MILLENNIAL DAYS: RELIGION AS CONSOLATION AND DESOLATION IN CONTEMPORARY SCOTTISH POETRY

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the context of Scottish religious culture and ideology, and its impact on contemporary poets who grew up within it. Their work helps us to move beyond sectarian tensions between Protestant majority and Catholic minority by understanding the deep strategies by which these communities construct both 'reality' and poetry. Scottish poets in a postmodern world also find paths out of such cultural divides, by creative exploration of other spiritual traditions, and by offering a more balanced appreciation of the continuities in their own.

> The fact that religion —in its various forms— was etched more sharply on the working class psyche than the politics of industrial society affected all the parties, but none more so than Labour.
> (Michael Lynch, *Scotland: A New History* 419)

THE CONTEXTS OF SCOTTISH RELIGIOUS POETRY

Scotland can be a dangerously dichotomous place not only for Labour politicians but also for literary critics to deal with. My title records the extremes of religious experience, its consolations as well as its desolations, while just evading an either/or of opposition. This is because I am aware of how highly oppositional and politicised Scottish religion can still be, especially where Protestant and Catholic are polarised. Reading Michael Lynch's description above of Scottish antagonism to the Liberal Party's support for Irish Home Rule in 1886, which the Conservative Party countered by populist appeal to Protestant sentiment, playing upon "the revival of the Orange

Order [...] issues such as religious instruction in schools, and fears kindled by [...] the revival of the Scottish Catholic Hierarchy in 1878,"[1] I find myself surprised, and slightly embarrassed, by its similarity to political life in Scotland in the year 2000.

In this first year of a new millennium, and of a newly devolved Scottish Parliament elected with great hopes and a Labour majority, it might seem that the continuities of culture, ideology and religious difference have conspired to keep the Scots not too far from where they were over one hundred years ago. Arguments in the media about the extent of anti-Catholic bigotry in the "new" Scotland (or anti-Irish racism, perhaps, since most of the Catholics who make up some 15% to 20% of the Scottish population are descended from nineteenth-century Irish economic migrants [Williams 237, 248]) have been bitter, defensive, prolonged and focused with a depressing similarity on "religious instructions in schools and [the political influence of] the Scottish Catholic Hierarchy."

Ideological tensions were further raised by a clumsy attempt by the Labour administration, in their earliest legislation in the new parliament, to equalise the treatment of homosexual relationships in sex education lessons in schools, while refusing to "privilege" marriage and stable family relationships as an ideal or even a norm to be presented to teenagers and young adults who might soon become parents themselves. However worthy the intention, this effort at equality was swiftly polarised into a populist media campaign against "political correctness" that capitalised upon a "moral alliance" of Catholics, evangelical Protestants and Muslims and a privately funded referendum, which gathered significant popular support. This eventually brought about a change in policy, so that more traditional views on the importance of marriage and stable relationships were included in guidance to schools, but at great cost to the social cohesion of the country and to the reputation of the parliamentary process itself.

What seems extraordinary about this early episode in Scotland's self-government was just how ordinary, in a supposedly secularist and "post-Christian" democracy, such a swift polarisation along religious and moral lines still appears to be for the Scottish people. For me, as a member of the country's Catholic minority, it served at least to make some sense of what has always been problematic: the determined iconoclasm of the Scottish Reformation, as compared with other parts of Europe, its swiftly sacrificial nature, and the enduring presence of deep religious strains within the sociopolitical institutions of contemporary Scotland —and in its poetry.

Scotland still appears in textbooks of world religions as the only country with a Calvinist national church. What are the implications of this for contemporary poetry, particularly when such writing comes from different cultural or religious groupings within the new Scotland? As Scotland becomes more confident of its distinct national identity within the United Kingdom or Europe (Rosie 209), there is probably a growing recognition of how that national identity was preserved and shaped by its retention of religious, educational and legal structures which are remarkably different from their English equivalents. Yet there is perhaps a less than honest awareness of how such an identity was shaped by various "myths" of an open and meritocratic educational system, which sociological research has now begun to call into question (McCrone 92-104). Ideologically, however, such myths remain powerfully present, and tend to be activated whenever the issue of separate schooling for Catholic, Jewish or Muslim pupils is debated. Such religious traditions, it is argued, should for the sake of social

cohesion be subsumed within the prevailing "non-denominational" system of schools; and yet the history and prevailing value-systems of such schools, so it seems to parents of minority cultures, are inescapably protestant in the Scottish manner.

Calvinism has exerted a shaping influence on Scottish life and letters for centuries now, through its emphasis on the glory and sovereignty of God; the utter depravity of humankind; the futility of human attempts to define the determined will of God; and the ultimate authority of scripture —lines of signification which have been deeply etched on Scottish culture and remain powerful, if diffuse, into the present day. Hence, as the poet Maurice Lindsay notes, there exists a peculiarly Scottish stress on "authority, obedience and responsibility; the careful use of resources; the discipline of work; the importance of education and understanding; the intellect rather than the imagination; simplicity rather than the ornate and decorative" (39). There is, too, the association of God with stern and implacable decrees, rather than with the plenitude of creation and a loving acceptance of human failings.

What is less openly remarked upon in Scottish social life was (and residually is?) a consequent tendency to judge Catholics and Catholicism, particularly in their Irish manifestation, as embodying the opposite of such sturdy Scottish virtues: being irresponsible, undisciplined, profligate, workshy, ignorant, superstitious, and ornately and inauthentically rhetorical, both in their "gift of the gab" and in their Latinate or Roman obscurantism. There is evidence for the prevalence of such views not only in nineteenth-century newspaper editorials on the condition of Scotland and in the numerous satirical "Paddy Songs" in the Poets Box collection of popular literature in the Mitchell Library in Glasgow. Even as late as the 1930s there were calls in Scottish political campaigns for forced repatriation of the Irish and complaints of their undermining of the Scottish national and moral character, which had already been weakened by manpower losses during the 1914-18 war, and by emigration of Scottish workers in the Depression years which followed (Mavor 176-77). These could be dismissed now as barely more than folk memory, were it not for the refreshing honesty of the contemporary young poet Angela McSeveney, who in a recent anthology of Scots-Irish writing admits:

