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The Individual and Religion in British Literature

In reflecting on the evolution of literature from the Medieval to the Post Modern periods, it occurs to me that a shift takes place in the individual's focus concerning faith. It seems that during the early periods, a special reverence and an unquestioning faith in some instances is placed on the structure of society and God's sovereignty over man and nature; however, changes occur in the later periods that begin to cause individuals to break away from the rigidity of the previous generations' faith structures. For the medievalist author, faith rests in God and a somewhat conflicting society; however, for the author of the later periods, beginning with the Romantics, the faith previously placed in God and society starts to become placed in vastly different areas.

Faith plays a major role in the literature of the Medieval period. While enormous faith is placed in God as the mighty king and savior of man, there are definitely some uneasy tensions with the culture surrounding the Christian author at this time. Pagan culture has a large influence on the writing of *The Dream of the Rood*. The following passage from this tenth century poem, clearly exhibits the importance of faith and the impact that Pagan society had on the early Christian:

Then the young warrior, God Almighty,
stripped Himself, firm and unflinching. He climbed
upon the cross, brave before many, to redeem mankind.

I quivered when the hero clasped me, yet I dared not bow
 to the ground,
 fall to the earth. I had to stand firm.
 A rood was I raised up; I bore aloft the mighty King
 the Lord of Heaven. I dared not stoop. (*Rood*, ln. 40-47)

This particular poem seems to indicate a sort of unquestioning faith in God as the King of all of mankind; however, I believe that one reason this poem had appeal to the individual of the medieval period is the Pagan warrior theme. Describing Christ as a warrior would appeal to the individual during a time of knights and warriors; using warrior themes and imagery would aid the Christian author in his attempt to preserve the Christian ideas of God as a king.

Portions of this poem are inscribed on the Ruthwell Cross in Scotland, suggesting the importance placed on this work at the time that it was written. To understand the scope of the effect of this poem on Medieval society one must understand that the Ruthwell Cross is not located in a major town or city in Scotland but rather in a small mountainous area of northern Scotland. Since long distance travel was more difficult at that time, it speaks to the importance of the poem in that society and culture, for it to have traveled so far. Obviously, “everyday” people, not just the literate, valued the story.

While *The Dream of the Rood* does not illustrate the tensions of the Pagan society and the Christian faith, another work of the Medieval period, the tenth century poem entitled *The Wanderer*, exhibits a great deal of the tensions between Pagan cultural structures and Christian faith structures. Generally accepted as a Christian poem, *The Wanderer* reflects the view of the individual’s faith during the Medieval period. The first

stanza has an element of stress between Christian faith and Pagan culture that I believe is vital in making the poem intelligible to the individual of the Medieval period:

Often the wanderer pleads for pity
and mercy from the Lord; but for a long time,
sad in mind, he must dip his oars
into icy waters, the lanes of the sea;
he must follow the paths of exile: fate is inflexible.

(*The Wanderer*, ln. 1-5)

The wanderer is a knight or warrior who has outlived his master; outliving one's master during the Medieval period was a very unfortunate event. To the Christian, the wanderer's faith should be placed in the mercy of God to see him through his difficulties, yet there is a certain tension in this particular stanza symbolizing tensions that the Medievalist would be facing. I think the word that best depicts the Pagan versus Christian conflict in this stanza is the word fate. In the medievalist Pagan society, fate represents the idea that one's terrestrial life is all that one has—the Pagan puts his faith in the earthly things in the hope that his fame will outlive him. In the body of the poem, which contains distinctly pagan themes, his master is gone, and the wanderer finds himself searching for something to believe in since the pagan societal structure he knows has broken down. Yet the last stanza of the poem contrasts the pagan views of the afterlife and reflects the Christian view of what the wanderer should look for in his search for something to place his faith in:

So spoke the wise man in his heart as he sat apart in
thought.

Brave is the man who holds to his beliefs; nor shall he ever
 show the sorrow in his heart before he knows how he
 can hope to heal it. It is best for a man to seek
 mercy and comfort from the Father in heaven, the safe
 home that awaits us all. (*The Wanderer*, ln. 111-115).

