

**The Catholic New Left:  
Language, Liturgy and Literature in *Slant* magazine, 1964-1970.**

Criticism of religion is the beginning of all criticism—Karl Marx

What kind of language might fit readers for revolution, where the reader's revolutionary destiny is understood to be revealed in the divine humanity of Jesus Christ? The first half of this question will be familiar as one of the concerns of the New Left in Britain in the 1960s, whose emphasis—in Raymond Williams' formulation—on culture as 'a whole way of life' (Williams 281) continues to inform our justification (and more recently our defence) of the humanities.<sup>1</sup> However, the twist is less familiar. Not only must we ask what the place of language is, how it unfolds in institutions and in literary artworks; we must also consider language unfolding in the context of the revelation of human destiny in the historical fact of Christ's life, death and resurrection. This is not a question at the forefront of any recent argument concerning the centrality of culture for a revolutionary agenda. Yet renewed interest in the relationship between catholicism and the avant-garde, the analogy between poetic and liturgical form being pursued in philosophical theology, and the theological turn in literary studies suggests that a return to this question may not be untimely.<sup>2</sup> In this direction, the efforts of the priests, critics and theologians who contributed to thirty issues of *Slant* magazine between 1964 and 1970 offers an important test case.

J. P. Corrin, in his thorough recent history, identifies the transmission of the New Left's project into the pages of this magazine:

The ideas concerning culture and politics articulated by Williams and Hoggart, both of whom recognized the value of a Marxist critique of power, meshed closely with the intellectual dispositions of Catholics on the left. The architectural framework for their goal of a society of humanistic socialism required the creation of what Williams called a community of common culture. The task of such cultural construction was undertaken by a group of young Catholic university graduates who, under the inspiration of their Dominican mentors, launched a radical magazine called *Slant*. Its writers and the broader movement that took its name became the intellectual power house and seedbed of the Catholic New Left (Corrin 214-5).

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<sup>1</sup> See Stefan Collini *What are Universities For?*. St Ives: Penguin, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> This article was originally conceived as a paper for 'The Unorthodox Orthodoxy: Catholicism, Modernisms and The Avant-Garde' conference, University of Notre Dame London Centre, 25<sup>th</sup> September 2015. With regard to the relation between literature and liturgy, I must acknowledge my debt to Catherine Pickstock's work, *After Writing*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.

However, it was not the case, as the denomination ‘Catholic New Left’ suggests, that the project pursued in *Slant* simply presents the attitudes of the New Left, plus Christ. Instead, certain key words—such as ‘language’, ‘liturgy’, ‘literature’, even ‘culture’ itself—were transformed in the attempt to think ‘the full implications of a Christian radicalism’ (*Slant*, 2.1, 2). As a result, the answers they offer as to the nature of language, the meaning of linguistic communities and the role of literature, develop differently from what we now recognise as the mainstream of left-leaning cultural criticism. Their particular take on what Williams called, ‘the tradition’ of thinking about the relations between culture and society may prove valuable for just this fact. To attempt to give a summative view of what *Slant* meant by ‘culture’, ‘language’, ‘liturgy’ and ‘literature’, is far from simple and any attempt to do so is itself complicated by the fact that *Slant* cannot be said to present the coherent work of a single authorship, or a consistent line of argument: ‘The making of a community is always an exploration, for consciousness cannot precede creation, and there is no formula for unknown experience’ (Williams 334). However, we can get a fair way by reconsidering these terms in use, in the context of the problems they were called to answer to. As Williams writes in the Preface to *Culture and Society*: ‘All this work will be difficult, but it may be helped by an understanding of the context of our present vocabulary in these matters, to which this [essay] is offered as a contribution (Williams viii).

