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‘Sunlit Now, We See the Devastation’: Apocalyptic Themes in Michael Symmons Roberts’ *Drysalter*

Patrick Ian Wright

Metaphysical inquiry into matters of religion is central to Michael Symmons Roberts’ poems. This is most apparent in his collection *Drysalter* (2013). Here, Roberts engages with long-held theological debates on the existence of the soul, God as the foundation of meaning, and how the divine reveals itself. *Drysalter* is also unified through the formal constraint of 150 poems of 15 lines. The 15 lines are ‘super-sonnets’ as Kate Kellaway calls them; and the 150 suggests a dialogue between Roberts’ book and the Psalms, as noted by Victoria Mackenzie.¹ Though constrained within the 15 lines, the arrangement of lines and stanzas appears to shift perpetually or fragment into new configurations – three stanzas of five lines, five stanzas of three lines, seven couplets with a lone final line, and so forth – as though representing different ways of finding the sacred within the flux of the modern world. While the persistence of the sacred is invoked by the 15 lines, in a structure that represents the Psalms, it is never stable or predictable. We can impose order on chaos, though never indefinitely; soon it will need to be re-configured; and in Roberts’ book, a straightjacket (of form in this case) is all the more necessary if an impulse exists to fall apart.

I intend to argue that the poems in Roberts’ *Drysalter* present a re-organisation of the sacred. I will understand the sacred, within the context of this discussion, as the revelation of God in the world. Given that Roberts is writing in what he understands as a ‘post-secular’ age, the presence of the sacred is intimated in his poems; though it is dispersed, non-hierarchical, immanent. Roberts presents a post-Enlightenment world that is already ruined, where the laws that, in earlier times, regulated the sacred are in a state of disintegration. In such a world the sacred has not disappeared; instead it imbues what we might have considered to be its opposite: the profane. Rather than a future-orientated Parousia or Second Coming, Roberts imagines the sacred as inhabiting the realm of everyday things, the mundane and the familiar. When the sacred comes to light, it can be read in terms of apocalypse: meaning, for my purposes here, spiritual revelation. However, some of Roberts’ poems are also meant to evoke – as I will illustrate – more cataclysmic associations of the word in the minds of contemporary readers.

My understanding of the sacred in Roberts’ poetry deconstructs the more traditional (binary) opposition with the profane. Furthermore, it is original in situating Roberts’ *Drysalter* in a theological and theoretical context that has, thus far, not been given enough scholarly attention. By reading his collection through the lens of the sacred, my purpose is to show that, though there is undoubtedly an apocalyptic aspect to Roberts’ writing (one which reveals the subject’s condition as fallen, abject and without transcendence), his poems are in no way nihilistic. They offer us moments where the sacred might disclose itself, where meaning and a re-enchantment of the world are reaffirmed.

I will examine these ideas and my focus on the sacred by analysing key poems from *Drysalter*; ones which, in the words of Roberts, approach the sacred by ‘[writing] into and around the gaps, the fractures, the silence’.²

¹ Kate Kellaway, ‘*Drysalter* by Michael Symmons Roberts – review’, *The Observer*, 22 April 2013 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/apr/22/drysalter-michael-symmons-roberts-review>> [accessed on 18 December 2019]; Victoria Mackenzie, ‘*Drysalter* by Michael Symmons Roberts’, *New Welsh Review*, 102 (2013) <<https://www.newwelshreview.com/article.php?id=708>> [accessed on 18 December 2019].

² Michael Symmons Roberts, ‘Poetry in a Post-Secular Age’, *Poetry Review: Psycho-Geographies*, 99.1 (2001), 69–75 (p. 74).

