The Catholic Revival in English Literature, 1845–1961

Newman, Hopkins, Belloc, Chesterton, Greene, Waugh

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Ker, I. T. (Ian Turnbull)
The Catholic revival in English literature, 1845–1961 : Newman, Hopkins, Belloc, Chesterton, Greene, Waugh / Ian Ker.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 0-268-03879-1 (cloth : alk. paper)
ISBN 0-268-03880-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. English literature—Catholic authors—History and criticism. 2. Christianity and literature—England—History—19th century. 3. English literature—19th century—History and criticism. 4. Catholics—England—History—19th century. 5. Catholic literature—History and criticism. 6. Catholic Church—In literature. 7. Catholics in literature. I. Title.
PR468.C3 K47 2003
820.9'9222—dc21
2003012366

∞*This book is printed on acid-free paper.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Professor William Myers of Leicester University for reading most of the typescript and for his helpful comments. Dr. Robert Carver of Durham University and Rev. Dr. Anthony Meredith, S.J., of Heythrop College, London University, gave me valuable information which I have made use of in, respectively, the introduction and chapter 2. To the Rev. Professor James Reidy of the University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, I am indebted for guiding me in my reading many years ago of Belloc and Chesterton; he has also kindly read all the typescript.

I thank the publisher for permission to reprint under a different title and with some modifications my chapter entitled "Newman's Postconversion Discovery of Catholicism" in *Newman and Conversion,* ed. Ian Ker (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997). Parts or versions of all but one of the other chapters were given as lectures to various institutions and universities, and I must thank those whose comments helped me complete this book.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University* (1873) consists not only of the famous *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education* (1852) but also of the lesser known *University Subjects Discussed in Occasional Lectures and Essays,* originally published as *Lectures and Essays on University Subjects* (1859), which in many ways forms a practical application of the theory of the first half of the book. Amongst these essays and lectures is "Catholic Literature in the English Tongue, 1854–8," which is not a piece that has ever attracted any attention, even from Newman scholars. It is a curiously self-falsifying essay, the thesis of which was anyway to be decisively disproved within a few years and during the course of the next hundred years.

The burden of Newman's argument is that English literature—and he means modern or postmedieval literature, as he doesn't refer even to Chaucer—is essentially Protestant literature and there is nothing that Catholics can hope to do to change the situation: a Catholic literature is simply an impossibility in the context of English culture. Discussing the nature of a literary classic—in the course of which he strikingly anticipates T. S. Eliot's "What Is a Classic?" (1944)[1]—he maintains, as though it were an obvious fact: "In no case can we, strictly speaking, form an English Literature; for by the Literature of a Nation is meant its Classics, and its Classics have been given to England, and have been recognized as such, long since." Newman doubts anyway whether there will be any more "classical authors" as such, as English literature has probably passed its hour of glory: "[T]his is not a day for great writers, but for good writing." This is especially true, he adds, of periodical literature: "There never was a time when men wrote so much and so well, and that, without being of any great account themselves." But while the articles in contemporary periodicals may evince a superior style to that even of the classic English prose writers, the fact that they are anonymous is a serious deficiency, since "the

personal" element is so important in great writers. And so Newman concludes that Catholic writers can aspire only to produce ephemeral work, not likely "to last much beyond themselves."[2]

These are remarkable words, considering that they are taken from one of the Victorian prose classics comparable to such works as Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy,* Carlyle's *Past and Present,* and Ruskin's *Stones of Venice.* It is an even more extraordinary assertion when one considers that the Victorian period, the richest apart from the Elizabethan in English literature, was less than halfway through. George Eliot had not yet published a single novel, Dickens was still at the height of his powers, Trollope was only just beginning his Barchester novels, Hardy had not yet written a single novel. Newman himself had no idea when he wrote this essay that six years after its completion he himself would be publishing one of the great autobiographies in English, the *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864). Nor could he possibly have conceived that two years after its publication he would be receiving into the Roman Catholic Church a young Oxford undergraduate called Gerard Manley Hopkins, who was destined to become one of the major or "classic" English poets. If Newman's essay was so happily lacking in prescience about both the future prospects of English literature and the possibility of any significant Catholic contribution, what of his unhesitating assertion that "[w]e have . . . a Protestant literature"? In fact, he is rather more equivocal than that bald statement suggests, admitting in the very next sentence that "the most illustrious amongst English writers has so little of a Protestant about him that Catholics have been able, without extravagance, to claim him as their own, and that enemies to our creed have allowed that he is only not a Catholic, because, and as far as, his times forbade it."[3]

