



Beyond the Threshold – Autobiography, Dialogic Interaction, and Conversion in Gerard Manley Hopkins’s and W. Abdullah Quilliam’s Poetry

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Abstract

The intertwinement of poetic life writing and theological reflections has a long-standing history in British literature. This paper shows how two Victorian poets – Gerard Manley Hopkins and W. Abdullah Quilliam – use dialogic strategies to establish an autobiographic voice, which becomes an essential poetic means of the text. Through the representation of dialogic encounters, the poems establish an autobiographic mode of speaking, which is used to articulate individual conversion experiences and to negotiate conversion as an encounter with God. Based on the works of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, I will show how a dynamic understanding of text and conversion experience is essential to a reading that seeks to explore the poetic construction of Hopkins’s as well as Quilliam’s works. The representation of the dynamic encounter of the self and the Divine in the contact zone of the text provides a frame in which the authors locate themselves with regard to the religious majority of Victorian Britain. The texts link the spiritual journey of conversion to the self as being caught in the world, responding to God’s call as an answer to the world’s condition.

Keywords: Autobiographic Poetry, Conversion, Gerard Manley Hopkins, W. Abdullah Quilliam

Zusammenfassung

Die Verflechtung von poetischem *Life Writing* und theologischen Reflektionen hat in der britischen Literatur eine langanhaltende Geschichte. Dieser Beitrag zeigt, wie zwei viktorianische Dichter – Gerard Manley Hopkins und W. Abdullah Quilliam – dialogische Strategien verwenden, um eine autobiographische Stimme zu etablieren, die zu einem wesentlichen poetischen Mittel des Texts avanciert. Durch die Darstellung dialogischer Begegnungen etablieren die Gedichte eine autobiographische Art des Sprechens, die dazu dient, individuelle Bekehrungserfahrungen zu artikulieren und die Bekehrung als eine Begegnung mit Gott zu verhandeln. Auf Grundlage der Werke von Martin Buber und Emmanuel Levinas wird dieser Beitrag zeigen, wie ein dynamisches Verständnis von Text und Bekehrungserfahrungen wesentlich für eine Lektüre ist, die versucht, die poetische Konstruktion sowohl von Hopkins' als auch von Quilliams Werken zu erforschen. Die Darstellung der dynamischen Begegnung des Selbst und des Göttlichen in der Kontaktzone des Texts bietet einen Rahmen, in dem sich die Autoren im Hinblick auf die religiöse Mehrheit des viktorianischen Großbritanniens verorten. Die Texte verbinden die spirituelle Reise der Bekehrung mit dem Selbst als eines, das in der Welt gefangen ist, und reagieren auf Gottes Ruf als eine Antwort auf den Zustand der Welt.

Schlüsselwörter: Gerard Manley Hopkins, W. Abdullah Quilliam, Religiöse Dichtung, Dialogische Literatur, Autobiographische Literatur, Selbstkonstruktion

Autobiography and religion can look back on a long-standing history: From texts that seek to testify to and promote the life and suffering of Jesus Christ to accounts of conversion like Augustinus's *Confesiones* or the lives of prophets and saints to serve as examples to be imitated, to name but a few topics from Christian writing. Yet, one cannot help but wonder why the sheer mass of texts from different religious traditions that are presented in an autobiographic voice have not found more attention in literary scholarship as well as theological discourses. Furthermore, scholarship is often solely focused on Christian texts, and yet, Buddhist, Jewish, or Muslim traditions have a quite different outlook on autobiography within a religious context. A differentiated analysis of these various religious traditions of life writing is surely one of the vital questions scholarship has to face in the future.