A range of thinkers including Jürgen Habermas and Aleksandr Morozov have suggested that the present age (from the start of the twenty-first century) is one of post-secularism. They, along with philosophers such as Philip Blond, have argued, in Roberts' words, that 'the project of relativism has failed', 'Christianity and Islam are growing very rapidly throughout the developing world', and now, in response, a new dialogue is possible between the spheres of faith and reason.³ Indeed, even though some affluent regions of the Western world have passed through a phase of secularisation, Habermas believes that 'global changes and the visible conflicts that flare up in connection with religious issues give us reason to doubt whether the relevance of religion has waned.'⁴

Though this perception is contentious for many, Roberts aligns himself with it, and has written on the status of poetry in these present times. For him, terminology is one issue that immediately problematises such works. He explores David Jones' reference to the word *religio*, which, following the etymology, Jones relates to the word 'ligament', as 'a binding' but also one that 'secures with a freedom to function'.⁵ In endorsing this reading, Roberts has religion play a ubiquitous role in *Drysalter*, one that articulates the human need for the sacred in fragmented times. He also takes issue with the use of the adjective 'religious' to define certain poetry, and with its words such as 'sacred' and 'spiritual'. In doing so, he supports T. S. Eliot's view that religious poetry should treat the whole subject of poetry in a religious spirit, rather than confine it to particular themes.⁶ Due to what is suggested here – that so-called 'religious' poetry can be restrictive – I share Roberts' unease with such terms, and, at the same time, see potential in reading *Drysalter* as representing the sacred as defined more theoretically. Indeed, if Roberts is regarded as a 'religious poet in a secular age', the term 'religious' needs to be qualified.⁷

One important poem that develops the ideas above is 'Fragments into World' (the companion piece to the opening poem). In this, Roberts proposes that even if it is possible, once 'Sunlit now, we see the devastation', to console ourselves with a narrative or semblance of purpose, we dare not 'sing a note, dig in a heel' of rootedness and/or foundations.⁸ It is possible to read these lines as Roberts' awareness of the precariousness of faith in the present age. Though he is a believer, he is cognisant that the post-secular does not equate to a return to a pre-modern or modern forms of belief. He seems aware that the present age is one where solid grounds or foundations are in perpetual doubt, where many of us have lost touch with the sacred:

A note resolves, hum becomes chime,
the floor stirs and broken moon is combed
from shattered sun in utter darkness.

Then like wrong rain it falls up, gathers in the sky.⁹

³ Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Contemporary Poetry and Belief', in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, ed. by Peter Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 694–706 (pp. 694–95). See also *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology*, ed. by Philip Blond (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁴ See Jürgen Habermas 'Secularism's Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society', *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 25 (2008), 17–29 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5842.2008.01017.x>>; and Aleksandr Morozov, 'Has the Postsecular Age Begun?', *Religion, State & Society*, 36 (2008), 39–44 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09637490701809696>>.

⁵ Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', p. 72; cf. David Jones, 'Art and Sacrament', in *Epoch and Artist*, ed. by Harman Grisewood (London: Faber, 1959), 143–79.

⁶ Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', p. 71; cf. T.S. Eliot, 'Religion and Literature', in *Essays Ancient and Modern*, ed. by T. S. Eliot (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1932), 92–115 (p. 96).

⁷ Jeanette Winterson, quoted in Miguel Cullen, "'Philosophy Undermined My Atheism'", *Catholic Herald*, 25 June 2010 <<https://catholicherald.co.uk/news/2010/06/25/philosophy-undermined-my-atheism/>> [accessed on 11 February 2020].

⁸ Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Fragments into World', *Drysalter* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), p. 152.

⁹ Symmons Roberts, 'Fragments into World', p. 152.