Here Newman is much more prescient in his anticipation of a subject which has attracted growing attention from scholars. The first published study, *The Religion of Shakespeare* (1899), in fact, was by Henry Sebastian Bowden, an Oratorian priest like Newman (who had introduced the institute to England after his conversion) and the son of Newman's close friend from undergraduate days, John William Bowden. Bowden moreover was drawing upon papers left by the Shakespearian scholar Richard Simpson, who was also a convert well known to Newman. Since then a good deal has been written both about Shakespeare's Catholic "recusant" background and about the evidence from his writings.[4] Writing cautiously and not from a Catholic point of view, a modern biographer concludes from the available

evidence that Shakespeare's parents "appear to have been Catholics who conformed" to the Church of England, "as thousands of similar conviction did, and they raised a son who conformed: Shakespeare would show a close familiarity with Catholic practices, and at least as much intimacy and sympathy with the 'old faith,' as any Protestant writer of his time."[5]

Apart from Shakespeare, Newman strangely mentions only Pope and Johnson. He ignores two major poets, Crashaw and Dryden, both of whom were converts to Catholicism, as well as Robert Southwell. It is true that Dryden's Catholicism is of interest only in one (long) poem, and Newman can be forgiven for ignoring Southwell and Crashaw when the same neglect persisted through the twentieth century. One obvious reason for this was the huge influence of the Anglo-Catholic T. S. Eliot's view of metaphysical poetry, a view which definitely excluded a baroque poet like Crashaw as foreign and alien to the English tradition. A recent study by Alison Shell (*Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination, 1558–1660*), appearing in the last year of the last century and hopefully inaugurating a fresh approach, has pointed out the inconsistency and unfairness of on the one hand praising the Protestant Spenser for enriching English poetry by importing an Italian style, and on the other hand dismissing the Catholic Crashaw as an un-English minor poet for doing exactly the same thing. In other words, it is religious prejudice rather than literary considerations which has prevented Crashaw from being even considered as an important English metaphysical poet like Donne and Herbert.

In her revisionist study, which she clearly sees as a literary counterpart to the revisionist critique of the history of the English Reformation mounted most notably by J. J. Scarisbrick in *The Reformation and the English People* (1984) and Eamon Duffy in *The Stripping of the Altars* (1993), Alison Shell calls for the recognition of Southwell and Crashaw as important *English* poets, albeit writing in the Catholic baroque tradition. She points out that the practice in recent decades of calling metaphysical poetry seventeenth-century lyric or religious poetry has not helped the cause of Southwell either, as he was executed in 1595, five years before the century began. However, these formulations only reflect the fact that Southwell, the Jesuit priest martyr, was not taken very seriously as a poet. True, his significance as a precursor of Herbert and other contemporary religious poets is "a commonplace, and has inspired a number of critics to explore the relationship between devotional poetry and Ignatian meditation," especially as a result of Louis Martz's groundbreaking *The Poetry of Meditation* (1954).

But although Martz discusses Southwell at length, the tendency has been simply to treat Southwell as though he were important only as a harbinger of Herbert and Donne.

Southwell's poems—like Crashaw's and other Catholic poetry—could be read just as easily by Protestants as by Catholics, however differently Catholics might interpret them. His poems were not explicitly Catholic as opposed to Protestant, unlike the works of the writers who are the subject of this book: you could not tell, for example, from reading the most famous, "The Burning Babe," whether it was written by a Catholic or Protestant. Rather, it was the Catholic martyr, or traitor, who could not readily be acknowledged as an exemplar and influence. Because of their influence on seventeenth-century poets, Southwell's short lyrics have received the most attention, but Shell is anxious to emphasize how hugely popular and influential was his lengthy "Saint Peter's Complaint" among both Catholics and Protestants. It was this "long lachrymal elegy that had the greatest effect upon contemporary writers."

