‘Catholic literature’: what does this mean?

David Birch

The highly influential commentator on Catholicism in the 20th century, Jacques Maritain, converted to Catholicism with his wife Raëssa in part from the influence of French novelist and poet, Lon Bloy, in 1906.

Catholic literature has played an immensely important role in the conversion of many to Catholicism and can certainly help to lead us towards the insight given to us by St Thomas Aquinas, and picked up by so many poets and writers since, that the world is, as Fr Gerard Manley Hopkins said, 'charged with the grandeur of God'.

'To be a Catholic', as Hilaire Belloc once remarked to Fr Ronald Knox (himself a convert), 'is to be everything'. If that still holds as a defining feature of Catholicism, and many Catholics would hope it does, what does that then mean for Catholic literature in a globalising culture that increasingly sees the idea of individual conscience as more important than Church teaching?

Is there such a thing as 'Catholic literature', and perhaps more to the point, can there be such a thing as 'Catholic literature' in societies and cultures which are not predominantly Catholic?

G.K. Chesterton once famously said of John Henry Newman that he would never have been so 'fanatically religious' had he lived in a Catholic country.

Indeed, to become a Catholic when Newman did was to effectively cut oneself off from established privilege, status and position - and if you happened to be a clergyman, as many of the converts to Catholicism were at this time, it was also to cut yourself off from your income as well; and indeed in many cases from family and friends.

It also meant, as Newman was himself to experience, and which Gerard Manley Hopkins was also to discover when converting to Catholicism and becoming a Jesuit, was that what constituted 'acceptable' Catholic writing and literature was not as 'laissez-faire' a process as the culture of growing unbelief which surrounded them.

One of Newman's contemporaries, the Rector of Lincoln College Oxford, Mark Pattison, preached on one occasion in 1865 (twenty years after Newman's conversion) that 'Literature is simply the form in which the existing opinions of a country are registered. It is,' he continued, 'palpably a product and measure of the intellectual attainment of a people not its source.'

If this were true, it would, in effect, deny Newman and Hopkins, and countless other Catholic writers in non-Catholic countries, the right to be considered a part of Catholic literature - indeed would seem to deny the existence of a Catholic literature outside of a Catholic country.

This was, in fact, a position Newman himself took. He argued that to talk of Catholic literature was an impossibility because while ever Catholics were writing in Protestant England they were de facto writing Protestant literature.
Newman's own *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, written (in English) in 1864, the year before Pattison's sermon, proves, I would suggest, the lie to Newman's own thesis, and so too does the Catholic splendour and originality of Hopkins' poetry, unrecognised in his lifetime and only published years after his death.

**Questions raised**

But Newman's position still continues to raise questions for us about what constitutes 'Catholic literature'. For example, does the fiction of a contemporary writer and Catholic commentator (love him or hate him as you will) like Fr Andrew Greeley, or the 20th century novels of the Melbourne-born Catholic writer Morris West, dealing as they both do with Catholic themes and practices, constitute the same 'Catholicity' in literature as a Dante or St John of the Cross?

Do they stop being 'Catholic' writings because America and Australia are not Catholic countries? Similarly, are the earlier writings of a Venerable Bede, St Ambrose, St Anselm, St Theresa of Avila, Thomas à Kempis, or a Juliana of Norwich, Richard Rolle and John Lydgate, who wrote in a fully Catholic environment and society, better defined as Catholic literature, than say, the work of the convert Cardinals Manning and Newman in 19th century Protestant England?

What of their contemporary, Cardinal Wiseman, who was laid, at his birth, on the High Altar of Seville Cathedral in the Catholic country whose Armada's defeat England has made part of its iconic post-reformation identity, and who, on that Altar, had been dedicated by his mother to a life in the Catholic Church?

Is Cardinal Wiseman's writing part of Catholic literature and Newman and Manning's not, because they are converts and Wiseman was not? Even though all three spent the greater part of their adult lives rebuilding a Catholic voice in a rampant anti-Catholic environment in England even after Catholic emancipation in 1829.

Do the poems of Francis Thompson, the novels of James Joyce and the work of Irish poet Seamus Heaney, or the wide-ranging writings of Fr Louis (Thomas) Merton, constitute the same sort of Catholic literature as the writings of a Michael O'Brien, Romano Guardini, or a Fr Teilhard de Chardin (still with a Vatican caution against his writings)? They are all Catholics, but should their work be treated in the same way? Are there Catholic writers, very different from each other as they are, like Lon Bloy, Georges Bernanos and Charles Péguy, worth rediscovering simply because they are Catholics, irrespective of how well or how badly they wrote?

Do you have to be a 'good' Catholic to be included in the pantheon of Catholic writers, or can you, as writers like English novelist Graham Greene, the Irish novelist Brian Moore, or the American poet Robert Lowell, be included even though they might have struggled with, even rejected totally, their Catholic faith?