This acknowledges the legacy of postmodernism and its critique of God as the anchoring point of the sacred — begun, arguably, by thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. Roberts recognises the uncertainty and groundlessness that has resulted from their ideas and modernity as a whole, while offering hope of re-finding the sacred or re-enchanting the world, as Heidegger suggested poets were responsible for in his essay ‘What Are Poets For?’¹⁰ Roberts is, then, implicitly responding to the danger of nihilism. Whilst sceptical of a metaphysical basis for belief, his poems in *Drysalter* suggest the sacred can still be found in ‘the gaps, the fractures, the silence,’ through the quotidian and commonplace.¹¹ This, in turn, suggests a postmodern theology where a connection with the divine is possible; but this takes place ‘in people or places that are overlooked, marginal places, unwatched, unheralded,’ or through interactions with culture and technology.¹² In his poem ‘Hymn to a Photo Booth’, for example, the human ‘soul’ is relegated to the same level as a machine, and (while seeing through the booth’s eyes) any essence of the self is evacuated in place of ‘a bone-fuse or knuckle in your neck’ and a face ‘as wintry landscape.’¹³ This machine, with its ‘*All-seeing-I*’, supplants the place of God, re-configuring the sacred as a disturbing insight into the limits of selfhood.

In Roberts’ *Drysalter* the sacred has no locus: it is vague, felt round the edges of things; it re-enchants that which has become deadened, banal, or emptied of value. It is re-organised, dispersed around the Möbius loop of death and desire, suffused in the midst of everyday life. Thus, if there is a resurrection of meaning in a world where traditional prayers go unanswered, Roberts implies this occurs at the level of language, of poetry itself. In his poem ‘To Listen’, as a case in point, ‘parts of speech / – lost to us in sleep – are found again / in rain outside’; ‘Prayer ... speaks / itself (on skylights, roofs of cars, / on nodding leaves).’¹⁴ Rather than being celestial, then, the sacred is communed with through the concrete and corporeal. And this, for Roberts, is a way of counteracting the secularised condition of present-day language, ‘drained of significance’, citing Jones again.¹⁵ This impoverishment is of concern for Roberts, particularly the banality of signs in contemporary culture, ones which fail to address the vacuum of transcendence.¹⁶ Such concern is apparent, too, in his collection *Mancunia*, where the question of value recurs throughout the poems and comes to be projected on the urban sprawl. Here, the sacred appears in the degradation of Roberts’ real and imagined city.¹⁷

One distinction is offered by Lucy Tatman, for whom ‘Religion’ indicates the institutionalised and organisational form of the sacred. In fact, the sacred is for Tatman both the foundation of Religion *and* the (sacrilegious) bane of its existence, since it threatens to transgress the interdictions laid out in scripture. If Religion is patriarchal and rooted within history, the sacred is timeless, personal, and accessible

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, ‘What are Poets For?’, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by A. Hofstadter (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1971), 91–142.

¹¹ Symmons Roberts, ‘Poetry in a Post-Secular Age’, p. 74. On Roberts’ faith, see also Cullen’s “‘Philosophy Undermined My Atheism’”, *Catholic Herald*, 25 June 2010 <<https://catholicherald.co.uk/news/2010/06/25/philosophy-undermined-my-atheism/>> [accessed on 18 December 2019].

¹² Michael Symmons Roberts, in David Fuller, “‘Raising Sparks’: An Interview with Michael Symmons Roberts”, in *The Recovery of Beauty: Arts, Culture, Medicine*, ed. by Corrine Saunders, Jane Macnaughton and David Fuller (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 129–149 (p. 130).

¹³ Roberts, ‘Hymn to a Photo Booth’, *Drysalter*, p. 7.

¹⁴ Roberts, ‘To Listen’, *Drysalter*, p. 21.

¹⁵ Roberts, ‘Poetry in a Post-Secular Age’, p. 74.

¹⁶ See Julia Kristeva, ‘Of Word and Flesh, An Interview with Julia Kristeva by Charles Penwarden’, in *Rites of Passage: Art for the End of the Century*, ed. by Stuart Morgan and Frances Morris (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1995), 21–27.