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The aims of *Slant* magazine are stated in the first paragraph of the second volume: to communicate the ideas and values of the political new left to the catholic community in Britain, thereby moving the emergent middle class to the left, while exploring the relations between a theological and political radicalism in practice (2.1, 2). The thinkers named in connection with this project include Marx, Sartre, R.D. Laing, Heidegger, Wittgenstein; and Williams—all thinkers notable for their ‘work on language and community’ (2.1, 2). This litany, the emphasis on connecting theory with practice, and their target audience indicate their common cause with the New Left Review. However, the grounds for a discussion of culture in terms friendly to Williams’ definition of culture were already established by the catholic situation post-Vatican II. As Neil Middleton reflects, in an article called ‘Man and Society at Vatican II’, by the mid 60s the fuller response to modernity and capitalism which many Catholics had hoped for had not materialised. As a result of its emphasis on belief as preceding action, the *Constitution on the Church in the World of Today*, merely furthers a dualistic model of human behaviour’ (*Slant* 2.6, 21). Middleton sees this as essentially atomistic, since ‘it promotes the idea of society as ‘something in which men are immersed... rather than something that they create as, at the same time, society ‘creates’ them’ (21). The *Constitution* worked against any attempt to change economic and social

institutions—the church included—by returning the emphasis in moral questions to personal belief. One can see why Williams’ definition of culture as a ‘whole way of life’ was welcomed as an antidote to such conservative thinking.

However, beginning with a consideration of the catholic situation after 1962 also asks us to acknowledge that Williams’ understanding of culture involved the catholic in paradoxes which Williams did not anticipate. While Vatican II allowed Catholics living in Britain to view themselves as a group, perhaps for the first time since the Catholic Emancipation Act, it also provoked questions about the limits of that commonality.<sup>3</sup> As early as the second issue of *Slant*, Francis McDonagh argues that ‘Non-Christians have the right to demand our reunion as a contribution to the ideal which is at the same time essentially human and essentially Christian, the unity of all men’. He suggests that ‘culture’ must embrace non-catholics in both senses of the word’ (1.2, 27). The argument receives further early support from Leo Pyle, who argues for a Christian, rather than a catholic, left. Yet this ecumenicism is in tension with a more subtle, and embedded critique of Anglican sacramental theology and practice, for example, in the almost unanimous rejection of T.S. Eliot’s argument, in his *Notes on a Definition of Culture*, for a National church (which Williams agrees with, albeit for different reasons), and the implicit connection between the dualistic notion of human action, that emphasis on inwardness which the writers of *Slant* associated with Vatican II, and Anglicanism, interpreted through the lens of Marx’s early writings on Protestant Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

The question of how far ‘culture’ should be extended is further complicated by the question of the relations between the catholic left and the non-Christian community. Martin Redfern recognises in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and related pacifist movements people who, ‘by the very fact of their communal openness and sensitivity to the real and vital moral issues of their time and society, [are] fully realising their natural humanity, and so

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<sup>3</sup> On the popular misconception of Roman Catholicism as a minority group in Britain see Eagleton’s article ‘Mass and Media’ (1.2, 12). For the class stratification of roman catholicism in Britain, see Monica Lawlor ‘Two Tier conspiracy’, *New Christian*, 26 Jan 1967, p.10, and J. P. Corrin (*Catholic Progressives*) 219.

<sup>4</sup> In an article called ‘Theology and the New Left’, Brian Wicker argues that: ‘The difference between Marxist and liberal anticlericalism is that the former believes that the visible church is a real community which must be destroyed, while the latter believes that the visible trappings of ecclesiastical organisation contain an inward nothingness, and can therefore be dispensed with without doing any damage to the essence of Christianity. Such a position is by no means irreconcilable with Anglicanism: for it is possible to hold that, while the visible garments of the church do not yet contain any living reality, the fragments which do exist may one day be brought to life by the breath of the spirit of ecumenical reunion... But this hope is based upon something which, to a Catholic, is simply infidelity. It is only because he does not yet believe, that such a Christian can still go on hoping. Faith and hope in this sense are irreconcilable’ (1.1, 13). Likewise Adrian Cunningham argues that ‘Alienation proper is a product of post-medieval society’ (2.1, 20).

sharing—even if only implicitly—in the divinity which Christ has mediated to man’(1.3, 8-9). The awkwardness implied by the parentheses, which would connect these secular activists with the catholic struggle without bringing them into the fold, is common in *Slant*. It is difficult to know what the writers of this magazine would rather pray for: the strength to work alongside secular radicals, or for the conversion of England. As Adrian and Angela Cunningham write in their retrospective assessment, ‘More Questions for the Catholic Left’, which appeared towards the end of the second volume: ‘If there is a tension within the catholic left... The tension is, perhaps, between those whose main emphasis is socialist, and those whose main emphasis is catholic’ (2.6, 24). For this reason, they argue, it is ‘the theological side of this [connection]—the role of the church in a socialist perspective—that needs to be looked at’ (2.6, 24). In order to understand what *Slant* meant by ‘culture’, then, we might consider how the motivations behind this plea for a common culture changes once it enters the pages of *Slant*.

