The Enclosure of an Open Mystery

Sacrament and Incarnation in the Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins, David Jones and Les Murray

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In setting in conversation the writings of the Catholic poets Gerard Manley Hopkins, David Jones and Les Murray, this study brings together three of the most engaging writers in the English language and seeks to demonstrate the numerous points at which their works, in reaching out to embrace the divine Other, ‘touch’ one another. It aims to demonstrate the relevance of a ‘sacramental poetic’, which touches many of the most crucial themes of contemporary critical discourse – the body, presence, the problem of the one and the many, and the tension between a ‘manifestation’ (to use David Tracy’s expression) and the plenitude that exceeds such a physical, tangible, verbal or iconic realization in time and space. In particular, this book situates this tension within the context of its resolution – within the realm of analogical similarity-in-difference, the point where the same and the different, the present and the absent, the transcendent and immanent, meet in the kiss of peace.

An assessment of Hopkins’s work in the light of serious liturgical scholarship is long overdue, as is a discussion of the question of the ‘body’ and embodiment in his work, which relates his ‘bodies’ to a broader liturgical and sacramental view of reality. This study extends the boundaries of Hopkins criticism through original readings of key sonnets and ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’, by showing how Hopkins’s work reaches into central areas of scholarly discourse, and by using a governing metaphor derived from Catherine Pickstock – ‘the enclosure of an open mystery’ – as a window through which to peer into Hopkins’s poetic world. It also demonstrates how certain of Hopkins’s principal themes and images – the interaction of ‘touching’ bodies, the intressing of the divine – prepare the way for a more complete understanding of two of his later followers in David Jones and Les Murray.

Jones extends the sacramental aesthetic of Hopkins, making explicit the idea that a ‘shape in words’ is a sacrament and that the making of
shapes is itself a fundamentally incarnational activity, one that seeks to bring the divine ‘content’ into a human ‘form’, to contain what cannot be contained. By situating Jones’s work in the purview of the insights of William F. Lynch and David Tracy, this book’s points out the important implications, both for art and ideology, of Jones’s engagements with the problem of the one and the many and the theme of modern and historical ‘disembodiment’. By showing that the tension between the ‘fact man’ and the artist is fundamentally a tension between the ‘univocal imagination’ and the ‘analogical imagination’, it strives to show that Jones’s seemingly idiosyncratic terminology forms part of a much broader philosophical and theological tradition.

In setting the work of Les Murray alongside Hopkins and Jones, the study aims to illustrate Murray’s universal reach by exploring the relationship in Murray’s work between presence as ultimate mystery, embodiment and sacrifice, wherein the work itself is configured as a sacramental body, a manifestation that holds in creative tension the divine Other and the human desire to make rational order through ‘action’. By bringing the insights of Lynch, Kilgour, Foucault and others to bear on Murray’s work, I also hope to show its importance for current critical discourse. Murray’s images of sacrifice, his theory of the importance of the body for an understanding of the ‘whole’ person, and his explorations of all the places where God is ‘caught, not imprisoned’, illustrate the perennial relevance and adaptability of a ‘sacramental poetic’.

Taken together, Hopkins, Jones and Murray offer an example of unity in difference. Drawing from a common religious tradition, in particular from Catholicism’s principal ritual and from the central Christian doctrine, the career of each poet marks a unique and significant point in the history of creative responses to the themes of Sacrament and Incarnation.

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Divine: the Catholic Vision in Contemporary Literature, ed. Mary Reichardt (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010): 207–225. I am grateful to Logos and to the Catholic University of America Press for permission to reuse the relevant material. Margaret Connolly and Associates (acting on behalf of Mr Les Murray) have granted permission to quote extensively from Sonnet 70 of The Boys Who Stole the Funeral, and I acknowledge my gratitude to them. I am also grateful to Margaret Connolly and Associates, to Carcanet (UK) and to Farrer, Straus & Giroux for permission to quote extensively from Les Murray’s Fredy Neptune.

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