



Faith and Doubt as Components of Catholic Literature

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In a conference on the current position of Catholic culture, Catholic literature obviously has its place. But what place? Is its position within our culture the same as it was in the past? Does it still justify a place in school or university curricula? These are complicated issues, and to deal with them we will need to look at the various forms that Catholic literature has taken over the years, and the development that it has undergone. I will be looking specifically at Catholic literature in English, but glancing occasionally across the Channel.

We must start by trying to clear the decks. What is Catholic literature? It's not, of course, necessarily the same thing as literature written by Catholics. For a great many Catholics the writing of a literary work has not automatically involved a deep concern with matters of faith. Yet alongside such non-committed writers we find, in both France and Britain over the last century and a half, a hard core of writers in whom a deep involvement in religious matters is associated with works of literary value, with the novel and poetry taking the forefront. Their faith has been central to

their work, and some of these writers have been among the greatest, whether religious or secular, of their time.

The marriage of literature and religion does, however, have its problems. In the wrong hands, 'religious literature' can become banal, prosaic, sentimental, didactic. As my old friend the Dominican Fr Pie Duployé put it, describing the deleterious effect that he felt religion had had upon the appreciation of the arts:

Christians claim to know this world, but only too often they turn it into a clerical version of reality. They will never know that sublime moment when the work of art is considered and loved for itself; instead they will use that work self-consciously for their own exclusive ends, which are the construction of the kingdom of God, or (alas) what they believe to be the kingdom of God. On this diet, Christian consciousness will absorb everything; there is no art so tough that it will not end up by being neutralised and taken over, but at what a price!¹

Just as Christian readers can tend to appropriate literature to their own needs, so Christian writers, when they too blatantly try to use their writings to put across a Christian message, can come seriously unstuck as writers. But there are other dangers, too, for the Christian writer. For poets, the most insistent of these dangers are over-sentimentality and banality. There has, over the ages, been a strong tradition in all parts of the Christian Church of pious poetry of this kind. The Christian poet Norman Nicholson, in the introduction to his *Anthology of Christian Verse*, has defined such poetry as 'moral uplift in rhyme, or pious verse' in which 'the use of conventional images and worn-out phrases seems to imply that Christianity itself is no longer a

¹ Pie Duployé OP, *La Littérature dans le Royaume de Dieu* (Paris: Bibliothèque de l'Homme d'Action, 1961), p. 20.

living thing.’² Much of mid-nineteenth century English Catholic poetry was of this kind.

The Catholic novel can share this tendency to sentimentality, and also to moralising, as one can tell merely from the titles of a number of mid-nineteenth century novels, which seem to ape the titles of the secular writings of the same time, such as Dean Farrar’s famous novel *Eric: or Little by Little*. These Catholic titles included *Eustace: or Self-Devotion*, *The Cousins: or Pride and Vanity*, and *Geraldine: A Tale of Conscience*. It has to be said, of course, that such novels chimed in well with Victorian secular taste.

The nineteenth-century Catholic novel lay open to an even more insidious tendency, however, and that was didacticism, or the desire above all to *teach*. To teach can be, of course, a perfectly legitimate aim of Catholic literature. But that teaching, to be effective and to be artistically satisfying, should not be blatant and obvious, as it was in for example Emily Agnew’s novel *Rome and the Abbey*, where most of the dialogue consists mainly of various authoritative figures expounding Catholic doctrine in great detail to the heroine.

We should not put up our noses at the sentimental or banal strand of Catholic poetry. Aren’t we being artistic snobs if we do so? Many ordinary Christians have found a great deal of solace in such literature. It is the equivalent of the tawdry objects of piety which have so often been found in our churches – sentimental plaster statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph, cheap mementos of the Sacred Heart, and so on. French Catholic intellectuals have always turned up their noses at such objects; some have even suggested that they are the work of the devil! But in this

² Norman Nicholson, *An Anthology of Religious Verse, designed for the times* (London: Pelican, 1942)

country Catholics of all kinds have tended to accept these objects very readily, as one of the many pathways bringing the faithful to God.