> I have a prejudice, an innate inexplicable knowledge that Protestant equals good, Catholic equals not so good. [...] No one ever sat me down and told me it was so but from an early age I just knew... it's so hard to break free when the drip of indoctrination has gone on so gently so assiduously all of your life that you can't even remember being aware of it. (McGonigal, *Across* 360)

That the Protestant national religion of Scotland has been historically antagonistic to poetry and the other arts when these are used liturgically to express the numinous or simply to praise creation and Creator, is still problematic for contemporary writers and artists. Since Scotland's fiercely destructive Reformation in the middle of the sixteenth century, evidenced in the many ruined abbeys which ghost our landscape, a plain sincerity of spiritual or moral purpose has forestalled much indigenous Scottish involvement in European developments towards complexity in religious art. Regret for such impoverishment lay behind some of the rhetoric of the renowned young Scottish composer James MacMillan, when in a speech at the Edinburgh Interna-

tional Festival of 1999 he denounced the "sleepwalking bigotry" of anti-Catholicism in Scottish national life, and drew comparisons between the destructiveness of the Scottish Reformation and the ideological upheaval of cultural revolution in Far Eastern communist regimes, ironically comparing such notable Protestant heroes as Knox and Melville to Mao and Pol Pot (MacMillan 13-24).

The speech as a whole was more measured than such excerpts suggest, but the media moved very quickly both in London and in Edinburgh to present the issues in a crude and polarised light, and, particularly in the industrial West of Scotland where concentration of the Catholic population is highest, it remained a raw issue for weeks (Finn 61-72). This may in itself have illustrated some lack of subtlety or sophistication in the Scottish temperament. Might it after all be the case, as MacMillan seemed to be suggesting, that the post-Reformation loss of a courtly poetry and music, and of the spiritualised architecture of the ruined abbeys and cathedrals, and of cultural links with the music and poetry of the Scottish Gaels (who after the Reformation remained mainly Catholic and Episcopalian until finally brought into line by a combination of eighteenth-century post-Jacobite ethnic warfare against the clans who had supported Charles Edward Stewart in the 1745 rebellion, and a nineteenth-century campaign of forced emigration and Protestant Evangelicalism) did some permanent damage to Scottish sensitivity? After several strictly Presbyterian centuries, Lowland Scotland's links with a proscribed Catholicism were further complicated in Victorian times by the many thousands of Irish migrant workers who made possible Scotland's industrial revolution, working in coal mining, iron and steel foundries, railways and shipbuilding, and many of whose descendants (like James MacMillan himself) have become artists and writers in contemporary Scotland.

What is needed in Scotland now, it would seem, is a recognition of the heteroglossic and multidimensional nature of the spiritual life of the culture; what emerged from the MacMillan debate was too often monologic assertion or dualistic thinking. Yet it would be wrong to dismiss the difficult presence for poetry of two mutually incompatible philosophical understandings of the created universe, the Calvinistic and the Catholic, within one society, and the resonances of bigotry and bloodshed which such incompatibility has created across the centuries.

Calvinism has had its literary uses, of course, mainly in Scottish fiction and satire where malignant or religiously perverted characters such as Wringhim in James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner,* or John Guthrie in Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song*, or *Gillespie* in George Campbell Hay's novel of that name, or Gourlay in George Douglas Brown's *The House with the Green Shutters*, are seen to subvert or overwhelm the values of their communities. Ian Campbell has drawn parallels between such Scottish works and the American New England background of puritanism in producing "masterpieces of educative fiction" (267). In the context of Irish Protestantism, Declan Kibbard has noted a restless focus on the inner self and an obsessive concern with conscience and consciousness in the characters of Samuel Beckett, as well as his unadorned stage settings, like reformed church altars (457-58). But the impact of calvinistic protestantism on Scottish literature has often seemed less than rational. Rory Watson reminds us that Alastair Gray's *Lanark* (1981) is typical of "the Scottish penchant for dealing with other realms, mixing metaphysical questions and fantastic inner experience with terror, black poetry and political satire —all expressed

with an extraordinary textual energy" (285-86) and he outlines a tradition that stretches through David Lindsay's *Voyage to Arcturus* (1920), James Thompson's *The City of Dreadful Night* (1880) George McDonald's *Phantastes* (1858), and Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1836), through to Byron, Hogg and Urquhart.

Such vital Scottish writing may be being created as a redress to the dour determinism and rationalistic emphasis of the ideology into which its authors were born; but because such ideas are also deeply part of their own ingrained ways of perceiving, the artistry has an anarchic inventiveness and swings of tone that are unpredictable by the norms of English prose. Since the examples cited are mainly prose works, we may ask ourselves to what extent such tensions still operate in contemporary poetry or whether such Scottish obsessiveness about divides and differences could in any sense be harmonised there. The reference to Beckett's Irish Protestant mind-set, and our growing historical awareness of the problematic interchange of peoples and ideas between Scotland and Ireland across the centuries (the first Scots were, of course, an Irish clan who in the ninth century settled on the western coast of what was to become Scotland) may further lead us to consider how such Scots-Irish connections are actually registered in literature. Scottish literature has so recently emerged from being a minor branch of English literature that exploration its own constituent elements and subcultures is only beginning: astonishingly, there has been no collection of Scottish religious verse reflecting the shifts of practice and belief over the centuries. This may be symptomatic of post-Reformation denial of the fact that Scotland's three great medieval poets, Robert Henryson, William Dunbar, and Gavin Douglas were not only Catholic but a teacher in an abbey school, a priest, and a bishop respectively!

One way forward, then, is simply to gather the material and read it afresh. In this millennial year, I have been co-editing two anthologies: of Scottish religious poetry from St Columba to the present day[2] and of Scots-Irish influences on modern Scottish writing, which includes work by immigrant writers, both Irish Catholic and Ulster Protestant, and their descendants.[3] Such anthologies at least have the merit of complicating the issue, so that we can re-read the interaction of religion and culture across time, particularly as this is opened up by shifts in population and ideology within the Scottish polity, past and present. Simplistic divisions into Catholic/Protestant or pre-/post-Reformation values may be shown to be flawed.

