

Theological and literary analysis of endo's silence



Shusaku Endo's *Silence* follows the experience of the young Catholic missionary Father Rodrigues and his companion Father Garrpe in their attempt to help the brutally oppressed Christians of 17th century Japan. As a 20th-century novel, *Silence* presents readers with a historically accurate yet captivating account of the harsh realities of both 17th century Japanese society and Catholic missionary work. However, the true genius within *Silence* is the religious and spiritual introspection which it inspires. By following the deeply personal theological struggles of Father Rodrigues we as readers are forced to face the same existential questions and moral dilemmas facing him.

Silence can, and has been analyzed in various ways through the years. To truly grasp the full aesthetic power of the work, readers must examine it as both a work of literature and theology. As a work of literature, *Silence* is considered a masterpiece by many for a number of reasons. However few acknowledge one of the significant literary accomplishments of the book: Endo not only perfects the Catholic modernist literary aesthetic, he expands and further modernizes it. Furthermore, as a work of theology *Silence* raises many interesting points and questions, particularly about the meaning of sacrifice. In many ways, Father Rodrigues's decision to apostatize is congruent with the "transcendence of sacrifice" as described by Jill Robbins. In this essay we will look at both these aspects of the work.

In the early 20th century, much of Europe experienced what was known as the Catholic Literary Revival. During this period many writers including Graham Greene, Francois Mauriac and Flannery O'Connor found success by utilizing what became known as the Catholic aesthetic. Yoshihiko Yoshimitsu,

an influential teacher of Endo, was also familiar with this aesthetic and helped introduce it to him. The writer David Lodge identifies four key attributes of this Catholic aesthetic namely, “ the idea of the sinner at the heart of Christianity, the doctrine of mystical substitution, the implied criticism of materialism, and the tireless pursuit of the erring soul by God” (Bosco 81). Endo read much of the work by the Catholic writers and spent time in France studying this particular aesthetic. Endo’s work evidently paid off as he wrote *Silence*, what many including Graham Greene consider to be one of the greatest works of the Catholic literary aesthetic. Mark Bosco, in his essay “ Charting Endo’s Catholic Literary Aesthetic” examines why this is this case. *Silence* manifests each of these four key attributes. As Bosco points out, the story revolves primarily around the characters of Rodrigues and Kichijiro, both of whom in the end have apostatized yet are capable of finding a sense of salvation despite their sins. They are sinners, but they are at the center of the story in accordance with the literary aesthetic. Similarly, Rodrigues apostasy can be viewed as a “ mystical substitution”. Bosco contends that his apostasy is ...” an act of love that mystically substitutes his own righteousness for those being tortured for his sake” (Bosco 82). The “ tireless pursuit of the erring soul” is also evident in *Silence* in the character of Kichijiro who despite his continuous faltering continues to come back to the faith. As Bosco puts it, “...even in one’s freedom to disavow God or a divine agency, this God continues to pursue the soul” (Bosco 83).

While Endo’s novel masterfully epitomizes the essence of the Catholic aesthetic, it also expands upon it. Endo successfully integrates the fundamental aspects of the Catholic literary aesthetic with an authentic

representation of Japanese culture and society. Japan is not only geographically different from Catholic Europe, it is politically, culturally and religiously different as well and yet Endo himself and Rodrigues in the book, are capable of ultimately reconciling these things with their own sense of Catholic faith. This in turn transforms the Catholic literary aesthetic and the theology associated with it from a distinctly European movement into a global one. The global sense of Catholicism conveyed in *Silence* in which meaningful contributions can be made to Catholic literature and theology from outside Europe, in strange places like Japan, helps to bring the aesthetic into a modern context. As Bosco puts it, " *Silence* forces one to relinquish any rationalized and distorted faith in order encounter the image of God in unlikely places, and among unlikely people" (Bosco 90). *Silence* also forces people to relinquish any preconceived western ideas of the ways in which the Catholic literary aesthetic can and can't be used. This is the literary beauty of the work. It internalizes and accepts the fundamental literary aspects of the Catholic literary aesthetic while also expanding it by bringing it to a more global and modern stage.