The most important successors of Southwell were two poets who were both converts to Catholicism—William Alabaster and Richard Crashaw. Because lachrymal or "tears literature" was intended as a call to repentance, which was a prelude to conversion, not least from Protestantism to Catholicism, the poetry of both Alabaster and Crashaw can reasonably be read as spiritual autobiography. True, unlike Alabaster's conversion which was sudden, Crashaw's took longer, and indeed most of his religious poetry was written while he was still at least outwardly conforming to the Church of England, although already a Catholic in his thinking. One of Crashaw's best known poems, "The Weeper," describes the penitence of Mary Magdalen, the prototype convert, about whom Southwell himself had written two poems. For Crashaw and Alabaster, tears signify devotion and love as against the Protestant emphasis on justification by faith. Shell suggests that the secularism of twentieth-century criticism has naturally favored the religious questioning and struggle that one finds in Donne and Herbert over the ecstatic faith of Crashaw. Thus both modern agnosticism and the English Protestant tradition have combined to deny Crashaw his proper place in English poetry. Nor has the neglect of Southwell helped in this marginalization of a poet whose baroque style and unquestioning religious devotion have of themselves been deemed sufficient to brand Crashaw as un-English and manifestly inferior to his Anglican contemporaries, Donne and Herbert.[6]

Less surprising than Newman's failure even to mention Crashaw is the omission of the name of Dryden, who converted to Catholicism some forty years later toward the end of his life, a conversion he announced in his long poem *The Hind and the Panther* (1687), although only five years before he had defended the Anglican position in *Religio Laici.* We do not know exactly when or why Dryden became a Catholic, only that it was at the end of a long process of religious searching. *The Hind and the Panther* is the longest and most complex of Dryden's original poems (as opposed to translations); it is, in the words of his modern biographer James Anderson Winn, "as a whole . . . a fascinating, risk-taking failure."[7] But if it does not succeed in being one of the major poems in the language, it has some great passages, including one dramatic tour de force where Dryden daringly compares the Catholic Church's acceptance of the heavy responsibility of infallibility with Christ's willingness to bear the sins of the world—in lines, moreover, that ironically echo the arch-Protestant poet Milton ("breathing hatred to the Catholic Church," as Newman puts it), for, as Winn points out, "The success of the analogy between a Church that lifts the burden of infallibility and a Saviour who lifts the burden of the world's sin thus depends upon a Catholic poet's ability to lift the 'glorious weight' of a great Protestant predecessor." And—especially in view of the conventional objection to Crashaw's style—it is a paradox that, while Dryden's "plays and much of his poetry display a baroque . . . exuberance of imagery," it is in his Catholic poetry that he is "most 'Calvinist'" in his style.[8]

Pope, born a Catholic in 1744 just over forty years after Dryden's death, is described by Newman as "personally an unsatisfactory one," while his "freedom . . . from Protestantism is but a poor compensation for a false theory of religion in one of his poems" (*An Essay on Man*).[9] On the other hand, as his modern biographer Maynard Mack puts it, Pope's poem "Eloisa" is notable for its "immersion in Catholic feeling," which "is more than skin-deep," frequently reflecting "the various structures of devotional meditation—exercises particularly recommended by the handbooks of the Counter-Reformation," in a "well-informed" if "sidelong" way. However, for all its "extreme Catholic cast . . . so much unlike anything else that Pope ever wrote," the poem is highly enigmatic, as "one cannot claim that the monastic vocation is treated here with much more respect than in the *Essay on Criticism,*" which aroused criticism from his fellow Catholics. Indeed, Eloisa's harsh and melancholy surroundings and incarceration "might be felt to communicate his distaste for all confining practices and dogmas."

Still, it remains possible that "the turmoil of his co-religionists at this period" did "produce in him a special feeling of solidarity with the old faith and its practices, impelling him to write something substantial that, unlike the *Essay on Criticism* and *Rape of the Lock* . . . would be a work for his own people."[10]