Another useful way of evading a general Scottish tendency to dichotomise is to take the longer philosophical overview of Alexander Broadie in his *The Tradition of Scottish Philosophy: A New Perspective on the Enlightenment* (1990) and *The Shadow of Scotus: Philosophy and Faith in pre-Reformation Scotland* (1995) in which he examines the ongoing tensions in Scottish intellectual life between "intellectualist" and "voluntarist" views of reality. To the intellectualist vision of, say, the Dominican Thomas Aquinas, which is based on a confidence in the mind's ability to know the good and to recognise the workings of God within a varied and positive creation, there seems to be an opposing (though not consistent) Scottish tendency, from the Franciscan Duns Scotus onwards through the Calvinist writers and theologians of the Reformation and on to Hume in the Scottish Enlightenment, to take a much more instrumental view of reason, and to subject it to the power of the will. The intellectualist view conforms the mind's belief to the world at hand; the voluntarist view alters the state of the world to conform to the will or the perceived destiny of the beholder. In the first, reason tells us

what we should be doing; in the second, reason is "the slave of the passions" (in Hume's phrase) and humankind is driven by its inclinations and desires, for good or ill.

The key point in Broadie is a recognition of the gradations and interconnections of these visions of reality, and also the way in which they overarch the pre- and post-Reformation divide, emerging from medieval philosophy to touch the present day. In our contemporary context of English Studies, the contrasting tendencies may remind us of different critical approaches: the intellectualist reader being willing to learn from what, and how, the text communally means, whereas the voluntarist reader prefers to bring his or her own preferences to bear in "subverting" or "creatively misreading" the text, in order to illuminate the reader's or society's hidden but predestined sense of truth: the reader as a member of an elect readership, realising the truth of the text within a convinced and theorised sense of a chosen critical strategy.[4]

READING SCOTTISH RELIGIOUS POETRY

Reading Scottish religious poetry in a new millennium, then, demands a heteroglossic and philosophical appreciation of different voices and energies, in order to overcome reductive dualisms and to realise more positive continuities. This means, for example, reading a little further into David Daiches' contrast in the final chapter of his *God and the Poets* of the spiritualities of Hugh MacDairmid and Edmund Muir in terms of their literary politics (Daiches 176-204). Daiches rightly emphasises the importance of myth, ritual and symbolism below the surface of the revivalist Christian socialism of Muir's youth, and the role of such iconography in his psychological recovery from the trauma of his urban experience of Glasgow, after the rural Orkney innocence of childhood. This is contrasted with the more highly politicised and materialist MacDiarmid (who also had, of course, his mystical sense of the power of history and language, and of the elemental and spiritual, or in Daiches' term, "transhumanist" geology of "On a Raised Beach" where the stones seem to have a message for humankind, suggesting that we might, by an effort of the will, achieve a similarly pure, rock-like identity (Daiches 201-02).

Reading these poets as representative of the intellectualist and voluntarist tendencies of Scottish thought, we can see connections between Muir's intellectualist ease with archetypal and Christian symbolism and his sympathies with an incarnational Catholicism,[5] and trace clear links through his student, George Mackay Brown, to such younger contemporary poets as John Burnside, who works similarly from a Catholic background in symbolism and signification, responsive to spiritual resonances within the actuality of landscape and history. One could compare Muir's *"The Annunciation"* (Muir 206) for example, with Burnside's prose poems on the Annunciation in *Common Knowledge*, in the steady and yet disturbing focus on humanity, eroticism and the divine in both these works.[6] Accepting the text of the mystical event, both poets read it carefully within an intellectualist frame of reference.

A contrasting voluntarist vision is offered by MacDiarmid's determined adherence to communism even when (or especially when) it became unfashionable in literary circles, in rejoining the Communist Party after ruthless Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956, for example. Muir, on the other hand, considered that he

himself "had been made a Socialist by the degradation of the poor and the hope for an eventual reign of freedom, justice and brotherhood. Instead of these things, Communism offered me the victory of a class, and substituted the proletariat for a moral idea."[7] His experiences as a teacher and translator in Czechoslovakia left him additionally aware of the ruthlessness of Communist aspirations. Marjory McCulloch notes the connection he made then to the Scottish Covenanters in their warfare against Episcopalianism, "With their paradoxical slogan: 'Christ and No Quarter' " (67).

MacDairmid's determined energy in moving in apparently contradictory artistic directions (between international communism and Scottish nationalism; between dialectal lyricism and encyclopaedic excursions into new scientific lexis) is reminiscent of what Terry Eagleton describes as Thomas Carlyle's curious fusion of German idealism and strict Evangelicalism, where man's fallen and alienated condition cuts him off "from his intuitive traffic with the cosmos or with the power that sustains it" (94-95). MacDiarmid was more obviously linked with such later post-Kantian German thinkers as Nietzsche, of course, with a primacy given to the will over Kant's ideal imperatives, nevertheless there is a similarity in the restless combination in both Scottish writers (born only some twenty miles apart on the Scottish Borders) of existential uncertainty combined with ideological drive to re-establish that "traffic with the cosmos" in two ways:

> By an outgoing relationship with the natural world which left the meddling intellect in suspension (Carlyle's puritan doctrine of mindlessly spontaneous and immediate *work*) and by a withdrawal into the timeless depths of the individual self at the core of which God was to be directly apprehended. (Eagleton 95)

MacDiarmid's wonderfully detailed obsessions with the natural world, his desperate efforts to move beyond the power of his own and other writers' intellect and texts, his supreme sense of self importance and mission are all part of this voluntarist temperament. Of course, in such a varied and great artist, it is set off by acute if intermittent perceptions of the other mode of thinking: in such tender poems of the life and death of Christ as "O Jesu Parvule," "I Heard Christ Sing" or "The Innumerable Christ" (*Collected Poems* 31, 18, 32, 66). Their impact might even make us want to re-read the lyric "Empty Vessel" as a sort of ironic Scottish pietà:

> I met ayont the cairney
> A lass wi tousie hair
> Singin' till a bairnie
> That was nae langer there.
>
> Wunds wi warlds to swing
> Dinna sing sae sweet,
> The licht that bends owre a' thing
> Is less ta'en up wi't. (*Collected Poems* 66)