But while didactic or sentimental literature and art can seem to serve a religious purpose of a kind, it is of a very restricted kind; and it certainly does not serve a literary or artistic purpose. One could not, for example, teach about such literature in the English or French departments of Catholic schools. If this were the only Catholic literature that existed, Catholic literature would not be worth reading alongside the flourishing secular literature of our age.

To come back to the novel: Some Catholic novelists, later at the turn of the century, while avoiding the excesses we have noted, nevertheless shared some of those faults in a rather less obvious way. A good example of this is Robert Hugh Benson, a vastly popular novelist of the first decade of the twentieth century. He had considerable literary skill, particularly in his historical novels of the times of Catholic persecution in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These gripping stories were a religious version of the vastly popular secular yarns, by such authors as G.A. Henty, that flourished in this period. But various serious faults which exist in these novels come out even more clearly in his novels on contemporary subjects. Characters in them are unreal and two-dimensional; moral issues, though clear-cut, are often puzzlingly simplistic and inhuman; and the author's standpoint allows for no ambiguity as to motivation or meaning. Above all, the religious message is far too obviously introduced, and is often alarmingly simplistic. As Maisie Ward was later contemptuously to point out, there were things in the Catholic faith that Benson really did not understand: 'Swiftly instructed and swiftly ordained', she wrote, 'he had no opportunity to acquire an all-round Catholic intellectual equipment'. In literary terms,

Benson's output is highly unsatisfactory. In religious terms, his treatment of issues can be highly misleading.

Even at this stage of the English Catholic novel's development, however, there was at least one example of someone who wrote real novels, with a keen insight not only into human motivation but also into the complexities of modern society. This was Mrs Wilfrid Ward (Josephine Ward, the wife of the Catholic apologist Wilfrid Ward), who is to my mind an unjustly neglected novelist. As well as the obvious literary attributes of her novels, she also manages, far more subtly than most Catholic novelists of her time, to convey a religious message, on the one hand about moral dilemmas faced by Catholics and on the other about the nature of religious vocation and the workings of grace. She has the rare quality, for someone of her time, of never pushing a conclusion at her reader. One of the best examples of her techniques is the novel *Horace Blake*, a 'conversion' novel which avoids the obvious nature of so many novels in this genre. In it the conversion, that of a fervent atheist, occurs less than halfway through the novel, the rest of which is taken up by the repercussions, and the questioning, of that conversion. Was it real, or was it the fear of death that had brought it on? This is typical of Mrs Ward. A situation is put before the reader and the author does not immediately come down on one side or the other. All options remain open. Only gradually do we begin to realise the Christian message lying beneath the surface.

Mrs Wilfrid Ward was, in the period before the First World War, a lone voice in the English Catholic novel, however. Where, in France, a highly successful Catholic novel had emerged well before the First World War, with figures such as Joris-Karl Huysmans, Léon Bloy, Paul Bourget and others, little of similar value was to emerge in Britain before the inter-war period. It was then that the two great

exponents of the English Catholic novel, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, came to dominate the scene, at the same time as, in France, François Mauriac and Georges Bernanos emerged as similarly powerful writers. Alongside them other, lesser writers also produced novels of value. In Britain, one of the most important of these was the now neglected Maurice Baring.