Another critic, Thomas Woodman, has pointed out that although Pope is not so much a Catholic poet as a poet who happens to be a Catholic, nevertheless "Catholic influences and images are evident throughout." Even more significant "is the fascinating complex of identification and differentiation between papists and poets that is so built into Pope's conception of himself." No doubt poetry and Catholicism are inextricably linked in Pope's mind because his convert father guided his early literary exercises and studies. However, poets are seen as inherently irreligious because they are devotees of an alternative religion. Like Catholics, poets can expect to be persecuted—especially if they are also Catholics, in which case they are also exposed to criticism from their co-religionists. They can also expect poverty as their lot in life. Pope even sees poets, like Catholics, as martyrs for the truth. The Catholic motifs in Pope suggest a parallel with the apostate John Donne, a poet admired by Pope, whose childhood was spent in an atmosphere of martyrdom and persecution and whose early satires are notable for their Catholic ethos. In fact, circumstances led Pope to become the defender of orthodox Christianity against the skepticism of the Whigs and the theological liberalism of the Hanoverian court, which he saw as destructive of tradition and conducive to anarchy. His "'religion' of poetry," then, "is based not on the worship of art as such but on a commitment to the moral truth behind and in that art." The satirist has a valuable role in defending moral standards. Although Pope was not a practicing Catholic—certainly not after his mother's death, at any rate—and was skeptical about any church's claims to be the true form of Christianity, he resisted all attempts to make him give up the religion which brought so many disabilities and penalties. He also tried not to offend Catholics by his poetry and identified with their sufferings. But it seems it was essentially out of family loyalty rather than faith, since he appears not to have held any specific Catholic beliefs.[11]

Johnson is the last writer mentioned by Newman: "the special title of moralist in English literature is accorded by the public voice to Johnson, whose bias towards Catholicity is well known."[12] Newman is thinking of the conversations recorded by Boswell in which Johnson showed himself

remarkably sympathetic to Catholicism, which he thought not very different in essentials from other forms of Christianity and certainly preferable to Presbyterianism, and whose specific tenets, such as mass, confession, purgatory, prayers for the dead, and invocation of the saints, he could see no great objection to, at least in theory if not in practice. And, in spite of what he saw as its corruptions, on one occasion Boswell reports him as saying that he would "be glad to be of a church where there are so many helps to get to heaven" and even that he "would be a papist" if he could, except for "an obstinate rationality," which he might be able to overcome "on the near approach of death," of which he had "a very great terrour."[13]

Finally, one other major figure that one might have thought Newman would include in his list is Walter Scott, who, Newman wrote in an 1839 article, "turned men's minds in the direction of the middle ages," not least through his romantic depiction of medieval Catholicism. In this article, which Newman quotes at length in his *Apologia pro Vita Sua,* the first literary influence on the Oxford Movement that he mentions is that of Scott, who "reacted on his readers, stimulating their mental thirst . . . setting before them visions, which, when once seen, are not easily forgotten."[14]

This book is not intended, like that of Alison Shell, to be a work of revisionism as much as one of *realization:* that is, in the very Newmanian sense, of making real the extent to which Catholicism informed and shaped a considerable and impressive corpus of literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Of the two dates in the subtitle, the first, 1845, the year of Newman's conversion, speaks for itself; it was the same year as the publication of his first work as a Catholic, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine,* written while he was still an Anglican to test his growing conviction of the truth of the Church of Rome's claims but not published till after his conversion; the first work he wrote as a Catholic appeared three years later in 1848, his first novel, *Loss and Gain.* The second date, 1961, is less obvious, but it is a significant date for three reasons: it is the beginning of the decade which saw the wholesale secularization of England and by the end of which one could no longer speak of the country as a Protestant country; it is also the year before the Second Vatican Council began, a council which effectively brought to an end the Counter-Reformation and Tridentine Catholicism; and finally, coincidentally, it is the year in which Evelyn Waugh, who was to be so horrified by the council, and not least the abolition of the Tridentine mass, published the last

novel of his masterpiece, the trilogy *The Sword of Honour,* a book whose title, *Unconditional Surrender,* was intended to reflect Waugh's disillusion at the alliance of the Allies with the atheistic Soviet Union against Nazi Germany, but which could also be understood as presaging his despair at what was to happen to the Catholic Church in the next few years.

I should make it clear at the outset that this book is not meant in any sense to be a survey of the Catholic literary revival; the only chapter which resembles a survey is the present one. There is, in fact, already a recent, very thorough survey of the Catholic novel, which lists more novelists than Newman could have ever dreamed of in the 1850s.[15] I have already mentioned one curious coincidence; there are two others.