Prose writing as articulation of an autobiographic voice in a religious context is a genre we are quite familiar with: For centuries conversion tales, journals of soul

searching, and reflections on the author's spiritual development have been presented in literary form with a heavy focus on narrating the self as a religious I who analyses the relationship to God or the motivation for sinful deeds. Jens Schlamelcher puts it as follows:

From as early as the twelfth century, the investigation of one's conscience became one of the main preoccupations. Not the deed itself, but rather its motive had to be explored. From now on, the absolution of sins implied their willful repentance. [...] In Protestant theology, the absolution of one's sins was no longer possible. Thus, methods for rational self-control had to be developed in order to ensure their avoidance. This gave rise to diaries in which individuals would register even the smallest sins, in order to observe and confess to themselves their weaknesses, and to help them to become more pious and sincere. (Schlamelcher, 2019, 157)

Diaries become a medium to reflect on personal development and to present the self as constructed through literature to the public. The self is in the centre of the narrative focus and, yet, it is always connected to God. In the context of Abrahamic monotheism this implies a nullification of the self before the almighty God, a motif that Hopkins's poems often heavily emphasise.

Poetry as an autobiographic medium, on the other hand, has so far received far less attention than prose writing. Yet, especially when it comes to religious poetry the autobiographic mode of speaking in the works of Grace Aguilar, Cardinal John Henry Newman, Christina Rossetti, Hopkins or Quilliam, to name but very few, leaves us wondering how is obvious gap in research of religious poetry and autobiographic writing is to be explained.

The relationship between the poetic text and the poet's life is quite complex. All too often the speaker's literary *I* seems to invite an equation of the author's voice and the speaker's persona. And yet, autobiographic elements have informed, formed, and been used as a basis for works of literature throughout the centuries. This complex relationship is all the more crucial in poems which might not be categorised as autobiographic writing at first glance, such as Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' (Hopkins 1985, 12–24) or W. Abdullah Quilliam's 'A Vision of Paradise' (in Singleton 2009, 132–134).

Described as 'the dragon in the gate' by Hopkins's friend Robert Bridges (as quoted in Schneider 1966, 111), 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' unarguably remains at the core of the Hopkins canon, and although caution is advised when approaching complex and multi-layered works of literature with biographical details from the

poet's life, the poem has been convincingly analysed as a negotiation of Hopkins's own conversion to Catholicism, by Elisabeth Schneider among others. Schneider shows that the poem's two parts – a personal autobiographic setting on the one hand, and the actual shipwreck on the other – can be linked to different aspects of the conversion experience (Schneider 1966). However, I will show that the poem refuses to limit its voice to the two functions of autobiographic accounts outlined by Schlamelcher: *confessio* and *exemplum* (Schlamelcher, 2019, 159). Rather, Hopkins formulates an outcry to God from a perspective that is negotiated in an autobiographic mode. This outcry highlights the speaker's conflictual and yet constant interaction with God, in which life in this world becomes unthinkable without being embedded in an ongoing dialog between self and God.

For Quilliam the conversion to Islam represents the spiritual destination reached through constant development, so that his biography is inseparably intertwined with his poetic work. Here, private as well as professional life and literary articulation place the self in a relationship with God, and the poetic text becomes a means to explore this self-location in encounters with the sphere of the Divine.

Hopkins's poem links an autobiographic analysis of the poet's spiritual development to the clearly fictional, though at the same time historically accurate, account of the death of five Franciscan nuns on 7 December 1875. The poetic structure, as well as the poem's multi-layered network of relations on various levels, foreground dialogic encounters as a means of literary representation. In the first part, the text foregrounds the poet's emotional reaction to the shipwreck and his interpretation of the event. In addition to this, the poem embeds the autobiographic element of Hopkins's conversion to Catholicism in a complex and, as I will argue, dialogic relationship between the self and the text. Thus, the poet's life as told through the speaker persona is woven into a fictionalised narration of a historical event as a negotiation of the poet's conversion.

Quilliam's 'A Vision of Paradise' takes the conversion of the poet as a starting point from which to negotiate the long intellectual thought process which slowly leads to the re-location of the convert self. In the fictional setting of an artistic vision the speaker articulates a dynamic process of encounter with the Divine sphere as transition into the new faith. In a call and response scheme, God and speaker act and re-act while establishing a dialogic relationship. This relationship is the topic of the text and, at the same time, it makes the text itself a contact zone in which the dynamic network of the self-location of the convert can be represented (for a more detailed analysis of Quilliam's work cf. Kindermann 2019).