People of the medieval period would be able to relate to the warrior's plight because they would understand the gravity of the situation, but this portion of the poem exhibits the characteristic Christian viewpoint. The author brings in the religious element to explain that while outliving one's master on earth was a terrible fate, the warrior can seek mercy from God and eventually find his way into heaven. I believe that the warrior theme is crucial to this piece in that it provides a context for the individual warrior or person to understand the contrasting values of faith from the cultural standpoint of the Pagan society and the Christian view that the Father in Heaven awaits all.

As we move through the medieval period into the early modern period, the ideas about faith and the structure of faith begin to change. Milton is an excellent example of how the portrayals of the structures of faith change over time. As party to a government that had been overthrown and a tumultuous change in the relationship between church and state, Milton had his own ideas of where and in whom the individual should place his faith. Milton begins authoring works on topics such as censorship in *Aereopagitica*, as well as an opinionated piece on *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, illustrating that he was definitely beginning to lose faith in the church and government as institutions. *Paradise Lost* shows how Milton is able to use more complex relationships and ideas to depict religious values to his reader.

Thou from the first
 Was present, and with mighty wings outspread
 Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss
 And mad'st it pregnant: What in me is dark
 Illumine, what is low raise and support;
 That to the highth of this great Argument
 I may assert Eternal Providence, And justify the ways of
 God to men. (*Paradise Lost*, ln. 19-26)

According to Milton, the purpose of this grand undertaking is to explain the ways of God to men, the way that he believes it should be told. The relationship between the individual and faith is becoming more and more complex at this time during the Early Modern period as evidenced by Milton. No longer is the church and state one institution controlling what people may read and write; thus, it is becoming more and more difficult for the church to censor those who believe differently. Individuals such as Milton begin to question the ideas concerning things such as the relationships between faith in God, faith in kings, and the laws in between. Other non-church-related ideas such as governance and self-governance begin to become popular. Milton, however, is able to incorporate these non Christian cultural ideas as a theme throughout *Paradise Lost*, with each character having his or her own individual conflict of governance and self-governance.

Milton also boldly approaches subjects such as Theodicy, God's justice in allowing sin into the world, as well as man's inability to remain pure when tempted by the serpent. To the Medievalist, there was no real question as to why God allowed evil in

the world, there was just total faith that God was good and all things happened within the will of God. Milton was one of the first people I have studied that truly begins to question some of these issues at a deeper philosophical level and attempts to make sense of God's plan with man.

In the early periods, it is evident that there is a large focus on faith in God and the structure provided by the institutions of church and government. Beginning with the Medieval period, authors show their faith in God as being important in much of their work; however, they must deal with the Pagan culture that surrounds their religious beliefs. The themes vary from God's mercy and love to God's warrior-like death on the cross and later, beginning with Milton in the Early Modern period, the justification of God's allowance of sin on the earth. The early period authors are driven to display, preserve, and ultimately explain what they put their faith in—religion and the society that surrounded it. The Early Moderns are the first to truly begin questioning relationships between faith and the church as well as the society; eventually this leads to the questioning of other things such as science—bringing forth institutions such as the Royal Society. With the advent of the Royal Society new theories and sciences become more prevalent; the Royal Society was established to prove the existence of God empirically, but inevitably other theories and beliefs not based on faith God and society evolved out of the new and exciting sciences. People such as Darwin, Newton, and Locke began forcing people to consider places other than the Bible for explanations. While Darwin's Evolutionary theory was tactfully not applied to humans in his work, it began to cause people to question the origins of our existence, eventually leading to people questioning where they should place their faith. Late period authors begin to break away from the

structures of the previous periods, such as organized religion, and lose their faith in the institutions of the government.

Authors of the late periods begin to look at subjects like nature without the same reverence for God's handiwork; instead late period authors begin to lose their faith in God and society and deify nature as an entity in and of itself. I think a good place to start looking at this more closely is the work of William Wordsworth. In his poem "Lines Written in Early Spring" we see where Wordsworth begins to place his faith in terrestrial objects such as nature instead of looking at them as the wonderful works of God. The following lines demonstrate this point:

To her fair works did nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
...Through primrose-tufts, in that sweet bower,
The periwinkle trail'd its wreathes;
And 'tis my faith that every flower
Enjoys the air it breathes. (Lines Written in Early Spring,
ln. 5-12).