The first is that of all the many Catholic writers between 1845 and 1961, the six most important and significant figures were all writers whose work could not have been written without the formative Catholic influence. When I say "Catholic writers," I mean, of course, writers who really were Catholics, unlike, to take the most obvious case, Joseph Conrad, who seems to have abandoned his native Catholicism as thoroughly as he abandoned his Polish nationality. The other major figure who might be thought of as a Catholic writer was Conrad's friend and collaborator, Ford Madox Ford, a convert but a very intermittent Catholic. Unlike Conrad, Ford does include Catholicism in his fiction, especially in his most creative period when he wrote his masterpieces, *The Good Soldier* (1915) and the tetralogy *Parade's End* (1924–28). But, as Thomas Woodman remarks, these works "can hardly be considered 'Catholic' works in any full sense," although they do "explore in passing certain sociological and ethical dilemmas of English Catholicism with some evidence of inwardness on the subject." Woodman also points out that *The Good Soldier* uses the device of "the unreliable narrator," which is a helpful way for the Catholic novelist to present a Catholic point of view without appearing to do so by means of an impartial or even prejudiced observer, as Waugh does in *Brideshead Revisited* and Greene in *The End of the Affair.* The Catholicism of the wife of "the good soldier" determines her response to his adulteries.[16] The unsympathetic narrator who tells the story is forced to admit that Catholics have an extraordinary "sense of rectitude," as well as perhaps being "always right" when "dealing with the queer, shifty thing that is human nature."[17] Woodman notes how, in *Parade's End,* Ford's "nostalgic cultural Catholicism" plays its "special, if subordinate," part in his pessimism about the death of English civilization, and it is significant that the heir of Christopher

Tietjens, who represents the last of the Christian gentlemen, will be a Catholic and so inherit estates seized from Catholics at the Reformation.[18] Although only a more or less nominal, nonpracticing Catholic, whose faith was ambiguous, Ford found in Catholicism ceremony and tradition, which he linked with the feudal Toryism whose demise he lamented. Still, when all allowance has been made for the Catholic elements in Ford's work, the fact remains that he was not a Catholic writer in the sense in which the writers discussed in this book are *Catholic* writers, writing as they did *because* they were Catholics, and so producing exactly the kind of work that Newman desiderated but thought it vain to hope for.

A writer may happen to be a Catholic by birth, like Conrad, or by conviction, like Edith Sitwell, but neither necessarily makes the writer a Catholic writer in this sense. Like but unlike Conrad's works, Sitwell's poetry was unaffected by her conversion to Catholicism in 1955, nine years before her death, since her poetry was already written. Similarly, Siegfried Sassoon became a Catholic in 1957, but he had been a war poet, not a Catholic poet, and his poetry was also already written. Other writers may be Catholics and well known as Catholics, but their Catholicism may have even less effect on their writing than in the case of Ford.

From one point of view, there could not be a more Catholic poet than Francis Thompson, the protégé of the Meynells, and it is true that he made use of the liturgy and wrote poems on specifically Roman Catholic themes. In fact, however, not all that much of his poetry is specifically religious, and indeed his two best-known poems, which are religious poems ("The Hound of Heaven" and "The Kingdom of God"), could have been written by any religious poet and did not need a Catholic poet to write them. Coventry Patmore, who influenced Thompson, became a Catholic in 1862 when his best-known book of poetry, *The Angel in the House* (1854–63), a celebration of married love, was on the point of completion; but the erotic mysticism, for all its debt to Crashaw and St. John of the Cross, of his much less popular *The Unknown Eros* (1877) could just as easily have originated from an Anglo-Catholic poet. However, Anglo-Catholic writers fall outside the scope of this book, which is concerned only with specifically Roman Catholic writers—and moreover writers writing before the Second Vatican Council, as I have already indicated, within the Tridentine Church of the Counter-Reformation.

The convert poet David Jones has perhaps a better claim than Francis Thompson to be considered a specifically Roman Catholic writer. Like

his fellow convert the historian Christopher Dawson, he saw Western culture and history as being determined and shaped by Catholicism. His *Anathemata* (1952), a long and complex work of both poetry and prose, uses the symbols of the mass to order and interpret history and nature; but Jones is closer to the Church fathers than to the Counter-Reformation, and among other scriptural references the antiphonal structure and parallelism reflect the antiphonal chanting of the psalms as well as the versicles and responses of the liturgy. His earlier more accessible *In Parenthesis* (1937), an epic work also of both prose and poetry, is often liturgical in its language, with references to the mass and liturgical year. Although the soldiers' physical life is sometimes set against a Christian, and on occasions explicitly Catholic, background, the work belongs more to the genre of war literature, specifically that of the trenches of World War I, than to the genre of religious or Catholic literature.