MacDairmid and Muir, then, are (great-) grandfather figures for contemporary poetry. The voluntarist temperament of MacDairmid also informs the experimental

poetics of Edwin Morgan and W.S. Graham in the next generation, and of the present generation of "Informationist" poets, of whom more will be said below. The deaths of Norman MacCaig, George Mackay Brown and Sorley MacLean in 1996, and of Ian Crichton Smith in 1998, make me hesitate to treat them here as contemporary, although clearly they continued to write relevant and interesting poetry in old age. In passing, however, one would note that MacCaig's witty images and metaphors of the natural world derive most often from an easy involvement in a Gaelic Highland culture which is intellectualist and metaphysical in the terms outlined above:

> I took my mind for a walk
> Or my mind took me for a walk –
> Which ever was the truth of it. (154)

Almost any page of the four hundred and fifty in his *Collected Poems* reveals and revels in biblical or theological reference: a reminder that Scottish poets in the churches of their childhood must have absorbed the resonances of biblical preaching, even if they rarely assented wholeheartedly to its doctrines:

> In this respect he was like God,
> though he was godless. – he knew the difference
> between *what does it mean to me?*
> and *what does it mean?*
>
> That's what he said, half smiling.
> *Of course, God, like me*
> *is an atheist*. (364)

Slightly later than MacCaig, George Mackay Brown (b. 1921) and Iain Crichton Smith (b. 1928) offer vividly contrasting instances of islanders working out salvation in their isolation: the former by his conversion to Catholicism and by a deliberate focusing of his writing life on Orkney, its people and its history —his poetry often seems to involve a deepening of understanding by repetition, rather like prayer which may be both archaic yet efficacious:

> So we may see, dear people
> blessings may break from stone, who knows how. (n. pag.)

Again "incarnational" elements predominate of the divine embodied in the world he knew, as in his poems on the life and death of St Magnus of Orkney, or his many Nativity poems such as "They Came to an Inn," (*The Wreck of the Archangel*, 1989), and his variations on the Stations of the Cross embedded in the features of a northern landscape.

Meanwhile Iain Crichton Smith struggled throughout his artistic life to move beyond the dichotomies of his Gaelic childhood in the strictly Presbyterian community of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. The duality of his life and thought is visible in such book titles as *The Law and The Grace, Bread and Water*, *Thistles and Roses*, *The Black and the Blue*, but extends also into his poetry of Gaelic and English conscious-

ness, belief and agnosticism, emotion and intellect, theology and psychoanalysis, so that, as he writes in *The Law and the Grace*:

> The struggle's what we live by, not the whole unknown completion. (26)

The bitter Gaelic experience of emigration and exile, however, is marvellously transformed into such an "unknown completion" in his Australian poem "When They Reached the New Land," where the migrants

> Called the new mountains by old names,
>
> They carved a Presbyterian church on the hill.
> Nevertheless there was a sort of slantness,
>
> a curious odd feeling in the twilight
> that the mountain had shifted, had cast off its name ...[8]

That post-colonial perspective of spiritual freedom emerging from colonial exile is an issue I will return to.

CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS POETRY

Edwin Morgan (b. 1921) is the foremost poet and translator writing in Scotland now, still restlessly experimental and modern in his work, and clearly fascinated by religion while generally negative about its impact on Scottish life. From his earliest publication, *Dies Irae* (1952), to his latest, *Demon* (Glasgow: Mariscat, 2000) and with a forthcoming trilogy of plays on the life of Christ (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), he has clearly been drawn to religion and to cosmic perspectives, tackling these in a radical way. In "The Fifth Gospel" his Christ is neither meek nor mild:

> I have come to overthrow the law and the prophets: I have not come
> to fulfil but to overthrow. (*Poems* 249)

The New Divan (1977) mingles middle eastern mysticism and hedonism, sages in heaven and soldiers in the North Africa campaign. His many poems of space exploration seem inhabited by cosmonauts floating like fallen angels:

> Sulphur blew to choke the very soul.
> We prospected beyond the lava fields,
> But the best sulphur's the most perilous.
> The planet man must shoulder sorrow, great sacks
> Of pain ... (*Poems* 395)

Morgan's materialism is shot through with a questioning sensibility that is open to the energetic mysteriousness of other worlds, and this world too:

> I don't believe that what's been made
> clutters the spirit. Let it be patented
> and roll. It never terrorised
>
> three icon angels sitting at a table
> in Moscow, luminous as a hologram
> and blessing everything from holograms
>
> to pliers at a dripping nail. (*Poems* 345)

His "Testament" is a boldly experimental poem that mixes characters from a Jack Londonesque sea adventure with the occasion of Christ walking on the water, the tone combining visionary energy and homoerotic strangeness:

> ... they choked as they have saw him out there
> going or coming, who knows, through the sea-lumps.
> His face was like a sheet of lightening. "Beside him,
> his injured arm in a sling, was Red Nelson,
> his sou'wester gone and his fair hair plastered in wet
> wind-blown ringlets about his face. His whole attitude
> breathed indomitability, courage, strength ... (*Grafts* 28)

Such older poets born into the narrowly Presbyterian early decades of the twentieth century provide for younger poets a set of powerful parental presences, which it is vital to resist or evade, or at least re-address in different terms, as Morgan has done with the scientific lexis of MacDiarmid in an age of particle physics. Every new generation, of course, takes its bearings from earlier ones, even if that means heading off in a different direction with one of Harold Bloom's "Maps of Misprision" (93-96) for guidance. Although we have seen that the religious context of contemporary Scotland contains elements of early historical conditioning and myth making, it is likely that widespread education and the complexities of the modern or post-modern world has significantly altered the communities out of which poets emerge and for whom, in some sense, they speak. Like religious observance and belief in contemporary Scotland, Scottish religious poetry has become more eclectic, and often parodic, reflecting the relativistic or personal approach to social values made possible by multinational capitalism and liberal ideas in education.

That the postmodern enjoyment of a sheer range of choice and an excess of available values actually exists only for a tiny favoured minority, however, and those mainly in western societies, sometimes leads to a more actively political concern, expressed often through socialist, feminist or psychoanalytic perspectives, with the aim of exposing the contradictions inherent in some of the great "meta-narratives" which control relationships between cultures and people. From contemporary Scottish poets we can expect a range of religious and moral attitudes to take us beyond dichotomies, even of the broad intellectualist/voluntarist spectrum outlined above. But it is helpful to survey "clusters" of writers whose religious poems can usefully be compared, in order to convey some of the current complexity but within a social and ideological framework which still has force.