What is it that singled out this particular generation of Catholic novelists? They differ from their predecessors, I think, on both literary and religious grounds. In literary terms, they were attempting to combine the best in contemporary secular literary trends with specifically Catholic concerns. Unlike their French counterparts, English writers like Waugh, Greene and Baring had often carved out a career in the secular novel before turning to religious concerns. One of the important lessons they had learned was that of the importance of ambiguity in the modern novel, and its ability to convey the complexity of reality, as opposed to imposing an artificial pattern upon it. This might at first sight seem to preclude anything in the way of teaching or of a moral lesson; but these novelists discovered that the way to include Catholic concerns was by way of suggestion rather than of statement. The reader is often left to puzzle out the underlying message, rather than being given it on a plate. One of Graham Greene's characters, the journalist Fowler in *The Quiet American*, draws a telling comparison from the field of journalism. 'I am a reporter', he said. 'God exists only for leader-writers'. Yet if Catholic novelists, from the Thirties onwards, avoided the obvious authorial interventions which one could compare to the comments of leader-writers, they nevertheless did not just restrict themselves to being reporters. Behind their surface reporting there lay a more subtle form of comment, all the more powerful for being half-hidden and at times ambiguous.

On the religious front, these novelists can be divided into two groups. On the one hand there are Catholics of a strongly traditional and straightforward faith, such as Waugh and Baring. Their originality lies in the structure of their novels, and the way in which they gradually reveal the truths they are intending to impart. Thus it is that the true message of Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* is only gradually revealed during the course of the novel, while in the *Sword of Honour* trilogy the nub of the meaning is so effectively concealed that only too often unobservant critics have concluded that Waugh must have given up providing a Catholic theme to the novels (apart from producing occasional descriptions of Catholic observance or of recusant glamour). Yet in *Sword of Honour* that unobtrusive, serious Catholic theme in fact makes sense of the whole work. In other words, in novels like this, as with many secular modern novels, the reader is expected to play his or her part in the interpretation of the work, and the author's task is to provide the fragments of information on which that interpretation can be based.

The other group of writers is made up of people whose Christian faith is far more complicated. In a sense, they are closer to their readers' religious experience, in that most approaches to faith are far more complicated than, up to this time, Catholic literature had suggested. Above all, these writers conveyed something of the complex relationship between faith and doubt.

The close relationship between faith and doubt has often been pointed out, and has been part of the religious experience of even the most holy Saints. St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross come immediately to mind. And it sometimes seems that the experience of doubt can be the basis for the firmest faith. On the other hand, the most unquestioning faith can often become extremely fragile, when at some stage the holder of that faith finds him- or herself tried by misfortune in their own lives,

such as bereavement or serious illness. Their faith has never, till now, been put to the test, and at this crucial moment it is found wanting. Indeed, I sometimes think that the Biblical parable of the house built on rock and the house built on sand is capable of a different interpretation from the conventional one. In this version one house is built on the sand of unquestioning certainty, and the other on the rock of faith fortified by doubt.

Graham Greene once described himself as a ‘Catholic agnostic.’ David Lodge, the most remarkable of the Catholic novelists who emerged after the Second World War, described himself as an ‘agnostic Catholic’. There is a subtle difference between the two concepts, but the word agnostic is here particularly important, because it is not necessarily, as is so often thought, a close relation to atheism, a step on the way in that direction. It means, in fact, not knowing exactly what to believe, or whether to believe. And the word ‘Catholic’ is very important, because it clearly implies a desire to believe (even if one is not sure exactly what one believes). Both these authors, and many others in the modern period, grapple with their faith, and ask more questions than they provide answers. Yet their work is clearly Catholic, and is clearly religious.

Graham Greene provides a particularly interesting case. His concept of what could be called the ‘Catholic novel’ changed drastically during the course of his career. In some of his superb early novels, he remained very much within the traditions of the Catholic novel as it had been up to that time, and used them to remarkable effect. Within this format, however, one could already sense an impatience, tempered with cynicism. And soon he emerged from this phase, into a freer, less overtly ‘Catholic’ approach, in which the same underlying principles were more subtly approached.