Similarly, are the earlier ('non-Catholic') poems and writings of convert writers like Coventry Patmore to be considered Catholic? Or writers like contemporary English poet
Geoffrey Hill whose writings engage so much (and are so heavily influenced) by reactions to and with Catholicism?

What about the many converts to Catholicism like Ronald Knox, Edith Sitwell, Malcolm Muggeridge, Rumer Godden, Ernest Hemingway, Evelyn Waugh, Antonia Fraser, Muriel Spark and the contemporary Australian poet James McAuley, whose writings may not necessarily always be 'about' something Catholic?

Are the political writings of the American Catholic Michael Novak 'Catholic' in the same way as the political anti-reformation writings of St Thomas More, in his role as the official voice of the Catholic Church in England defending the inroads of the reformers? Are the writings of people like J.R.R. Tolkien, Anthony Burgess, Thomas Keneally and David Lodge 'Catholic' simply because they are baptised, sometimes practising, sometimes not, Catholics?

**Problem of faith**

Evelyn Waugh once described the 'Catholic novel' as 'one that deals with the problem of faith'. While American writer Flannery O'Connor, a devout Catholic living in the Southern Baptist belt of America, went far beyond that, when she wrote of Catholic literature 'as a Catholic mind looking into anything.'

More idealistically, Jacques Maritain, including 'literature' as part of an understanding of art as 'fundamentally constructive and creative', argued in 1923, following St Thomas Aquinas, that, 'Artistic creation does not copy God's creation, but continues it', holding within it both 'the trace and image of God', but also 'the full, sensitive and spiritual character not of the hands only but of the whole soul.' Does all of that have to be there for a work to make it as Catholic literature?

In his Easter Sunday (1999) Letter to Artists (n. 11) Pope John Paul II reiterated the position of the Second Vatican Council on 'a renewed relationship between the Church and culture, with immediate implications for the world of art' by referring to the Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes, which stressed 'the great importance' of literature and the arts in human life, stating that: 'They seek to probe the true nature of man, his problems and experiences, as he strives to know and perfect himself and the world, to discover his place in history and the universe, to portray his miseries and joys, his needs and strengths, with a view to a better future' (Gaudium et Spes, 62).

Earlier in Gaudium et Spes the Council Fathers referred to 'A change in attitudes and in human structures [which] frequently calls accepted values into question, especially among young people, who have grown impatient on more than one occasion, and indeed become rebels in their distress.'

These new conditions and views, they argued, 'have their impact on religion' and, moreover, in 'numerous places these views are voiced not only in the teachings of philosophers, but on every side they influence literature, the arts, the interpretation of the humanities and of history and civil laws themselves. As a consequence, many people are shaken' (n. 7).

The Council made it clear that 'literature and the arts' are, 'in their own way, of great importance to the life of the Church. They strive', the Council said, 'to make known the
proper nature of man, his problems and his experiences in trying to know and perfect both himself and the world. They have much to do with revealing man's place in history and in the world; with illustrating the miseries and joys, the needs and strengths of man and with foreshadowing a better life for him. They are able to elevate human life, expressed in multifold forms according to various times and regions' (n. 62).

So, for example, reading the Catholic poetry of the 20th century Welsh poet, David Jones, engages us in a quite different journey, though at times related, to the one we may experience reading the 19th century poetry of Fr Gerard Manley Hopkins SJ. While both clearly follow a Thomist understanding of poetry as 'the divination of the spiritual in the things of sense', they do so in quite different ways.

Not all Catholic writers write in an explicitly religious way - in fact very few do. Flannery O'Connor is a very good example saying, 'what we roughly call the Catholic novel is not necessarily about a Christianised or Catholicised world, but simply that it is one in which the truth as Christians know it has been used as a light to see the world by.'

Of course, what constitutes that 'truth' for a Catholic writer is that it is impossible to separate the supernatural from the natural worlds in which they live and write about. In effect, we encounter what Jacques Maritain described as 'the conduct of human life itself in fiction'.

Catholic lens

The crucial issue, when it comes to thinking about 'Catholic' literature, is the extent to which Catholicism defines that 'conduct of human life'. So, when we read J.R.R. Tolkien, a devout Catholic all his life, we may not be reading explicit Catholic dogma and theology, but when read through a Catholic lens, a work like The Lord of the Rings becomes, as Tolkien himself said in 1953 in a letter to Fr Robert Murray SJ, 'a fundamentally religious and Catholic work.'

This short article merely touches the tip of the iceberg of what might or might not constitute some of the questions surrounding the idea of 'Catholic literature'.

To explore these questions more fully, and to read widely amongst the many thousands of Catholic books and writers, the Caroline Chisholm Library in association with the Central Catholic Bookshop in Melbourne is hosting a monthly Catholic Reading Group, beginning 14 November at 7pm, Level 3, 358 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne. All are welcome, and should contact this writer for details of how to join the Group, at birchd_at_deakin.edu.au

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