The first group of poets might be termed "sons of the manse" —a peculiarly Scottish title given to the sons of religious ministers which connotes a serious minded, frugal and hardworking approach to education and career. I know of no poetic daughters. Living in the manse or parish house provided for the minister, and influenced by that odd position of being notionally at the heart of community life (through proximity to their fathers' work in the Kirk at the centre of any district, and to the key events of birth, marriage and death which are marked there) the son of a minister may feel nevertheless at some distance from it: for in a fairly judgemental Scottish society, lacking any sacramental means of forgiveness and reconciliation, there may be a tendency to keep secret from the moral authority represented by the minister and even from his children, the "sins" involved in daily life.

This upbringing may be fruitful for poetry, however, not only because of its social ambiguity but also because of the dutifully regular attendance of such sons at the biblical reading and preaching which form a major part of the Protestant liturgy in Scotland. The youngster may well be sensitised at an early age to the power of words in a community, and to social concern for right thinking and right action. Four of the senior Scottish poets now writing are sons of the manse: Alastair Reid (b. 1926), Gael Turnbull (b. 1926), Stuart Conn (b. 1936) and Robin Fulton (b. 1937). It is interesting that the first and last of these have worked mainly abroad, in the Americas and in Scandinavia respectively, and that Gael Turnbull was a medical practitioner in the USA, Canada and England, founding the Migrant Press which went with him to his various hospital posts, and publishing a range of avant-garde writing by, for example, Basil Bunting and Robert Creeley. Stuart Conn worked in the media as a radio and drama producer, focusing on the powerfully spoken word in a different medium, and travelled widely. All have combined their social concern of a "professional" sort, then, with distance from a fixed community in their working lives. Their poetry, however, returns often to those communities of concern led by their fathers and to the intimations of suffering and religious emotion encountered in youth.

Thus Alastair Reid's much anthologised "Scotland" describes a beautiful day:

> When larks rose on long thin strings of singing
> and the air shifted with the shimmer of actual angels. (39)

It ends with a Calvinistic comment from a shopkeeper:

> Her brow grew bleak, her ancestors raged in their graves
> as she spoke with their ancient misery:
> "We'll pay for it, we'll pay for it, we'll pay for it!" (39)

His meditative "My Father, Dying" is intimate and moving:

> The heavy scented night
> seems to get at his throat.
> It is as if the dark coughed. (18)

In Stuart Conn's *Stolen Lights: Selected Poems* are several powerful poems about his father's ministry, such as "Family Tree" (27), "Farm Funeral" (28), and "Terra Firma" (159):

> He never exerted pressure
> but permitted me to go my own way,
> doubtless praying it would not be to purgatory. (159)

His own moral upbringing is perhaps evident in a generosity of tone combined with sensitivity to the suffering of others — and a frequent sense of fragility of existence, often imagined as skating on ice or mountain climbing above the snowline.[9]

A nordic cold and darkness form the backdrop to the poetry of Robin Fulton, set in a Lutheran context which is warmer in its liturgy than his memories of plain Scottish churches on the island of Arran where his father was a minister. His *Coming Down to Earth and Spring Is Soon* reveals how his earlier detached lyricism has deepened into a deeply reflective poetry of woods, lakes, light and music. He is a notable translator of Swedish poetry and has learned in particular from the intense and disturbing imagery of Tomas Tranströmer as in "Travelling Alone":

> The countless forests we pass hour after hour.
> They are anonymous with such grace.
> Would we feel safer
> if all the dead came back and stood waiting? (Fulton, *Selected* 105)

Gael Turnbull's moods are lighter and livelier, and his poetic forms more experimental. The series of twin-versed *Impellings*, in *For Whose Delight* 43-61, (or, in smaller compass, his invented form of *Spaces*, as here):

> If the dead cry out
>
> shall the living keep silent? (45)

have a disturbing effect as the silence between dichotomies in the two separated lines of verse enacts, somehow, a glimpse of the mystery of existence: the second part is impelled forward out of silence, charged with a new and inspirited energy. That seems a very Scottish poetic invention: energy arising from a pause for thought, with the second element deliberately not quite matching the expectations raised by the first.

A second group of poets emerging from evangelical religious backgrounds (often of an intensely puritanical sort, such as the Plymouth Brethren), might be termed "sons and daughters of dissent" in their rejection of the narrowness of the religious life into which they were inducted as children. Ian Banforth (b. 1959) made a striking impact with his collection *Sons and Pioneers* (1992) in which the strictly sectarian religion of his childhood is generalised into a "Calvinist geography" with a richly oppressive verbal surface:

Being a land of dissent and magnificent defeats
it evolved a subtle theology of failure, stealing its own thunder
wherever two or three were gathered together
and the occult plumbing groaned querulously beneath the boards. (11)

Don Paterson (b. 1963) has written a glittering poetry of cruelty, mixing eclectic verbal brilliance, formal elegance, and a deliberate amorality of stance in his personae which mark him out as a true inheritor of the dark traditions of Robert Louis Stevenson and James Hogg. A jokily manic surface and autodidactic reference to an eclectic range of reading seems held together by sheer willpower and intelligence. The title poem of his second collection *God's Gift to Women*, for example, is arrayed with demonic archetypes and reads like the justifications of a self confessed sinner, a new twist on an old Scottish genre. But the tone of his third collection, *The Eyes*, is notably more meditative and sombre, created out of adaptations from the poems of Antonio Machado:

I'll make you Lord, as you made me, restore
the soul you gifted me; in time uncover
your name in my own. Let that pure source
that pours its empty heart out to us pour
through my heart too [...] ("Profession of Faith," *The Eyes* 10)

Helen Lamb (b. 1956), also from a Brethren background, writes out of an awareness of suffering and deferral:

She comes
when I've all but given up.

She says –
waiting is part of the pleasure.