Turning to fiction, Robert Hugh Benson, the convert son of an archbishop of Canterbury, published his best-known Catholic novel, *Come Rack! Come Rope!*, in 1912, a story of persecution of Catholics under Elizabeth, which is a more gripping novel than the usual dismissal of it as melodramatic propaganda suggests. The first of his future fantasies, *Lord of the World* (1907), is another celebration of Catholic martyrdom, highly ultramontane in its view of the papacy, while *The Dawn of All* (1911) is unabashedly triumphalistic. Along with *The Average Man* (1913), which has a contemporary setting, these are Benson's best novels, all still very readable and intensely Roman Catholic.

Benson's sometime friend, the notorious Frederick Rolfe, or "Baron Corvo" as he liked to be called, wrote one book which is still read, *Hadrian the Seventh* (1904), a fictitious autobiography of wish fulfillment in which the protagonist, who has been dismissed from the seminary, is elected pope. Ronald Firbank, another homosexual convert who was received into the Church by Benson, resembles Rolfe in his decadence, exotic aestheticism, fantasies, and idiosyncratic style. It is doubtful whether he was a believing or practicing Catholic for long, but his elaborate parodies of Catholicism in novels like *Valmouth* (1919) and *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* (1926) contain a curious note of sympathy, even devotion. Firbank was an influence on Evelyn Waugh—but the influence was literary, not religious. Another very similar convert homosexual was John Gray, whose future fantasy *Park* (1932) is also an idiosyncratic work of aestheti-

cism, though, unlike Firbank's, it has the serious purpose of celebrating the Church's liturgy as the one true source of beauty in the world.[19]

The Scots nationalist novelist Compton Mackenzie became a Catholic in 1914, an event that he fictitiously predicted at the end of his best-known, and at the time very influential, novel, *Sinister Street* (1913–14), in the form of the semiautobiographical protagonist. But otherwise the book is not a Catholic novel, while his explicitly Catholic fictions, *The Altar Steps* (1924) and his most ambitious work, the six volumes of *The Four Winds of Love* (1937–45), are now hardly read. Another convert, Maurice Baring, wrote some successful social portraits of English upper-class society, especially *C.* (1924), *Cat's Cradle* (1925), and *Daphne Adeane* (1926), in which Catholicism is shown to offer the way of rendering personal suffering redemptive in a world where human love is ultimately doomed.[20]

In 1933 Antonia White published *Frost in May,* the story of her convent school days. It was the first of a quartet of autobiographical novels, the next of which was not published till nearly twenty years later: *The Lost Traveller* (1950), *The Sugar House* (1952), and *Beyond the Glass* (1954). A theme which she touches on several times is one that we shall see recurring in the course of this book, but it is not noticeable in the other, more important minor Catholic literature so briefly surveyed here: the paradox that Catholicism is so much more supernatural and otherworldly and yet at the same time more human and matter-of-fact than Protestantism.

Antonia White became a Catholic at the age of seven, when her father converted. Another woman novelist, Muriel Spark, was an adult convert from Judaism who was much influenced by Newman. She published her first novel three years later: *The Comforters* (1957). In this and *Memento Mori* (1959), *The Bachelors* (1960), *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960), and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), there is a strong awareness of the presence of the supernatural, especially evil and original sin. This last novel was published in the year where this study finishes. It is the same year in which Anthony Burgess, a lapsed Catholic with strong Manichaean tendencies, published *A Vision of Battlements.* His succeeding novels contain such Catholic motifs as the view of the Reformation as a disaster, the sense of being a foreigner in one's own country, a strong awareness of evil and original sin, and an antipuritanism.[21]

We shall find, interestingly enough, in the Catholic writers this book is concerned with—writers who are Catholic writers not just because they

happen to be Catholics, or even because they happen to introduce Catholic ideas and themes into their work—that we are not dealing with such familiar and typical topics at all. The second coincidence I referred to earlier is that these six writers belong in pairs to three different periods of English literature. Not only did Newman receive Hopkins into the Catholic Church, but Hopkins's first job was at the Oratory School in Birmingham which Newman had founded, and his last job was at the university which Newman had also founded in Dublin. Belloc was a close friend and acknowledged influence on Chesterton. Greene and Waugh were contemporaries at Oxford who later became friends.