Many people have described his novels of the first type – *The Power and the Glory*, *Brighton Rock*, *The Heart of the Matter*, *The End of the Affair* – as his ‘Catholic’ novels – which presumably implies that his later novels should be classified as ‘not Catholic’. Yet it could be argued that these later novels are more profoundly Catholic than the earlier ones. Gone are the trappings of the traditional ‘Catholic novel’, and in their place comes a new, spare type of novel, in which people grapple with the same problems, but where the answers are, as in life, not so clear. For Greene, Christian answers are only too often answering the wrong questions – questions that have not been put. The author has taken on a new persona, that of a hyper-observant first-person narrator who, like the author, is fascinated by the *minutiae* of human behaviour around him – but who is often as unsure as the reader as to what the answers are. The novel *A Burnt-Out Case* takes place in a leper-colony in Africa. The hero Query (a name which many have related to the word ‘Query’) is a lapsed Catholic. His is an arid life, empty of belief and of purpose, which is compared to that of those lepers who, cured of the virulent disease, are nevertheless ‘burnt-out cases’ whose limbs no longer have life in them. As the novel proceeds, he seems to re-find a capacity for compassion, and indeed his eventual death can be seen as a result of this capacity for pity for others, which makes him impervious to the dangers of what he is doing. Because of this, a stupid priest takes him to be a saint. In contrast, the atheist Dr Colin’s view is that he has been cured of his ‘burnt-out’ condition by learning to serve other people. The final discussion between the Fathers serving the leper colony and Dr Colin leaves unresolved the question of whether Query has refound his faith or not. In one sense, for Greene the question is now irrelevant. As the critic Bernard Bergonzi has put it, Greene now took the view that ‘nature and

grace are interdependent, and that there is a virtual and implicit Christianity as well as a doctrinally informed and committed Christianity.’

Greene’s subtle treatment of these issues leads him to portray, in *A Burnt-Out Case*, an uncertain lapsed Christian alongside a firm but humanitarian atheist. This puzzled many of his readers who had been used to a more clear-cut depiction of Christian issues. One of the characters in a David Lodge novel typifies these reactions. For him, says Lodge, ‘the credibility of the Catholic faith was underwritten by the existence of distinguished literary converts like Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, so any sign of their having Doubts was unsettling’ This character found the new novels ‘morally and theologically confused – there was not the same stark contrast between the Church and the secular world that you got in the earlier novels.’ Such readers even felt that *A Burnt-Out Case* was a sign that Greene had lost his faith. But, as Greene replied to one of them, they were forgetting that fiction is fiction, and that the author can convey subtle shades of meaning not by direct statement, but by the interplay between the characters. ‘Must a Catholic’, he protested, ‘be forbidden to paint the portrait of a lapsed Catholic? I suggest that if you read the book again you will find in the dialogue between the doctor and Querry at the end the suggestion that Querry’s lack of faith was a very superficial one – far more superficial than the doctor’s atheism. If people are so impetuous as to regard this book as a recantation of faith, I cannot help it. Perhaps they will be surprised to see me at Mass.’

The truth is that this new phase of Greene’s novelistic experience, from the mid-50s onwards, was to create a new kind of Catholic novel, which was to receive a worthy continuation in a younger generation of Catholic novelists, including David Lodge and Muriel Spark.

So, as far as the Catholic novel is concerned, there is thus a great deal of material that deserves to be part of an English syllabus, as far as its literary merits are concerned, and of which the religious content deserves serious consideration, not least because it is not prescriptive, but raises questions to which the answers are often not easy. At the centre, there are the two colossi, Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene. More recently, there is the masterly David Lodge. But there are a number of other writers for whom I would make a plea: for the precursor, Mrs Wilfrid Ward, with her subtle depiction of human motivation and religious dilemmas; for Maurice Baring, admittedly a writer of the second division, but whose deceptively simple treatment of human relationships hides an often profound examination of Catholic issues; and for, among the more recent novelists, the widely differing Muriel Spark, Antonia White, Alice Thomas Ellis and George Mackay Brown.