¹⁷ Michael Symmons Roberts, *Mancunia* (London: Cape Poetry, 2017).

even in the most secular of surroundings.¹⁸ Furthermore, one ought to recall that the Latin word *sacer* originally meant both blessed and accursed. And this is another reason to read Roberts' *Drysalter* as re-organising the sacred (rather than as conventionally 'religious'): when the sacred is evoked it is not always ameliorating or consoling; it may actually be diminishing. In his 'Hymn to a Roller Coaster' for instance, 'humans' are little more than 'crash-test dummies', finding transient release from the monotony of their everyday lives, nothing more than tawdry modes of elevation as they are 'stretched between darkness and light'.¹⁹ Likewise, it is arguable that Roberts (in contrast to Habermas) is anti-Enlightenment in his scepticism of the credo that, one day, the truth will become clear. In 'Through a Glass Darkly', belief in an ever-clarifying mirror, in which knowledge of oneself and/or God will ultimately present itself, is thrown into doubt:

Forensic summer gone, now we
live in close-up: flaked face of brick

frostbitten, verdigris and icicles
on statues. A world drawn tight.

Look up: stars are gone. It's just us.²⁰

The poem suggests that truth is not only impossible, it is not even desirable. Roberts knows that the 'forensic summer' of belief in Reason to enlighten us has passed, as has the reassurance of the cosmos as providing order: 'the stars are gone'. What humans are left with is the realisation that 'mist can be a form of mercy', where the encounter with the sacred (and it *does* come and he 'prays' for it) emerges out of the murk and imprecision of sight – literal and metaphorical. Likewise, as we see in 'Jetsam', the sacred object, once raised from the depths, is by no means majestic; instead it is monstrous and debased:

close-up, it turns velveteen, its shape
plumped out by unseen ribs and spine, a full tail
ploughed into the sand, a fly-blown mound

with gashes in each side from gull-beaks
and the spray, yet though they look and poke
the locals cannot find its eyes, *cannot*.²¹

The starting point for Roberts is the recognition that the world is broken. In 'World into Fragments', for example, the ultimate fate of the Earth is unceremoniously addressed; a statement of intent and synecdochical of a foreboding aspect that haunts the book. Here, all has become precarious, fragile; all is in a state of disintegration (opposed to *religare*), where 'plate windows shiver into diamonds / smoked office towers fold into tobacco heaps'.²² This cosmological, seer-like epiphany is one which reveals the shadows of Plato's cave as precisely that, even if Roberts resists the idea of transcendent

¹⁸ Lucy Tatman, 'Blasphemous Thoughts', *Theology and Sexuality*, 11.1 (2004), 64–71 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/135583580401100106>>.

¹⁹ Roberts, 'Hymn to a Roller Coaster', *Drysalter*, p. 80.

²⁰ Roberts, 'Through a Glass Darkly', *Drysalter*, p. 31.

²¹ Roberts, 'Jetsam', *Drysalter*, p. 132.

²² Roberts, 'World into Fragments', *Drysalter*, p. 3.

forms. Herein lies the revelation; but it is not, strictly speaking, an apocalyptic one, since, in place of the promise of the Kingdom of Heaven, we are left with the partial and sublime consolation of seeing beyond illusions, seeing 'for real, as if through mud and spit.'²³ 'World into Fragments' envisions a post-future, post-apocalyptic scene. It attests to the inevitable entropy of human-composed order. His molossus technique ('Small breaks first') sounds like a pick-axe chiselling at the arrangement of things: what our anthropomorphic drive for synthesis keeps us in denial of. Roberts writes that 'Reasons for this shattering include too great a tension', which recalls W. B. Yeats' 'Second Coming', where the imagery and themes are precursors of Roberts' own. In Roberts' poem there is no hope of a new messiah, just a premonition of the Earth's end and the value of the *now*. Heaven is here, or nowhere, in a sacred 'lock of hair that mimes / your cheekbone's curve'.²⁴

If one takes apocalypse to mean revelation, then what is disclosed here, in *Drysalter*, is that the world is subject to the second law of thermodynamics: entropy. It is in a state of decay and by no means progressing. This anti-Hegelian insight is, for Roberts, the world's default mode, and it is the place of the poet, in the 'interesting times' in which we live, to not only bring attention to this fact, but also, in partial and ephemeral ways, as religion can, to help us transcend our state of abjection.²⁵ One poem that sets out the entropic and non-progressive vision of history is the second of Roberts' 'Something and Nothing' poems, where the 'world' is compared to a 'bruised fruit, a-buzz with what you take / for wasps but is in truth all human life', characterised too by 'a metronomic churn of births and deaths'.²⁶ In similar fashion, in 'Portrait of the Psalmist as an Old Man', 'History' is referred to as 'blind currents that ruck up empires, eras, / squall them into heaps of leaves'.²⁷ On both a micro- and macrocosmic scale, the narrative of human advancement and perfectibility is blown through, and replaced with images of terminal decline, a slow spiral into (self-)destruction.

