our eyes to the innovative and open-ended future.

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