The pickings are even richer, however, when it comes to Catholic poetry. Where, in the French Catholic Revival, the novel took pride of place, with very little in the way of successful Catholic poetry, in Britain the opposite was the case. (It would be interesting to go into the possible reasons for this difference – but today is not the time for such a discussion). Even from the earliest stages of modern English Catholic poetry, with that of John Henry Newman in the mid-nineteenth century, there had been a healthy escape from the sentimentality that is religious poetry's most insidious danger. By the end of the nineteenth century a brilliant upsurge of Catholic poetry occurred, with highly original poets like Francis Thompson, Alice Meynell, Coventry Patmore and Lionel Johnson, and with of course in the background (and not widely known until long after his death), the lone poetic genius of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Then, in the inter-war period, there emerged the unclassifiable poet/novelist/visual artist David Jones, a figure of great complexity and originality.

And later still, during and after the Second World War, a new generation of Catholic poets emerged, including David Gascoyne, Kathleen Raine, Elizabeth Jennings, Peter Levi, and a remarkable Scottish poet from the Orkneys, George Mackay Brown.

Poetry is, of course, the ideal medium for conveying religious meaning. As the Anglican poet R.S. Thomas once wrote, 'How shall we attempt to describe or express ultimate meaning except through metaphor and symbol?' Poetry works through images, similes, metaphors, allusions, rather than through the logical processes of prose. The Catholic poets writing in English explore many shades of meaning, and the effect of their poetry is often very moving.

I have no need, here, to describe the revolutionary nature of Hopkins's verse. It is enough to say that, through that remarkable vehicle, he was able to convey a whole range of forms of religious experience, from his exuberant wonder at God's creation to his terrible onslaughts of doubt, and the struggle to maintain his faith. In contrast to Hopkins, we have the quiet understatement of Alice Meynell's poetry, a series of meditative ponderings on the implications of the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection. And then there is Francis Thompson's powerful series of statements, whether in the headlong dash of the 'Hound of Heaven', depicting the poet's attempts to escape from the call of God, or in the world-view of his 'Kingdom of God', in which he shows us that God's kingdom is not a distant thing that is difficult to approach, but surrounds us in the everyday world we live in, if we are only prepared to look and perceive. Nor should we neglect Lionel Johnson, admired by such disparate poets as W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound. At its best, his complex, subtle poetry partakes of a very modern uncertainty, where 'Doubt and Faith' come together as natural companions.

When we come to David Jones, we find a poet for whom the Mass is central to his faith. He was strongly influenced by the French Jesuit Maurice de la Taille's theories on the Mass, as expressed in his book *Mysterium Fidei*. Jones's vast epic *The Anathemata*, published in 1952, follows these teachings. It depicts the Last Supper, the Crucifixion and the Mass as being one and the same act of oblation, with central to it the 'axile stipe', the tree of the crucifixion, the axle around which the whole world revolves. The book starts with a priest celebrating the Mass in the present day, and after vast-ranging wanderings through history and pre-history, on the final page it returns to the same scene, with the priest acting according to the rubrics. Once again our attention is drawn to the universality of the act:

Here, in this high place
 into both hands
he takes the stemmed dish
 as in many places
by this poured and that held up
wherever their directing glosses reads:
 Here he takes the victim.....

He does what is done in many places
what he does other
 he does after the mode
of what has always been done.
What did he do other
 recumbent at the garnished supper?
What did he do yet other
 riding the Axile Tree?

Jones's influence upon the next generation of Catholic poets was immense. Elizabeth Jennings, whose poetry similarly stresses the importance of the sacrament of the Mass, refers, in a poem dedicated to him, to his vision of 'art as gesture and as sacrament... much like the Presence under wine and bread', and Peter Levi, at Jones's requiem in 1975, echoed Jones's vision of the Mass as 'what has already been done once for all on another hilltop... and also done many times from the beginning of mankind'. And in the poetry of the Orkney poet George Mackay Brown, in which he

mingles the Norse past of the Orkneys with its Christian heritage, we find the Mass similarly depicted as a timeless enactment rather than a re-enactment. Even the imagery is similar, with, in the poem 'A Feast of Candles' a priest, speaking in 'Latin whispers', celebrating Candlemas in the 'stone ship' of the nave (one of Jones's favourite images).