Have you suffered enough?
Are you hungry and lean? (71)

To these two sets of artistic response to a Protestant upbringing, I feel compelled to offer two sorts of response to a Catholic childhood. The first is satirical and is adopted by Tom Leonard (b. 1944) in his oppositional, humorous and demotic poetry, in which the educated working class poet alternately outrages and out-argues those genteel and upwardly mobile Scots (most of his readers!) who have left their local dialects behind in the interests of social advancement. His quasi-phonetic spelling of Glasgow speech (often with punning effect, as below) made an immediate impact when it appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as did the pointed social comment. In his poem "The Good Thief" the coincidence of three o'clock crucifixion and traditional three o'clock football match kickoff is made significant, and the Gospel story once again surges forward into the Scottish present as the good thief address Christ as a fellow supporter of Celtic Football Club (traditionally associated with the Catholic workers of the east end of Glasgow):

heh jimmy
ma right insane yirra pape
ma right insane yirwanny uz jimmy

see it nyir eyes

wanny uz (9)[10]

This combination of familiarity (which can be irreverently easy about serious issues precisely because they are an intimate part of daily consciousness) with a devotional or even "sacramental" perception of the natural or the social world (in which "real presences" are discernible within things) seems to me typical of the poetic descendants of Irish migrants who have managed to grow through education into autonomy. There are many of them[11] and they are bringing back to the Scottish religious tradition echoes of an almost lost spirituality, which had earlier been carried by converts such as George Mackay Brown, attracted by a "Catholic" sense of the sacredness and continuities of existence, with the imminence of God and the spiritual realm being sensed within the actualities of creation, rather than through the more transcendent emphasis, combined with a bleakly fallen world, offered by Protestant theologies.

A woman poet from a similar Irish immigrant background who can combine both the satirical and the sacred within the space of a single poem is Carol Ann Duffy (b. 1955), as in "The Virgin Punishing the Infant":

But I am God. We heard him through the window,
heard the smacks which made us peep. What we saw
was commonplace enough. But afterwards, we wondered
why the infant did not cry. And why the mother did. (*Selected Poems* 51)

Hers is a gifted voice, the Scots-Irish overlaid by an English upbringing but still sensitised to the significance of light and sound:

Listening. The words you have for things die
in your heart, but grasses are plainsong,
patiently chanting the circles you cannot repeat
or understand. This is your homeland,
Lost One, Stranger who speaks with tears. ("Plainsong," *Selling* 60)

John Burnside (b. 1955) is more consistently meditative, but with a complex attitude to nature and the soul which moves him beyond orthodoxy while gaining power from a resonant imagery. He typically explores the tangled boundaries between the natural and the supernatural, between suburbs and countryside, the dead and the reborn. The mysteriousness of life glimpsed from the corner of the eye or heart in warmly lit domestic settings is as real in his work as the darkness or manipulation and abuse: different corners of the same garden. It is difficult to express in brief quotation the strange blending of threat and promise in his poetry:

Where angels arrive through the hedge,
and the dead from your school days
are waking through nettles and elms

or walking away in the corn, and leaving no trace.[12]

The physicality of such quasi-mystical perceptions, manifested in the sound effects of consonant and vowel as well as in the air of almost scientific detachment, is typical and recognisable. Dislocated from his native Scotland to industrial middle England at the age of eleven, he seems like Edmund Muir to have become sensitised to the lyrical surfaces of a mythic narrative of loss with Christian (and also ambiguously pre-Christian) echoes and signs, locked into landscape and human habitations.

The ambiguities and variation of response to a Catholic upbringing evident in Burnside and also in the poetry of Raymond Friel, Gerard Mangan, Donny O'Rourke and James McGonigal,[13] remind us of a Scotland which is an increasingly secularised and pluralist society, but one with a continuing concern for spiritual exploration, perhaps intensified by the decline of organised religious orthodoxy and church attendance. Contemporary religious poetry discovers three roads that can be taken out of this impasse.

The first is the oddly attractive blend of Celtic and Zen mysticism found in the work of poets such as Kenneth Whyte (b. 1936). His "geopoetic" wandering in search of unity or ecstasy beyond a world of separation and distraction is recorded in *The Bird Path* and *Travels in the Drifting Dawn* (both 1989) and *Handbook for the Diamond Country* and *The Blue Road* (both 1990). He has achieved a considerable following in present day Scotland, as a modern exponent perhaps of the *peregrinus* tradition of Celtic monks on wandering missionary journeys in Europe.[14] Kevin MacNeil's Gaelic-English collection *Love and Zen in the Outer Hebrides* (1998) is a recent example of haiku- and zen-influenced poetry, building on earlier work by such writers as Alan Spence and Thomas A. Clarke. The range of this poetry can be seen in a recent anthology *Atoms of Delight*, edited by Alec Finlay, with some one hundred and thirty Scottish poets represented in spare forms of perception and insight: an antidote to Scottish preachiness, perhaps, in that the divine can be caught within such a brief focus by surprise, not argument.

A second strand of spiritual exploration can be found in the work of women poets, and it is possible to trace a tradition of Scottish women's writing from the nineteenth and early twentieth century which stays close to the beauties and energies of creation: Jessie Ann Anderson, Violet Jacob, Marion Angus, Naomi Mitchison and Kathleen Raine prefigure the contemporary work of Meg Bateman (b. 1959) in Gaelic and Kathleen Jamie (b. 1962) in English and Scots. Each of these women in her own way can be seen as reclaiming a spiritual territory through confidently unorthodox engagement with the mysterious forces which emerge at moments of transition in life and death. Kathleen Jamie's most recent collection is *Jizzen* (1999), a Scots word for childbirth. She has earlier made use of imagery from Tibetan Buddhism encountered on her travels in the Himalayas, as in her remarkable "Sky Burial":

raise your arms
part the blue sky

to a dark pupil: intelligent eye,
ice black retina of stars

slip me in. (*The Queen of Sheba* 45)

Both the zen and the feminist poetic paths beyond the secular can be linked to the intellectualist tradition of meaning discovered in creation: what the "intelligent eye" reveals. The third path is more voluntarist and postmodern and is taken by some of the most self-consciously avant-garde of the younger contemporary poets, known collectively as the "Informationists"[15] who manipulate media and academic jargon for aesthetic or satirical effect, and play language games with the different dialects of Scotland, mingling the intimate and familiar with new technological and electronic registers of discourse.