In the following, I am going to show that both texts make use of dialogic strategies to establish an autobiographic voice and that this voice governs the poems as a whole. In Hopkins's text these strategies are used to put forward the religious analysis of the shipwreck, which spreads from the first part of the poem into the second and influences, even dominates, the second part as well. In Quilliam's poem the autobiographic element of conversion is woven into a poetic vision of Paradise, which the speaker is granted through Divine grace. In this case, the conversion is an intellectual as well as spiritual process of encounter that negotiates the speaker's relationship to God and provides a clearly defined frame of reference for the poem to unfold the vision in an autobiographic mode of speaking. Both texts are directed at God, a mode of speaking quite common in religious autobiographic texts. 'God is addressed as a recipient – even though it was quite clear that these writings would address (also, if not mainly) – a human audience.' (Schlammelcher, 2019, 158-159) God as partner in dialogue is addressed through the medium of a human audience, or, as Martin Buber outlines: Every dialogic interaction with a Thou inevitably implies an interaction with the Divine Thou as 'a relation that gathers up and includes all others.' (Buber, 1958, 75-76) The dialogic mode of poetic representation is therefore a means of addressing God through the author's autobiographic voice.

It is nevertheless necessary to introduce my concept of dialogic interaction, which is based on the works of Buber and Emmanuel Lévinas. Building upon this, I will outline how each of the poems uses an autobiographic voice in the representation of the conversion experience. Herein, the autobiographic mode of speaking is not merely a facet of the text but crucial to its negotiation of religious identity. Speakers in both poems are able to provide an understanding of selfhood as narration that integrates the rupture of the conversion as a transition and, therefore, provides meaning to life-events. Encountering the other in dialogic openness is of vital importance and the speakers use these encounters as a poetic means, through which the otherwise inaccessible interaction between speaker and God is made accessible to literary representation. The texts themselves become dynamic spaces of interaction.

Encounters in dialogue

To understand how the poems can provide this dynamic space of interaction it is important to consider how the text in a religious frame becomes an agent that transcends a mere system of communication. In Abrahamic monotheism – Judaism, Christianity and Islam alike – the text is not a static entity frozen in a specific point in space and time. Rather, the text displays dynamic features that blur the line between

the sphere of the Divine and those engaged in text-study seeking to connect themselves to God through the text. From a Catholic perspective, the connection between the text and the world is a veiled one, as Kinereth Meyer and Rachel Deshen outline: 'For Christian hermeneutics, the language of Scripture is a veil, but that veil can be pierced or lifted to reveal full, essential meaning, because ultimate reality itself has become directly perceivable, knowable at least to some extent, through Incarnation' (Meyer and Deshen 2010, 13–14). And it is exactly this capability of the Holy Text to bring together conflicting elements in a polyvalent network, which is particularly interesting to an understanding of both poems with regard to autobiographic writing.

Encountering the Divine has to be understood as the central event for all three Abrahamic faiths. The revelation of God takes place through dialogic interaction, which manifests itself in God's call and Abraham's answer. As Avraham Heschel outlines, '[...] faith itself is an event, something that happens rather than something that is stored away; it is a moment in which the soul of man communes with the glory of God' (Heschel 1955, 138). Hence religious practice is a conscious act of contemplation, as well as an act of relating oneself to God as part of a dialogic process. Keeping the focus on events of faith and revelation in mind, it is easy to see how (auto-)biographic accounts play a central role in these three religions: Relating the self to God's revelation is part of an ongoing dialogic interaction that is placing the self located in the world before God, Who reveals the Divine Presence in history.