Wordsworth does not seem to place any of his faith in God or his work to make flowers beautiful; instead, he invests his faith into the nature and beauty almost as if he believes the flowers are a god. Nature is not a product of something wonderful and beautiful like the God of the Medievalist; nature is a wonderful and beautiful god in and of itself. Not only does Wordsworth put his faith in nature, but he seems to suggest that he can find salvation in nature as evidenced in the following passage from one of his other works entitled, "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey":

Nor less, I trust,
 To them I may have owed another gift,
 Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
 In which the burden of the mystery,
 In which the heavy and the weary weight
 Of all this unintelligible world
 Is lighten'd. (Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern
 Abbey, ln. 36-42)

These particular lines refer to a landscape on which he is reflecting. Wordsworth seems to suggest that the beauty of nature is enough to save one from the weariness of this world when everything else becomes nearly unbearable, rather than the mercy and goodness of God that the medievalist believed was the key to salvation. Wordsworth places complete faith in the sublime characteristic of nature. In some ways nature can provide a personal rapture, in the sense that it raptures one away from the weary and troublesome world into a higher and better place, providing one with a sense of salvation.

Another author of the Romantic period who has shifted his faith to that of nature is John Keats. In his poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" Keats displays his ideas of truth and beauty.

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
 Beauty is truth, truth beauty,--that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. (Ode on a
 Grecian Urn, ln. 47-50)

While the medievalist would attribute truth and beauty to characteristics of God, Keats suggests that they are earthly qualities. Essentially, Keats is participating in the breaking away from the faith structures of the early periods; placing his faith in the truth and beauty of earth, Keats is suggesting that truth and beauty are necessarily sufficient qualities of the natural world. In the equation of truth equals beauty and beauty equals truth, there is not really any room for Keats to place his faith in God. Rather than attributing the beauty of nature to something else, Keats is suggesting that one can place his faith in nature. Keats could possibly be asserting that truth and beauty act as a god in the way that nature acts as a god for Wordsworth. Nature provides truth and beauty which, for Keats, is all one needs.

During the modern period there was much turmoil going on in the world. World War I was occurring, and the face of the world was changing. New influences and ways of writing poetry were coming about; blank verse, iambic pentameter, and the other structures for writing were giving way to newer forms of poetry such as free verse. William Butler Yeats, a Modernist author had a different view of faith and God than that held by either Wordsworth or Keats. Rather than looking for beauty and truth or the beauty of the pastoral, Yeats's view of the world was wary. Faith does not appear in his work the same way that it does in Wordsworth and Keats; his views of mankind and God suggest that he was very skeptical of God and man. Yeats seemed to be very conscious of the disillusionment of the people of the world as shown in the following poem, "The Second Coming":

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity. (The Second Coming 4-8)

These lines are very apocalyptic and Yeats seems to be going through a crisis of faith, instead of looking forward to the return of Christ. He appears to not really know where he can place his faith—certainly not in man. It is as if he is saying that the good and faithful people are not in charge of the world any more.

Because of his lack of faith Yeats also expresses an uncertainty of what is to come of his world. He writes: “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,/ Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?” (lines 21-22) Yeats seems to be very skeptical of Christ’s return, and wonders what is next for the world. His statement sounds like the words of a man who has lost his faith in God and man and is skeptically looking for what is to come, since his faith is not in Christ to come and deliver man. While Yeats is faithful that a new beast will come around, he seems to give the impression that the beast is taking its time to get to Bethlehem. I get the impression that Keats is asking how long we must wait for something new to put our faith in; apparently he does not have faith in what is here now.

I essentially wanted to show that the structure of faith in the early periods differed drastically from the later periods. The early period authors seem to suggest a strong adherence to their faith in the church as well as their society, despite the pagan and Christian conflicts. It may be hard to say exactly what the general consensus was among the early period authors concerning faith and the church due to the church-centered government, but from what we have read, it seems that for the most part the individual

thrived on the structures provided by his or her faith in God and society. However, The late period authors definitely seemed to break away from the strict structures of their predecessors. With the advent of the Royal Society and the many revolutions that occurred over the course of the centuries, changes in what people believed and how they recorded it inevitably resulted. The later period authors seemed to change from reflective lovers of beauty and nature to, sometimes, pessimistic and wary skeptics. However, while people lost faith in God and the government, they have never lost faith. Each period found a new and exciting entities and to put their faith in.

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