But it is important to distinguish such visions from millenarian or apocalyptic ones. As Lois Zamora expounds, entropy is 'an eschatological vision ... [of] a world moving toward its extinction inexorably and irreversibly.' Unlike the Judeo-Christian apocalypse, the end is not caused by man's action and God's reaction, but is 'produced by ... gradual loss of energy and differentiation.' The entropic vision, then, is without teleology and human or divine actions; it provides us only the more unsettling prospect of a physical world running out of energy. History is 'purposeful' only in that it moves towards heat death: the Earth as a cooling cinder, the sun as a black dwarf.²⁸ The result is, as Roberts reiterates through his collection, that rather than God's salvation occurring in the future, the present exudes everything of the sacred. And it is a sacred that is re-distributed, scattered throughout the profane landscapes of capitalism and its reified remains, glinting through its gaps or fractures.

As I implied at the beginning, the more conventional dichotomy of the sacred and profane is not easy to maintain when reading *Drysalter*. The sacred is certainly there, and yet it appears within the profane; it seeps out of the most broken things, the most detrital surroundings. Roberts finds the inviolable quality of the human – the possibility of the soul, perhaps? – paradoxically in the very fact of inevitable death, that prescience of our passing offers the chance of seeing life's preciousness in the here and now:

²³ Roberts, 'World into Fragments', *Drysalter*, p. 3. Cf. *The Bible*, John 9:6.

²⁴ Roberts, 'In Praise of Now', *Drysalter*, p. 118.

²⁵ Roberts, 'Poetry in a Post-Secular Age', p. 69.

²⁶ Roberts, 'Something and Nothing', *Drysalter*, p. 13.

²⁷ Roberts, 'Portrait of the Psalmist as an Old Man', *Drysalter*, p. 16.

²⁸ Lois P. Zamora, 'Apocalypse', in *Dictionary of Literary Themes and Motifs*, I: A–J, ed. by Jean-Charles Seigneuret (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1988), 87–97 (p. 96).

We know more:
 that such beautiful distress – a stone
 wall turned to mud and straw –

 will be mirrored in our own,
 that mountains will give way to snow,
 that light will look through us again.²⁹

Like Derek Mahon placing things like mushrooms and hubcaps at the same level as that of the human (or rather the lacuna left by the absence of a human essence), Roberts' poems seem to arrange a non-hierarchical universe.³⁰ This levelling, of the supposed pre-eminence of humanity, is in some ways politically important – in response, for instance, to the despoiling of the world by human activity. While the inanimate objects are anthropomorphised ('rows of robot arms'³¹), and the 'sheer beauty of machines' is celebrated, the human is demoted to a subject of pure contingency, one which faces its finitude. In fact, the fallenness of the human, where paradise is 'an old zoo / abandoned by its keepers', is affirmed throughout Roberts' collection, compressing time into the present, where the last things are undeniably now, and where immanence is the reward.