From a theological context, *Silence* offers a number of meaningful insights particularly about Christian sacrifice and suffering. Having Father Rodrigues apostatize to end the suffering of the Japanese peasants Endo makes us question what exactly it means to sacrifice and suffer for others. Traditional Catholic conceptions of sacrifice typically revolve around the idea of the glorious martyr. Father Rodrigues himself is transfixed on this idea of martyrdom. While in Japan he is constantly contemplating whether he will have the spiritual and physical resolve to die for his faith. Yet as we see

Rodrigues begins to become disillusioned with the idea of the glorious martyrdom after he witnesses the death of the two Japanese peasants who are crucified on the coast. He is struck by the meaninglessness of their deaths and the silence of God. Father Garrpe's death as well seems to be of little use as he fails to save any of the peasants who are thrown into the sea. Really the only sacrifices that we see that seem to make any difference are the various apostasies that occur. This notion is supported by the fact that when Rodrigues is going to trample on the fumie he allegedly hears the voice of Christ encouraging him to do so. In this case God is not silent.

What does Endo mean to suggest about Christian sacrifice and suffering by this? The article titled " Sacrifice" by Jill Robbins could be used to provide some answers. In this article, Robbins traces the origins of Christian sacrifice from the Old Testament to the New Testament. What she discovers is an apparent discrepancy between what is described as " the older sacrifice" and the understanding of sacrifice found in the New Testament manifested in the death of Christ. The older form of sacrifice typically found in the Old Testament is more associated with the sacrifice of animals and offerings. These offerings and sacrifices are finite and often meaningless, performed habitually. It is a markedly outward form of Christian sacrifice which has little to do with the internal mindset. The newer form of sacrifice is one which Robbins contends is characterized by a " transcendence of sacrifice". The sacrifices of the New Testament are more personal and infinite, with an emphasis on the inward attitude of the performer. As Robbins points out "... the West's discourse on sacrifice would seem to rest on a foundation in which sacrifice has been surmounted and gone beyond. This is the case with

the sacrifice of Christ, who according to the author of Hebrews, offered once and for all a single sacrifice for sins, as opposed to the priest who repeatedly offers the same meaningless sacrifices" (Robbins 288). Christ by dying for the sins of man has therefore ended the need for continual and repeated sacrifice. His life is irreplaceable and his sacrifice is therefore infinite. In many ways the conventional martyrdoms present in Endo's *Silence* could be comparable to this "older" form of sacrifice while the apostasy of Rodrigues is somewhat congruent with the newer understanding of sacrifice. The martyrdoms of the characters in *Silence* as well as the martyrdoms of real life are finite in the fact that their suffering, while potentially excruciating, is indeed momentary, physical, and to some extent desired. Like the sacrifices of the old days, these sacrifices are distinctly outward. The suffering and sacrifice inflicted on Father Rodrigues during and after his apostasy on the other hand, is neither momentary, physical, or desired. His reputation is gone and his faith is altered forever. He is now an outcast and a sinner. Yet because of this the sacrifice is infinite and transcendent like Christ's sacrifice. Their sacrifices performed to save others hinder and pain them forever but because of this the sacrifices can be seen as true sacrifice. As Christ was placed among the thieves and sinners so is Rodrigues. However this is precisely the theological point that Endo is attempting to make. True Christian sacrifice is achieved through suffering on an infinite, personal, and inward level not through simple habitual rituals or a glorified public death.

Endo's theological and literary achievements are unique in that they stem from the outside. His academic literary sense and his theological knowledge are based on European western ideals but retain a distinct outside

perspective and understanding that is only available to someone who knows both the outside and the inside. Endo felt displaced in Japan for being a Catholic and felt displaced in Christendom for being Japanese. Yet despite this or perhaps because of it, Endo was capable of developing his own literary techniques and theological perspective. Because he often felt uncomfortable due to his cultural, and religious differences as an outsider Endo, and Rodrigues in many ways, were forced to confront and reconcile with unpleasant realities. It is often the case in life that feelings of discomfort are the natural stimulus for change and reflection. Discomfort is very closely associated with displacement, whether it be geographic, cultural, spiritual, theological, emotional, or all the above. Yet these changes and time spent in reflection due to discomfort and displacement often lead us to our best selves in which we recognize the truths which were once obscure. This is evident in both the life of Endo and the character of Rodrigues in the fact that through their trials and struggles they both find a sense of personal and theological enlightenment. Sometimes these feelings of discomfort and subsequent self-discovery are entirely natural and unavoidable. Other times they can be intentionally invoked by moving outside one's comfort zone in a geographic, theological, or personal sense. Either way the challenges associated with discomfort and displacement should be embraced not ran away from. As we can see through both Endo and the character of Father Rodrigues, these struggles can lead to personal, spiritual and intellectual growth.