From this group of about eight or ten poets I would pick out poems in three collections. In Robert Crawford's (b. 1959) *Spirit Machines* (1999), he juxtaposes a glowing computer screen and the life experience of his recently dead father to create a sense of riddling communication between worlds. An imagined internet search reveals the website of a virtual manse (where his father had grown up), complete with books and furnishings. Elsewhere in the sequence, there is a focus on e-commerce and virtual money, which had replaced his dead father's traditional banking skills, an interesting and, I think, largely unconscious echo of Weber's thesis on religion and the rise of capitalism, in a postmodern context.

The sequence appears to me to reflect a thoroughly modernised yet oddly traditional Presbyterianism. Viewed from another religious perspective, it may be that the loss of what Catholics call "the communion of saints" (a deep sense of the spiritual unity of the living and the dead, and of the loving duty of the living to pray for the dead and also to seek their spiritual mediation in the afterlife) is what is actually being mourned for in Crawford's poems. Such prayer was discouraged at the Reformation, along with the cult of particular local saints, though it survived longer in the spirituality of the Gaels. Crawford is left longing for the reality behind the virtual, with the glass screen interposing its factitious presence, and all communication remaining sadly unresolved.

W.N. Herbert (b. 1961) is a fiercely intelligent and imaginative contemporary of Crawford (these two Scots met as postgraduate students at Oxford University), possessing most confidently of all the younger poets the surge and pitch of MacDiarmid's vision, on whose work he wrote a doctoral thesis, later published as *To Circumjack MacDiarmid* (Oxford: 1992). In his *Cabaret McGonagall* (1996) the poems "Lammerwine" (21), "Becoming Joseph" (50), "The Ballad of Scrapey Powney" (91), and "Road Movie" (106) offer a remarkable concentration of Scottish religious obsessions and intimations, all carried off with a sort of wild energy which matches the supernatural and sometimes grotesque visions which are his subject. This is as Scottish as Tam O'Shanter, and manages to be both utterly modern (as when in the sequence "Road Movie" driving through northern landscapes the narrator suddenly finds his car crazily full of angels and spirits "picked up like burrs from the places driven through" [108]) while also harking back to an older visionary tradition of the Border Ballads which were James Hogg's poetic education.

Another contemporary poet (not normally taken to be an Informationist, but replete with arcane facts and fantasies) is Roddy Lumsden (b. 1966). One section of his admirable first collection *Yeah Yeah Yeah* (1997) contains poems with the titles "The Man Who Played the Voice of God" (58), "The Missionaries" (59), "Noah" (63), "Rogation" (68), Fallen" (69) and "The World's End" (70), showing the continued fascination of religion for the (post-) modern Scot. The last of these creates an ambiguous sense of eschatological boundaries still to be crossed:

> A place some call a border, some an edge
> As if the many missing or a saviour
> Will rise in welcome when we step over. (70)

This seems a very Scottish moment, as well as a religious one, in the uncertainty of its interpretation, the sceptical "as if," the Celtic tradition of hospitality and welcome to strangers, and our ancient understanding of the dead as standing quite close by.

RE-READING SCOTTISH RELIGIOUS POETRY

I want to end by briefly offering four ways of reading contemporary Scottish religious poetry. These may sugggest reasons for its continuation as a central theme for poetry across centuries of religious strife and misconceptions, particularly between the Catholic and Protestant (or more broadly, intellectualist and voluntarist) interpretations of reality, which were my starting point.

The first approach would be something like that of Declan Hiberd in his *Inventing Ireland: the Literature of the Modern Nation* (1995), in which he explores the role of language and literature in the creation of a post-colonial Ireland. As Ireland is seen by Hiberd as "England's Unconscious," so Scotland may be viewed as a psychosomatic site in which we can see played out, starkly and to extremes, the protestant and imperial temperament of England, her agonized involvement with Catholicism and the "Celtic" consciousness, and her perennial tension between nonconformism and compromise. Two examples of Scotland's role in England's psyche would be the strange case of such Scottish creations as J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan and Kenneth Grahame's Toad in the iconography of English childhood; and, at a more "adult" level, of Thomas Carlyle's dour presence as chief sage to a Victorian economic and political mission involving widespread depradation of humane values at home and abroad. Since many Scots were partners in that imperial mission, taking their bibles with them as spiritual charts of the wildernesses of Canada and Australia, it would also be worthwhile to pursue their values within the changing conditions of that diaspora. Their descendants included many poets, as Les Murray has discussed in the Australian context.[16]

A second route into religious dimensions of contemporary Scottish culture is socio-semiotic, moving beyond sociological facts on the decline of church membership to the different "signs of the times" which indicate something of the persistence of a Scottish spirituality, albeit flowing down new channels. This means not allowing our readings of religion to be overly limited by, for example, Steve Bruce's view that modernisation generally erodes religion "except where it finds or retains functions

other than its central task of mediating between natural and supernatural worlds" (he cites its role as "cultural defence" in Ireland and Poland, as well as among earlier generations of Irish immigrants to Scotland). This is true only so far as it goes, and Richard Harries has argued strongly against such a reductive view: he points to the growing "desecularisation" of the world beyond Europe, where modernisation involves new urban identities being built around mosque and church, and also cites the example of the new Chinese religion of Falum Gong, with 70 million adherents, which has grown so rapidly by using the internet to communicate despite strong state disapproval.[17]

Scottish religion may still have surprises to spring. New Age attraction to a partial version or vision of "Celtic Spirituality" and to such ancient sacred sites as Iona and Callanish on the western seaboard is one indicator of the power of religion to refashion itself in our culture. The beginnings of a recovery of a somewhat richer liturgical life in the Church of Scotland (with the increased use of candles, for instance, which were formerly forbidden as papist distraction) is another. In terms of poetry, the influence of zen has already been mentioned: Norman McCaig jokingly styled himself a Zen Calvinist, but the creative interplay between meditative practices from different traditions and the uses of religious symbols and insights by agnostic poets drawn to the numinous, and the impact of such imagery on readers contemplating their poems, is worth further exploration than I have space for here.