This is noticeable too in Roberts' book *Edgelands* (co-authored with Paul Farley), where the sacred is found in forgotten and abandoned places between cities.³² In the gaps, the interstices of retail parks and landfill sites, are the places set apart (the etymological root of *sacer*) in an age of the visible and commodifiable. Indeed, today it is precisely in places of the unsellable and the clandestine where modern forms of the sacred reside. This is illustrated in the first of the 'From the Dead' poems where the only revelation, which comes as a result of the 'votive offerings' of the 'people of the scrub and waste', are 'sunken supermarket trolleys, / bikes and breeze-blocks, / drinks cans and coins', the sacred immanent in the most devalued of man-made things; ruins re-surfacing not at the end of days, but in the now; Roberts staging for us the limit of transcendence for the common man or woman, one who is nevertheless living in hope, perhaps even faith.³³ Moreover, if there is something to save in all this, it is the Earth itself, with Roberts' forewarning brought down to ground level and impending ecological disaster. His poem 'In Case of Apocalypse' is a case in point, where the sacred is identified in places that today (but maybe less so in the future) are either invisible or considered worthless:

In such backwaters, our world's *plan b*
 ferments, rough alchemy in sodden soil:
 mud-skippers, whirligigs, china-mark moths.³⁴

In a comparable way, his series of hymns, such as 'Hymn to a Tolbooth', rediscover the sacred and reimagine it within the very spectacle of capitalism. Such hymns seem to attest to a human desire for correspondence with God, whose deferral is painfully felt in the most ready-to-hand objects, in junk and paraphernalia – on a ghost train, a Northern pier, in retreats of ersatz transcendence. In the case above,

²⁹ Roberts, 'In Praise of Flaking Walls', *Drysalter*, p. 117.

³⁰ See Derek Mahon, *New Collected Poems* (Oldcastle, County Meath: The Gallery Press, 2011), pp. 76, 81.

³¹ Roberts, 'Hymn to a Car Factory', *Drysalter*, p. 101.

³² Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, *Edgelands* (London: Vintage Books, 2012).

³³ Roberts, 'From the Dead', *Drysalter*, p. 134.

³⁴ Roberts, 'In Case of Apocalypse', *Drysalter*, p. 100.

'She', the 'tolbooth' (presumably a metaphor for God), 'has my coins but still the bar stays down.'³⁵ In these devotional sonnets, Roberts conveys a profound need for intimacy with the divine, though the narrator is met with silence or frustration, while the profane/sacred dualism is collapsed. This can be noticed at the level of diction and syntax, where the secular and religious are deliberately juxtaposed. For instance, in his 'Hymn to a Roller Coaster', 'litany' and 'darkness and light' occur in close proximity to modern machinery, the down-to-earth, either useful or outmoded. In finding the sacred indwelling in the most prosaic of places, Roberts makes its ubiquity all the more convincing – its *différance* and trace – as opposed to any future-orientated Parousia.

If Roberts' *Drysalter* re-organises the sacred (and, with it, a post-secular theology), it is one that has traversed the postmodern critique of metaphysics. The sacred, as it is sought, has no essence, nor does it indicate the promise of eschatological transcendence. It is certainly redemptive, though. In Roberts' paeans to karaoke booths and such like, there is an uncanny joy; and meaning (which can in an age of materiality easily become atrophied) is rejuvenated with tragic affirmation. Just as we are impelled in 'Automatic Soothsayer Booth', 'don't invest in futures and remember life is fun'.³⁶ All this, I conclude, follows in the wake of nihilism, which is one post-Enlightenment position to take up once the idea of ultimate transcendence has been foreclosed. Indeed, Roberts' poems are, it could be argued, re-enchantments of a world left to us by Heidegger, for whom poetry is a mode of sublimating the *abgrund* (groundlessness) of a 'destitute time', a time of the absence (or 'default') of God where 'divine radiance has become extinguished in the world's history'.³⁷ Perhaps Roberts' poems manage, if not to reinstate a transcendental signifier, then at least to suffuse signs, even their referents, with a sacredness that Heidegger had anticipated; and to permeate the world, as fallen and sundered as it is, with the sacred is to disperse any possible transcendence, through the wreckage of what we are now the inheritors of.

³⁵ Roberts, 'Hymn to a Tolbooth', *Drysalter*, p. 37.

³⁶ Roberts, 'Automatic Soothsayer Booth', *Drysalter*, p. 139.

³⁷ Heidegger, 'What are Poets For?', p. 91.

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