For Williams, we need a common culture ‘not for the sake of an abstraction, but because we shall not survive without it’ (Williams 317). Only by working to transform the structures of our society will the alienation of the individual from nature, work, and from each other give way to true community. Williams’ emphasis on overcoming alienation can be seen as part of a general return to Marx’s early writing, in the wake of the perceived failure of bureaucratic communism after 1956. *Slant* was also engaged in this return, and it is Marx’s concept of alienation, more than any other, which returns again and again in the pages of *Slant*.<sup>5</sup> However, it is here, where they share most, that terms such as ‘culture’ and ‘alienation’ come to denote a very different set of beliefs. This is most evident in two early articles by Adrian Cunningham, ‘The Continuity of Marx’ (2.1) and ‘Idolatry’ (2.4), and finds its most straightforward—even scholastic—formulation in the words of Herbert McCabe.

For Cunningham, Marx is ‘continuous’ in three aspects: first, there is continuity in his thinking about the concept of alienation, ‘the guiding direction of his thought’ (2.1, 17); secondly, Marx is continuous with Hegel’s Christology—meaning that Marx’s concepts have ‘a religious reference, at least in their origin’; lastly Marx’s thinking is continuous with radical Christianity insofar as both assert a model of human development towards ‘total community’. In his second article, Cunningham builds on the conviction that ‘the function of the church in the world is the preparation of the kingdom of God...’ to reinterpret alienated labour as a state of sin, reworking it within a theological framework. Returning to the fall stories—Eden and

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Terry Eagleton, ‘The Morality of Capitalism’ (1.3, 25); Leo Pyle, ‘Workers of the World—Unite!’ (1.3, 28-32); Adrian Cunningham, ‘Definitions’ (2.5, 26-7).

Babel—as moments in which the work for the kingdom of God is frustrated, Cunningham presents ‘fallenness’ as ‘the condition of man in which community is incomplete, in which the processes by which man changes his environment his society and himself, are not fully responsive to his control but remain irreducibly random, as if endowed with a parasitic life—in a word, alien (2.4., 11). Crucially, this particular understanding of alienation as ‘fallenness’ depends not only on the kinds of economic and social structures of capitalism in its bourgeois stage, but on an interlocking set of assumptions about language, liturgy and literature which moves the Catholic left’s thinking beyond the Marxist concept of alienation. These interlocking ideas were set out with scholastic precision in an earlier article in *Slant* by McCabe.

McCabe begins by defining humans as speaking animals, and community as ‘speaking together’, through ‘a common use of signs’. From here, he derives a definition of language as being irreducibly bound up with presence:

Language, the use of signs, is a way of being present to others, of being in community with them. Things just as things may link animals together but they also come between them and separate them. They are closer when there is nothing between them and they are linked by their own bodies. But things used as signs do not separate, they bring the participants more closely together than if there were nothing between them. Man is the animal that has come to use things and more especially his own body as a sign. Human life is significant life, it is therefore life in community (1.5, 9).

Language is conceived as a way of being present to each other, and the capacity to be present to each other—to live in community—defines what it is to be human. There is nothing here which is inconsistent with Williams’ definition of culture as ‘a whole way of life’. However, this inescapable tie between language and presence is next developed in the direction of an incarnational understanding of language:

Language is a way of being in community with others. To be in personal communion with the Father is to speak with him, to be with him not merely as his creatures but as persons to whom he communicates himself as we do when we speak freely together. To say, as St John does, that Jesus is the Word is to say that he is the Father’s communication of himself. ... In Christ the Father speaks to us in his own language. To share a language is to share a form of life... Faith means being in linguistic personal community with the Father’ (1.5, 10).