A third approach to reading Scottish religious verse would involve recognising the strong influence of Christianity in the thought and critical approaches of Bakhtin. His focus on self/other and author/character relations are also major preoccupations of all religious systems. As Kenneth Burke notes: "What we say about words in the empirical realm will bear a notable likeness to what is said about God in theology [...] the inescapable dualities of theology (man/God, spirit/matter) are at the heart of language in the duality of sign/signified."[18] Clark and Holquist have explored the connections between Bakhtin's christology and the apparently non-religious concerns of his thought by focusing on his deep sense of the Russian kenotic tradition which emphasises:

> the degree to which Christ is a God who became a man, unlike most Western traditions [...] This tradition cannot comprehend a Pauline contempt for the here and now, a revulsion of the body. In fact, both of these factors – the immediacy of historical existence and the regard for matter – have long had a grip on the Russian religious imagination. (84)

And on the Scottish literary imagination, one might add, particularly when set against a narrowed and moralistic culture, which it counters by a poetry of satire and celebration. MacDiarmid's work, in its noted affinities with Russian symbolist thought, is particularly open to such Bakhtinian interpretation. One might even be tempted to use kenotic insights to explore the dangerously "sectarian" differences between the Catholic and Protestant poetries of Scottish religion, and what I have termed the incarnational dimensions of the former.

Perhaps it would finally be safer, however, to look at this divide through the binoculars of space and time. Les Murray, an Australian Catholic poet of Scottish and

strictly Presbyterian descent, has written perceptively not only about the differences in spirituality and liturgy in each tradition, but more generally about the embodiment in both poetry and religion of vital human elements of reason, dream and physical response. In his bold synthesis:

> Religions are poems. They concert
> Our daylight and dreaming mind, our
> Emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture
>
> Into the only whole thinking: poetry. (*Paperbark* 349)[19]

From his experience of both Protestant and Catholic world-views, he seems himself to embody a large-mindedness, a sort of sturdy gracefulness in the verse such as one might hope to find emerging in Scottish religious poetry of the future. His deep awareness of Australian aboriginal spirituality, and his view that "religious practice does, or should, develop the ability in us to discern our own position, at the same time as it makes us wary of judging the position of others" (*Paperback* 161) are both pertinent in a Scotland which is historically judgemental but might now become open to other immigrant and native traditions, whether Irish, Asian or anciently Celtic.

He also offers the salutary warning that consideration of such religious topics as grace should not perhaps be entrusted to prose but instead to the medium of poetry, which possesses the linguistic subtlety and coherence to handle it. That is one final reason why religious poetry continues to be such a vital strand of Scottish cultural life. The Scots may for too long have been diminished by their own self-limiting, rational perspective, and the body of their post-Reformation religious poetry often seems surprised or hurt (at times) by the force of its own logic, or by God's. In some warmer and more vital Scotland of the future, we might, like Murray, begin to glimpse grace everywhere:

> the crown parrot has it, alighting, tips, and recovers it,
> the same grace moveless in the shapes of trees
> and complex in ourselves and fellow walkers; we see it's indivisible
> and scarcely willed ...
> a field all foreground, and equally all background,
> like a painting of equality. Of infinite detailed extent
> like God's attention. Where nothing is diminished by perspective.
> ("Equanimity," *Collected* 183-84)

That poem's title, "Equanimity," is significant, because in both politics and religion the Scots have not yet attained it. Their varied and questing religious poetry suggests, however, that having failed to reach it in the last millennium, then with good will in the next (although, as Les Murray reminds us, it's "scarcely willed") they might finally discover themselves as the mysteriously beautiful human figures in just such a "painting of equality" as the postcolonial poet both registers and responds to.

Notes

[1] Michael Lynch, *Scotland: A New History*, 418. Another revisionist history of the period is T. M. Devine's *The Scottish Nation, 1700-2000* (London: Penguin, 1999).

[2] Meg Bateman, Robert Crawford and James McGonigal, eds., *Scottish Religious Poems: From Columba to the Present Day* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 2000).

[3] James McGonigal, Donny O'Rourke and Hamish Whyte, eds. *Across the Water: Irishness in Modern Scottish Writing*. Gendaruel: Argyll, 2000.

[4] An apposite example here is Dr Liam McIlvanney's "intellectualist" rejection of Professor Willy Malley's "voluntarist" depiction of Scotland's cultural denial of ant-Irish racism by citing evidence from MacDiarmid, Muir, Grassic Gibbon and others in support of Irish and Catholic energies against narrowly protestant definitions of Scottishness. (McIlvanney, "Literature" 7)

[5] Margery McCulloch describes the impact of Italian culture on Muir in *Edwin Muir: Poet, Critic and Novelist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1993) 102 ff.

[6] John Burnside, "Annunciations," *Common Knowledge* 17-24. On his early poetry, see James McGonigal's "Recusant Grace: The religious impulse in John Burnside's verse."

[7] Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography* (London: Hogarth, 1954) 233-234, quoted in McCulloch 66.

[8] There is a marked sense of release from narrow Scottish tensions in the sequence of Australian poems of *The Exiles*.

[9] See James McGonigal, "The Scottish Temperament of Stewart Conn."

[10] Tom Leonard, *Intimate Voices: Selected Works 1965-1983*. The reference here is both to typical facial features which often make Scots of Irish Catholic backgrounds recognisable to others; and to the fact that since Celtic FC supporters call their stadium "Paradise", the words of Christ to the repentant thief take on an ironic resonance: "This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise."

[11] See "Introduction and Contents" in McGonigal, O'Rourke and Whyte, eds.

[12] John Burnside, "Angels Eyes," *The Myth of the Twin* 49. Other collections include *The Hoop* (1998), *Common Knowledge* (1991), *Feast days* (1992), *Swimming in the Flood* (1995), *A Normal Skin* (1997) and *The Asylum Dance* (2000).

[13] See McGonigal, O'Rourke and Whyte, eds., for reflection from these poets on their upbringing and ideologies.

[14] See also Kenneth Whyte *On Scottish Grounds*.

[15] The term was coined by one of their number, Richard Price: see his Introduction to W.N. Herbert and R. Price eds., *Contraflow on the Superhighway* (London: Vennel, 1994).

[16] Les Murray, "The Bonnie Disproportion," *The Paperbark Tree: Selected Prose* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992) 103-128, in which he discusses the large number of Australian poets of Scottish descent.

[17] See Richard Harries, "Salvation: great time to buy," *Times Higher Educational Supplement* 21 April 2000: a review of Steve Bruce, *Choice and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000).

[18] Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion* (1970), quoted in Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 83.

[19] See also in the same volume "Embodiment and Incarnation," 251-269.

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