Southwell the Poet: In and out of context

Brian McClorry SJ

On 1 December, the Society of Jesus celebrates the feast of a number of English Jesuit reformation martyrs, among them Saints Edmund Campion and Robert Southwell. Southwell is perhaps best known for his poetry, to which Brian McClorry SJ offers an introduction here. How does Southwell's poetry open up a space for Ignatian conversational prayer?

Clive James once provocatively remarked that poetry is 'any piece of writing that can't be quoted except out of context'. If poetry drowns in its context (the personal or the public context of the poet), maybe it's not quite poetry. Then context rather than the poetry becomes the focus of any reading of the poem. But since poetry is also read in a context, the 'out of context' lines can have a particular resonance. Then poetry is found to be in part a reminder and a maker of our common and varied world. And at the same time the 'otherness' of the context can also be salutary and freeing. This too might be part of what Seamus Heaney somewhat ambiguously called 'the redress of poetry'.

Robert Southwell SJ

Some context

Certainly Robert Southwell (1561-95), Jesuit priest, martyr and saint, had a considerable context. He lived during the reign of Elizabeth I (1533-1603; crowned 1558, excommunicated 1570), and overlapped with Shakespeare (1564-1616) and John Donne (1572-1631). George Herbert (1593-1633) was born two years before Southwell was executed. The reforming and controversial Council of Trent (1545-63) ended shortly after his birth. Southwell's English context was of state censorship, licensing and surveillance, violence and tortured death. To be a Jesuit was to be treasonous. The Reformation and its aftermath, whichever 'side' you took or found you were on, was an uncertain and fearful time.

Southwell was born in Norfolk and went to Flanders in 1576 at the age of 14. After being refused entry to the Jesuits in Paris, he made his way to Rome on foot where, in 1579, he joined the Jesuit novitiate and subsequently taught at the faction-riven English College. Southwell was ordained in 1584, wonderfully young. He was back in England in 1586, captured in 1592, tortured and eventually hung, drawn and quartered in 1595. It was a time when English Catholics were under threat, and England was threatened by foreign 'Catholic' powers. The Spanish Armada was dispersed in 1588, while Southwell was in England and free; Sir Francis Drake (1540-1596) was another of his contemporaries.

Clearly Southwell's poetry came out of and is directed towards his own enmeshed political, religious and ecclesiastical contexts. It is in large measure *for* variously embattled English Catholics, not only landed recusants, a purpose with its own real importance and interest. But with Clive James's remark in view, what follows considers a few of Southwell's English poems which can to some degree be read 'out of context'.

The Babe

Southwell, who died young but older than John Keats, wrote some 55 poems in English. A few are still commonly anthologised. Sometimes phrases, like the opening line of *A childe my Choyce* stick in the mind: 'Let folly praise what phancy loves I praise and love that childe', which moves so easily – the 'l's' and

the 'f's' doing their duty well – that the thought can pass before it fully registers. There is a sharp distinction between 'phancy' – 'fancy' – in the sense of whim, even a whim of iron, and an *imagination* which tries to stay rooted in a personal and more than individual truth-telling. There is very little punctuation in the poem, unlike the fastidious attention paid to this craft in the very long (over 800 lines including the introduction) of *Saint Peters complaynt*. Scant punctuation (like Emily Dickinson without the dashes) is fairly typical of Southwell and gives the reader room to shape the poem and to be shaped by it.

Of course the 'childe' is the Christ-child, the subject of Southwell's most famous poem, *The burning Babe*. In sixteen lines this poem moves from the 'I' of the author to the 'I' of the child and back to the 'I' of the author. Shifting *in persona* writing keeps the author and the 'childe' in mutual conversation, rather like the 'colloquy' or conversational prayer Ignatius advocates in his *Spiritual Exercises*. But it is also a proper device for poetry and gives the poet space for an exploration which a conventional doctrinal imagination would find difficult to undertake. The poem ends with a last-line discovery: 'And straight I called unto mynde, that it was Christmas day.' which contains two of the poem's three punctuation marks.

Joseph and the Babe

Southwell's 'infancy' poetry is not confined to the child Jesus or to Mary, though Mary is the subject of poems from her conception to the Assumption. However *Josephes Amazement* – more Joseph's 'problem' than his wonder or puzzlement – does not end with a discovery. The poem is avowedly about Joseph's horrified reaction to the unplanned pregnancy of his betrothed. Southwell's Joseph feels betrayed. From the 56th line out of 80 the poem (punctuated only by an occasional full stop) is very strongly *in persona*, in the person of Joseph. And Joseph's anguish at Mary's pregnancy, his sense of shocked betrayal, is neither resolved nor allayed. The last six lines run:

> Yett still I tredd a maze of doubtful end
> I goe I come she drawes she drives away
> She woundes she heales she doth both marr and mend
> She makes me seeke and shun depart and stay
> She is a frende to love a foe to lothe
> And in suspence I hange betwene them both

Although the context of Mary's pregnancy and Joseph's shock remain, they are for Southwell perhaps shadowed by a love for England in the time of the Reformation. The poem can also be quoted or read 'out of context' when relationships of love are strained or distorted by events or misunderstanding. Southwell's reluctance to punctuate lets the poem's space expand endlessly or contract to a zero point. As a whole the poem has a holding quality of ambiguity and capaciousness, as well as a fine lack of religious or pious determinism. Joseph continues to live in a harsh version of Keats's 'negative capability'