If we are present to each other through language, and language is understood to be directly bound up with presence, then we overcome sin and fallenness when we speak and act in a way which overcomes alienation. In coming into communion with Christ and, through him, with the Father: 'A man is born again in a new way into the human community.' However, this does not simply happen through political struggle. Instead, for McCabe, the church—as custodians and artists of this way of thinking about language and presence—must play a role. This results in a revised understanding of both liturgy and the church itself:

The church is a custodian of the sacramental language in somewhat the same way that the poet, the novelist and the literary critic are custodians of the English language. And she is subject to the same temptations, above all, the temptation to think of the language as the property of an elite... the church too can slip into the illusion that she exists for the sake of Christians (1.5, 10).

For McCabe, the church itself is not to be confused with the community of grace. It is not a club. Instead, the church is a sacrament of the human community: 'Its cultic life is the articulate language which expresses and realises the new way of being human which is the life of grace' (1.5, 10). McCabe is thus able to overcome the paradox of a common culture for radical catholics, by means of a deft series of analogies made in the manner of inductive statements, but working out of a Johannine understanding of language as incarnational. In McCabe's logic the 'church' becomes, not an institution or a body of people, but the expression of a new way of being human. The common ground which Cunningham identifies between alienation and 'fallenness', considered on the 'theological side', moves quickly out of the reach of Williams' plea for a 'common culture'.

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The incarnational understanding of language developed by McCabe would have several consequences for the meanings of language, liturgy and literature developed by *Slant*. However, rather than attempt to give a summary of those meanings by means of a straightforward comparison between the New Left and their contemporary catholic radicals, I want to use the remainder of this essay to think with—without attempting to entirely account for—the differences between two poems close in geographical location and date, but far from each other in the assumptions they evince about the relationship between language, liturgy and literature. The first was published in 1968, the second in 1967:

but society is “predictably” as we know “in  
a state of ferment”—as if that could ever turn to  
*wine* or raise *bread*, from the sad shit it  
is, to that crispy crunchy loaf we shall all  
eat only in heaven.

Bodies are like poems  
    moving focuses  
of meaning  
    gathering  
and entered  
    endlessly  
    failing  
they scatter then  
    grip to fresh presence

The self-conscious use of language and the continuous syntax broken across the lines, situate both poems in the post-imagist period. Both offer resources for thinking critically about the relationship between language and the body, the first through the use of quotations marks and italics, and the second through the simile in the first line quoted. However, beyond this, the poems have different trajectories.

The lines I quote from the first poem pivot around a darkly humorous pun on the verb ‘turn’. “Ferment” is the trigger for this, a change of state from one substance to the other, but contained here within speech marks as if to claim this diagnosis of society as reportage, abstraction. The commentary which follows suggests the absurdity of describing society in these terms, punning on ‘turn’ to mean at once unrest, the seeking of consolation in communal symbols such as *bread* and *wine*, and the transformatory power of language. The denied wish-clause which governs this pun also disavows efficacious speech, and, by extension, the idea that language might have some ineluctable connection to presence. Here, to turn ‘sad shit’ to bread—even the ‘crispy crunchy’ kind—and wine is a deferral, the kind which appears to the letter—if not the spirit—of Marx’s early writings.

The second poem is at once more straightforward and more complex. Slower and less arch, its movement is mainly driven by the verbs which drop down after the line-breaks, inviting us to connect the encounter of reading with reading as an encounter with shifting presences. The leap across the line-break: ‘then/ grip’ is wilful. A mimetic movement which seeks to make the

reader leap as the line does is one of the more dependable stylistic resources available for making good on the simile between bodies and presence. There is at once an attempt to riddle the poem as bodily, and to elicit, in the reader, a bodily response. If I to ask how far both poems might fit within a revolutionary project, I would suggest that while the first disavows the possibility that language might offer a means of transformation, the second places the transforming and transformatory powers of poetic language at its centre.