It is significant, too, that the other great influence upon this later generation of poets has been Gerard Manley Hopkins. This influence manifests itself not only in the surface evidence of quotations and direct references, but also at the more profound level of similarities of theme, mood and approach.

First, the direct references. David Jones quotes Hopkins directly on a number of occasions, most notably when he names one of the sections of his First-World War epic *In Parenthesis* as 'Starlight Order', a direct quotation from Hopkins's poem 'The Bugler's First Communion', or when, in *The Anthemata*, he describes Christ's cry upon the cross in words taken from the words of despair in one of Hopkins's terrible sonnets: 'His cry before his *mors*-cry / Of his black-hours' cryings / his ninth-hour outcry'. Among other poets who refer directly to Hopkins, we have Peter Levi, who devoted a monograph to him, and George Mackay Brown, who evokes Hopkins's influence upon him at length in his autobiography, and who made an abortive attempt to write a thesis on Hopkins for Edinburgh University. And Elizabeth Jennings, in a sonnet written towards the end of her life, when she was in hospital, sums up not only her debt to Hopkins but also the power of the sacrament for her, and her belief in the sacramental role of the poet:

Hopkins, I understand exactly now
What you meant when you told us that the sick
Endear us to them. I know this is true
Because I am a sick one and God's quick,

Saving principle has come to me,

A tiny piece of bread unleavened saves
The soul. I feel its power immediately.
Stammering my thanks, I know my flesh behaves

Oddly, but I know also I am
Within Heaven's confines. You, O Hopkins I
Commend for showing me how close I came

To our Redeemer in his healing, high
Offices. My thanksgiving is home
And Jesus Christ is with me where I lie.

The most powerful reflections of Hopkins's poetry are to be found, however, in the anguished poetry of a number of these poets, that reflects the mood of despair to be found in Hopkins's poems of doubt. It is significant, I think, that Jennings entitles one of her collections *The Mind has Mountains*, a specific reference to part of Hopkins's despairing sonnet 'No worst, there is none':

O the mind, the mind, has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there.

Hopkins had been the first modern Catholic poet to depict the anguish of doubt, the despair of the experience of the absence of God. In this, a poet like David Gascoyne follows him closely. But two things come clearly out of the poetry of both Hopkins and Gascoyne on this subject. Firstly, that the anguish comes out of the desire to believe: The poet prays for that belief to return. Secondly, that perhaps this trial has come to them in order to perfect them, to purge them of all dross and make them a fitting receptacle for belief.

Thus, in his poem 'Not, I'll not, Carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee', Hopkins determines not to give in to despair. He describes himself as having physically wrestled with despair. Defeated, he lies heaped there like the grain on the threshing-floor, waiting to be 'fanned':

But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me
Thy wring-world right foot rock? Lay a lionlimb against me? Scan

With darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones? And fan,
O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and flee?

And then we come to the turning-point of the poem: the stark word 'Why?' In an attempt to explain *why* this has happened to him, the poet continues the image of the threshing-floor. In St Matthew's Gospel we read that God's 'fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire'. Using the same imagery, Hopkins suggests that perhaps God has put him through all his suffering in order to get rid of all that is impure (the chaff), so that what is left will be his grain, 'sheer and clear'.

Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear.

The final image of the poem is highly dramatic. We now see the reason for the images of wrestling earlier in the poem. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel (or with God), the poet has, since he 'kissed the rod' (the rood, or Cross), been struggling with Christ, 'the hero'. The mood is still one of questioning, but the last line, with its sudden exclamation in brackets repeating the phrase 'my God!', shows a dawning realisation that the terrible struggles of 'that night, that year' in which all had been black for him, had been struggles with God:

Nay, in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,
Hand rather, my heart lo! Lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, cheer.
Cheer whom though? The hero whose heaven-handling flung me, fóot trod
Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one? That night, that year
Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.

