The Celebration of Nature in Victorian Poetry

Despite the publication of Darwin's radical text *On the Origin of Species* (1859),which promoted a theory of evolution that directly threatened the authority of Genesis, the pervading strength and influence of Christianity becomes apparent in the abundance of religious poetry created during the Victorian period. Poets such as Robert Browning and his wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning; Lord Tennyson, and Christina Rossetti, all created poetry that was highly spiritual in language and subject matter.

Celebrating Nature

This essay examines the use of nature as a means of celebrating God and spirituality in the poetry of two very different nineteenth-century poets: Walt Whitman and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Whitman was American, and, as is assumed from the imagery used in his poetry, a homosexual. Hopkins was English and a Jesuit priest. However, despite the stark differences between these two poets, similarities can be drawn by examining the celebration of nature present throughout their poetry.

Both men read nature as though it were the signature of God, finding evidence of Him in the natural world. It was through a celebration of the nature that the two poets were able to glorify God; each created a specific spirituality that correlated praising of the natural world with praising God and His creation. The two poets achieved this celebration of the natural through the development of radically different poetic style, which includes the use of free verse and experimental prosody.

Whitman's Celebration of the Self

In 'Song of Myself', Whitman's poetic voice celebrates the individual. The opening line states: 'I celebrate myself, and sing myself'. The poem reads the human body as a spiritual celebration, with each anatomical part being worthy of praise: 'I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and heart'. (Section 48)

Whitman locates the soul as assimilated within the flesh; he equates body and soul, and thereby imbues the body with spiritual grandeur. This is exemplified in the poem 'Song of Myself' when the speaker states:

'I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,
And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is'(Section 48).

The above example shows Whitman's use of free verse and his departure from the rules governing conventional nineteenth-century poetry. He uses free verse to parallel the biblical language and parallelism used in the King James Bible, a literary device which further serves to reinforce the notion of reading nature as Scripture. Whitman's use of free verse also symbolises the encompassing theme of his poetry which seeks to include all humanity in its praise:

'Why should I wish to see God better than this day?

I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each
moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in
the glass' (Section 48).

The Importance of Equality

Whitman's poetic voice appears to promote equality and include all humankind in its celebration. According to Whitman, God is present not only in himself, but also across all of humanity.

The importance of equality in shaping Whitman's spiritual belief is revealed in a letter Whitman wrote to Henry Stafford in 1881, in which he describes true religion as 'the most beautiful thing in the whole world, and the best part of any man's or woman's or boy's character'.

Whitman uses the literal geography of America as a means of celebrating nature in his poem 'Starting from Paumanok'. The speaker declares: 'I will make a song for these States that no one State may under/any circumstances be subjected to another State'. The word 'State' is a pun; it carries a double meaning which signifies the different States of America, and the state of being alive, conscious, and able to celebrate oneself. The poetic voice celebrates both elements symbolised by the pun 'States', and calls for equality, again showing Whitman's encompassing poetic voice which includes all humans as emblems of God, and therefore a cause for celebration.

Hopkins and Nature

For Hopkins, metaphor describes the relation of the natural world to God. His emphasis on sound and use of onomatopoeic words promote the idea of an original language and pure sound which captures the essence of the thing itself, and thereby reveals the essence of God in nature. This is linked to the prelapsarian state of language used by Adam in the Garden of Eden.

His sonnet 'The Windhover' (1877) demonstrates the correlation of nature with religion, as the poem uses a Kestrel to symbolise Christ, the poem's dedicatee.

The importance of sound is immediately apparent through the use of alliteration and half-rhymes in the opening lines:

'I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding'.

The poetic voice employs strange words of Hopkins' own invention, which demonstrates the emphasis he placed upon the onomatopoeic qualities of language. For example, the voice uses the word 'wimpling' to describe the movement of the Kestrel's wings in the wind, and the term 'sillion', to denote a strip of land between two furrows.

Hopkins' 1877 sonnet 'Pied Beauty' opens with the line 'Glory be to God for dappled things', and then proceeds to list the different things which constitute the 'dappled' elements of nature:

'For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches? wings'.

Hopkins' poem situates nature as evidence for God's glory in the speaker's observation and cataloguing of the natural world. However, the poetic voice restores spiritual mystery to the empirical evidence found in nature by using a list of ambivalent and unusual adjectives to describe:

'All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim'.

The poem is also heavily spondaic, which once again reinforces the importance of stress and sound in Hopkins' work. The poem ends with the spondee 'Praise him'.

The emphasis placed on these two concluding words summarises the spiritual motivation driving Hopkins' poetry. These words offer an explanation for his consistent use of natural imagery as religious metaphor; whereas Whitman looked to corporeal design and the wonders of the self in his spiritual celebration, Hopkins sought, through his poetic voice, to celebrate God through the ability to admire the beauty of the animals and the landscape of His creation.