How far does it alter our reading of these poems to learn that the first, called 'Die a Millionaire', is by J.H. Prynne, and the second poem, entitled simply 'Bodies' is by the literary critic Terry Eagleton (3.4, 20)? Or that the first poem appeared in Prynne's 1968 book *Kitchen Poems*, and the second appeared in the August/ September 1967 edition of *Slant*? Reinserted into their contexts, these poems have different valuations: the first is now regarded as one of the most forceful poems in this important late modernist collection and Prynne's *Collected Poems* is now in its third edition (Prynne 15). The second has never been reprinted, along with many of the poems and poets which appeared sporadically throughout *Slant*. Yet there remains something valuable in the alternative thinking around language, community and art which 'Bodies' presents. In order to give a sketch of that thinking, I want to consider what kind of language, and what community—actual and poetic—Eagleton's poem presents.

While McCabe's understanding of language is orthodox, *Slant* also took much from the Ludwig Wittgenstein. For the writers of the *Slant Manifesto*: '[t]his is one of the more important discoveries of modern philosophy:'

the fact that the individual can only experience within the terms of his language, and therefore within the terms of his society. The limits of my language are the limits of my life... Language is a communal activity, a shared process of making and refreshing and scrapping meanings. We can see it, therefore, as an image of the kind of unity of person and society which, as Christians, we demand (*Slant Manifesto*, 11)

This understanding of language as both constitutive and symbolic has several implications for poetry and literature. If language is both a way of being together and something we can reflect on, then the task of speakers, and—by extension—of poets and literary critics—is to consider new and old ways of being with in literary artworks. In this sense, *Slant* might appear to have found a common cause with R. P. Blackmur's sense that poetry increases 'the sum of the world's available reality', which J.H. Prynne quotes in an early article from 1961 on 'Resistance and Difficulty' (27).

However, where Prynne's poem strives to expose certain attitudes towards signs or language as dead metaphor, and to isolate for scrutiny symbols which constitute illusions, Eagleton instead seeks to explore, via the connection between word and presence, the way in which poems might connect the sacred and the ordinary. Read against Prynne's *Kitchen Poems*, Eagleton's poem is manageable to the point of appearing naive. 'Die a Millionaire' challenges uncritical connections between the sacred and the ordinary. As Prynne implies, thinking about the incarnation in 'Resistance and Difficulty', 'the ontology implicit in Hopkins' poetry draws much of its strength from a syntactical difficulty underpinned by etymological and phonetic resistance; the image of Christ's body as part of the natural order constantly reasserts the valid priority of substance' (30). Yet this curious aside, which sees Hopkins' style as a struggle with reality, misses the origin—and therefore, in many ways, the point, of Hopkins' drive to innovate. For Hopkins, as for Eagleton, language and presence is a given. It is impossible to understand this alternative understanding of the way in which literary language might bear on the relation between the sacred and the ordinary without also considering the way in which *Slant* thought about liturgy, the church's own means of social communication.

From the very beginning, the writers of *Slant* thought about literature as liturgical, and liturgy as literary. Eagleton writes that: 'ideally we find in literature a relationship between community and the whole body... "ideally", of course, because it is only recently that the Christian liturgy has begun to stop looking like an obscure expressionist drama of foreign authorship and started to resemble the communal act that it is' (*Slant Manifesto*, 11-12). Likewise, Brian Wicker saw the changes to catholic liturgy as 'one of the most significant developments in the religious field during the last half-century' (1.1, 9). Conducting the revised liturgy in the native tongue of the laity was considered as having 'the greatest promise for realizing [Raymond] Williams' call for a cultural community where every citizen is both member and an active personal agent.' This more than analogy between literature and culture follows directly from the understanding of language we have just been considering. Just as liturgy brings us into contact with each other and with God in the sacramental nature of the mass, literature also brings us into contact with each other and with God in the act of reading. Here, we discover the reverse of Prynne's cancelled wish-clause: 'as if that could ever turn to/ *wine* or raise *bread*, from the sad shit it/ is...' Wickers insists that liturgy and culture mean being with each other in the most straightforward possible way, adapting Raymond Williams' axiom that 'Culture is ordinary' by arguing that 'The ordinariness of liturgy and the ordinariness of culture are, indeed, two aspects of the same thing: a commitment to the belief that the communal aspect of human existence extends beyond the animal and material level and comprehends the intellectual and spiritual as

well' (1.1, 11). For the writers of *Slant*, the catholic liturgy's 'turn' to bread and wine is a commitment to the communal aspect of human existence which hopes to overcome 'The basic inequality of material possession... [which] creates a whole superstructure of inequality, distinction, privilege and exploitation in common social life; men come to see themselves as private beings, proprietors of their own existence, finding individual definition in opposition to, rather than through, others (*Slant Manifesto* 24).' In other words, the liturgy is seen as both the model and the fulfilment of community.