Hopkins's mood, and even certain aspects of his imagery, lie at the heart of David Gascoyne's poems of doubt and despair. In the poem 'Out of these depths' we get the same impression of depths and of falling as in Hopkins's phrase 'the mind has mountains, cliffs of fall frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed'. Gascoyne's poem is, however, addressed directly to God, and is a plea for him to come to the poet's rescue;

and the final line 'And aid our unbelief', extends the poet's situation to all humanity, and ultimately shows a trust in God's willingness to come to the rescue:

Out of these depths:

Where footsteps wander in the marsh of death and an
Intense infernal glare is on our faces facing down:

Out of these depths, what shamefaced cry
Half choked in the dry throat, as though a stone
Were our confounded tongue, can ever rise:
Because the mind has been struck blind
And may no more conceive
Thy Throne....

Because the depths
Are clear with only death's
Marsh-light, because the rock of grief
Is clearly too extreme for us to breach:
Deepen our depths

And aid our unbelief.

Like Teresa of Avila, Gascoyne is still able to pray to the God in whom he finds it so difficult to believe. And, in another poem, like Hopkins he considers the possibility that his despair may be a form of revelation. By clearing away all the unreal certainties of an unquestioning faith, a solid base will be found on which to found a true faith:

Far from Thy face I nothing understand
But kiss the Hand that has consigned
Me to these latter years where I must learn
The revelation of despair, and find
Among the debris of all certainties
The hardest stone on which to found
Altar and shelter for Eternity.

This is not, of course, the only mood of modern Catholic poetry, as we can see in much of the poetry of Jones, Jennings, Mackay Brown, Levi and Raine. Much of their poetry is made up of profound musings on the sacraments, on the nature of the Christian experience, and (in the case of Kathleen Raine) on a neo-Platonic

interpretation of the role of the artist and the poet as intermediaries between God and humankind. But one thing they all have in common: a capacity to make the reader think, and an eschewing of the easy answers.

Poetry of this kind is the most perfect vehicle for teaching, as such teaching involves close reading of texts, and a participation by a whole group in the interpretation of those texts.

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In giving the examples I have, I have been trying to show that Catholic literature is an entirely suitable subject for study in modern English Departments. This is particularly true of Catholic literature of the twentieth century, which is of a quality that deserves study purely as literature, but which also (and this is important for religious schools) raises religious issues in a profound and often demanding way.

Over the past fifty years or so, there has been a revolution in educational methods. The old methods were often prescriptive, with the teacher telling the pupils what was what. At its worst, such education could consist merely of dictating notes to the pupils, with little explanation and little opportunity for discussion. As we know, the great change that has come about consists of involving the pupils, of taking on board their opinions, of discussing issues in an open-ended way which does not take for granted any specific outcome for the discussion.

Catholic literature of the early period of the nineteenth-century Revival (with certain important exceptions) was, in its outlook, very similar to the educational methods of its day. There was a specific message to be conveyed, and it was often conveyed in a very simplistic manner. The complexity of human experience, and specifically of human religious experience, was on the whole ignored, 'straightened

out'. Such literature, as well as being artistically lacking, is also entirely unsuitable for pupils brought up in line with the presumptions of modern education.

Modern Catholic literature is, however, a perfect vehicle for such education. Its literary merit is such that it deserves to be studied widely, and not just by Catholics. For Catholics, and for other Christians, however, it is a particularly stimulating subject for study, in that it provides a glimpse of the complexity of religious experience, and in that it provides questions rather than answers. 'For now we see in a glass darkly'. The Christian faith would be easy, if we knew all the answers. God does not intend it to be that easy.