Peter and the love of life

Something similar might be said about the long and short versions of *Saint Peters complaynte*, although these poems do have a kind of ongoing resolution. Peter's denial of Christ and his endless remorse are based in the New Testament, but Elizabethan England was also the scene of real and perceived betrayal and ultimate denial, whether of monarch or belief. Although the long version of the poem ends conventionally with 'Amen', it is *Jesus* who is asked to say 'Amen' to *Peter*'s prayer. Once again the mutuality heralded in *The burning Babe* is present. For anyone who has denied or betrayed anyone, in the remote past or recently, the encouragement is inviting: let Jesus say 'Amen' to our prayer of confusion. And to any prayer.

However, all is not well in the poem. The references to the 'Jews' in the short version are hard to read: like many of his contemporaries, Southwell seems to have forgotten that Jesus and Peter were both Jews. It is not for nothing that Nicholas King SJ's translation of John's Gospel has 'Judeans' rather than 'Jews'. However, Jesus's death, as early commentators on the *Spiritual Exercises* rather misleadingly suggest, is to be considered as the fault of the person who prays. So in *Sinnes heavy loade*, 'Yea, flatt thou fallest with my faultes oppreste'. In some sense *everyone* is involved and the 'Jews' are not singled out.

In the related *Christs bloody sweate* the speaker admits, 'I withered am and stonye to all good', but the poem is also wonderfully, almost blatantly, clever. The first four lines can be read horizontally as usual, but these same lines also divide visually into four distinct columns – so we have five verses for the price of one. Similarly there is a jaunty rhythm in *Lifes deaths loves*

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life which belies the content of the poem. It is often as if Southwell's use of the English language of his time had a healing and sustaining capacity for life in life-denying circumstances. We read poetry for some 'redress'.

However, for Southwell it is 'heaven' (where the believer is with the beloved) more than Jesus's resurrection which is the primary image of hope. Even apart from the penal context of the Elizabethan period, an immediate joy in *this* life, here and now, struggles to find what Hopkins called 'root room'. Certainly the title of another poem, *What joy to live*, has to work to find joy given the line, 'Heere bewty is a bayte that swallowed chokes'. Even if Southwell's titles are on occasion carefully ironic, his wordplay gives a (fugitive) sense of life.

Grace's court

'I dwell in graces court' is the first line of *Content and ritche*, where 'graces court' sounds like an aggressive alternative to the court of Elizabeth, and is perhaps also a happy rendering of the frequent 'court of heaven' metaphor in Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*. The phrase implicitly and strongly asks where and how we do or might live, so that life in Christ may be real, significant and true. But finding where we really 'dwell' seems full of cloistered pressures, and Southwell works with wit and will on this intimate claustrophobia in *I dye alive*, a poem not surprisingly included in R.S. Thomas's 1963 *Penguin Anthology of Religious Verse*. Here, 'graces court' is no place of ease:

> My death to end my dying life denyes
> And life my living death no whit amends

The mode of Southwell's translation of Aquinas's *Lauda Sion*, and especially his own *Of the Blessed sacrament of the Aulter*, is almost deftly catechetical:

> What god as auctor made he alter may
> No change so hard as making all of nought

But in *I dye alive* the teaching tone shifts into a sense of the Eucharist as a Mass for hard, indeed penal, times, which reflects Jesus's situation in Gethsemane.

A note on reading

Good and varied Elizabethan spelling is not an obstacle to reading the poems – if read aloud (even, perhaps especially, to oneself) many conundrums dissolve. A few words may need explanation – 'sely' or 'selye', a favourite word, means not 'silly' but 'simple' or 'helpless', with maybe some awareness of 'holy'; and in *Content and ritche* we read, 'To ruyne runne amaygne', where 'amaygne' means 'swiftly'. But as well as the needed comprehension of words there is also a sense which comes from Southwell's rhymes and rhythms which hold the poems together. This 'music' is both medium and message and needs to be included in any 'reading'. Then the 'reading' offers a comprehension which cannot be reduced to or finalised by the 'straight' meaning of the words, and is hospitable to the reader's own story and context. This is the 'place' for one's own 'colloquy' or Ignatius's conversational prayer.

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Notes

The only full collection of Southwell's poetry that I know of is: Peter Davidson & Anne Sweeney, *St Robert Southwell, SJ. Collected Poems* (Flyfield Books, Carcenet, 2007). This admirable edition includes the Latin as well as the English poems, and gives an introduction and a fine afterword on reading Southwell, as well as notes on some individual poems.

For Clive James, there is a good review article: John Banville, 'A Quest for Clarity' in *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. LXII, No, 14 (24 September 2015), which deals with two of James's books, *Poetry Notebook: Reflections on the Intensity of Language* and *Latest Readings*.

Southwell's poems do give images of Jesus. For a very recent sense of Jesus – from fifty five contemporary poets – see *Poetry Ireland Review*, No. 112 (2014), with the title 'Name and Nature: "Who Do You Say That I Am?"'. On a broader cultural front, there is: Peggy Rosenthal, *The Poets' Jesus: Representations at the End of a Millennium* (OUP, 2000), which goes beyond 'Western' Christianity.

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