The possibilities which the reformed liturgy offered for thinking about community are central to *Slant's* radical project. However, those involved in the publication of *Slant* were aware that the liturgical community could not remain within the physical walls of the church. 'The community we create liturgically is pointless unless it is continually reaching beyond itself, extending to bring in all creation. The liturgy, then, is a political force—a force constantly working to transform human society into its own, communal image' (*Slant Manifesto* 13). Increasingly this hoped for transformation is not to be achieved through attendance at mass but through the creation of 'a society where the genuine personal openness which the experience of culture can provide has been generalized to the level of a whole way of life.'

Has literature then already been defined in the foregoing discussion of language, and of liturgy? Does *Slant* have a poetics? If by that term, one means a separate linguistic category and status for poetry and literature then one would have to conclude no: 'The arts'—the *Slant Manifesto* makes clear—'offer a prototype for feelings and values and kinds of relatedness, as the liturgy does—and like the liturgy they cannot be seen as existing in themselves, but only as transforming forces in society' (*Slant Manifesto*, 33). As a result, literature has no special, autonomous status but is, as Eagleton puts it:

one means of effecting the redemption, of finding a true relation to reality which overcomes alienation without slipping into empathy: and its parallel in daily work, is socialism, this finding of this same relationship through work. Capitalism is a false relationship to reality' (1.3, 28-9).

Here continuity between language and presence, language and being with, and language and writing or reading is won at the cost of the autonomy of the art-object. However, in this, perhaps, lies its strength.

In insisting on the continuities between speaking, being with and writing, *Slant* was aware that the position of the arts is at risk of being marginalised: 'the arts become sideshows under capitalism because a utilitarian philosophy assumes that they have nothing 'to do with the real business of living, the business of acquisition' (*Slant Manifesto*, 32). By insisting on a central place

for art in the struggle to ‘shape’ and ‘reach’ readers, the attempt to think a specifically catholic poetics in fact required a radical conception of literature as redemptive, which *Slant*, as a collection of critics, theologians and priests, rather than writers, could only point towards.

However, there is a hint of what poetry growing out of this set of beliefs about language might look like in the peculiar collisions present in Eagleton’s response to Prynne’s *Kitchen Poems* (*Stand* 10.1, 72-3). Eagleton recognises Prynne’s poems as ‘a new kind of political poetry which attempts to expose the spiritual structure of neo-capitalism—almost its ontology—by meditations on a group of key images (want, need, consumption, power) which permit an absorbing interplay of poetic-philosophical insight with the realities of a socio-economic system of power (*Stand* 10.1, 72). The value of such insights could not be lost on one of the founding members of *Slant*. However, when it comes to style, Eagleton and Prynne must part ways. ‘Jeremy Prynne’s *Kitchen Poems* probably aren’t intended to be ironically titled’, Eagleton writes:

but anything less humbly domestic than this deeply esoteric and intellectualist dissection of the metaphysics of capitalism, done in an aridly unruffled Black Mountain style filtered through the thin and occasionally pedantic tones of English academicism, would be hard to find (*Stand*, 10.1, 73).

For Eagleton, Prynne’s images are ‘desperately privatized and oblique’, and specialist ‘to the point where imagery threatens to manipulate rather than sustain argument’ (*Stand*, 10.1, 73). He takes further issue with the italicizations of words, and the use of personal pronouns to unite ‘we’ and ‘us’ which assert a relationship between speaker and auditor which is rendered inert by the rest of Prynne’s style. For Eagleton, poetry—like culture, language and liturgy—is ordinary. Prynne is linguistically completely ‘competent’. However, ‘he just doesn’t (for this critic anyway) manage to *communicate*’ [italics mine] (*Stand*, 10.1, 73).

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