According to Buber, dialogue is first and foremost formed by the relationship of addresser and addressee, the *I* and the *Thou*. In these relationships, the speaker interacts with the other without objectifying the addressee. Speaking the *Thou* thus refrains from placing the other in the world of *It* – which is governed by knowledge, causality, time and space. Rather, such a mode of speaking elevates the other onto a level of direct encounter established in radical openness. 'If I face a human being as my *Thou*, and say the primary word *I-Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things' (Buber 1958, 8). To articulate the primary word *I-Thou* means to disengage from the world of *It*, the world of objectification, and, instead, establishes a connection which is not utilised to accommodate the self's needs and personal selfish aims. As addressing the *Thou*, according to Buber, implies addressing God, Buber's approach in terms of autobiographic self-construction goes way beyond *exemplo* and *confessio* as functions of autobiographic writing. Constructing the *I* through speaking the *I-Thou* stresses interaction and dialogue as crucial aspects of speaking/writing the self. It follows that life writing as constitution

of the I in relation to the Thou must be understood as a means of communication in a dialogic encounter with God.

Lévinas takes the concept of dialogic interaction one step further: dialogic encounter centres on the interaction with the other. Encountering the other now inevitably echoes the Torah's commandment *ahavta l'reacha kamocho* (Lev. 19,18), the commandment to love the other.¹ The face-to-face communication represents an open dialogic encounter in which the self is called to engage with the other, or, as Lévinas puts it, to serve the other: 'The surpassing of phenomenal or inward existence does not consist in receiving the recognition of the Other, but in offering him one's being. To be oneself is to express oneself, that is, already to serve the Other.' (Lévinas 1991, 183). In addition, the idea of face-to-face encounters inevitably evokes the relationship of Moses to God, as Moses is characterised as humble servant with whom God communicates *pe el pe*, from mouth to mouth, like with no one else: 'With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddle, and he beholds the likeness of the LORD' (Num. 12,8). For Lévinas the widow, the orphan, or the stranger essentially represent the other, as they call for the self's compassionate response. 'The accomplishing of the I qua I and morality constitute one sole and same process in being: morality comes to birth not in equality, but in the fact that infinite exigencies, that serving the poor, the widow, and the orphan, converge at one point of the universe' (idem, 245). In accord with the Divine commandment the *Antlitz*, the face, of other poses a question that can only be answered through a compassionate response. In this answer the speaker articulates his self in relationship *to* the other, as well as in awe and openness *towards* the other.

The presence of a being not entering into, but overflowing, the sphere of the same determines its 'status' as infinite. This overflowing is to be distinguished from the image of liquid overflowing a vessel, because this overflowing presence is effectuated as a position *in the face of* the same. The facing position, opposition par excellence, can be only as a moral summons. This movement proceeds from the other. (idem, 195–196)

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg characterises the encounter as fundamental human experience, which is deeply embedded in Holy Scripture: The self is called forth by the Divine I, the *anochi* (cf. Zornberg 1995, 28). Answering to the Divine revelation thus constitutes the human I in response to God's call, or, as the Israelites at Mount Sinai answered: *naase v'neshma*, we will do and we will listen (cf. Ex. 24,7). Based on this, the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai presents us with a fundamental situation

of an encounter as God reveals Himself to His addressee, the Jewish people. Any conversion experience, on the other hand, can be seen as a similar form of encounter in which God – whether in a violent rupture in the addressee’s biography or as result of a continuous process of introspection and soul-searching – poses a call to which the self answers and thus enters a dialogic encounter. Such strategies of responding dialogically in poetic representations will be discussed in the two poems. It will become clear how both texts use encounters on different levels to negotiate conversion as a process of establishing new relations with various worldly addressees as well as God through re-articulating the religious self.

‘O at lightning and lashed rod’ – the forceful construction of the convert self

Dialogic encounters are vital to the poetic construction in Hopkins’s poem ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ as a whole. The text is governed by interacting pairs which reveal themselves as intertwined in dynamic relationships: different wrecks – the actual ship and the poet’s spiritual journey; different models of conversion – a forceful Divine intervention and a slow process of reflection; and different modes of autobiographic writing – historically and spiritually motivated.

The poem takes up the dialogic situation in the very first stanza: ‘Thou mastering me / God! giver of breath and bread;’ (1,1–2). The speaker uses the Thou in Buber’s sense when he addresses God directly in radical openness, thus placing himself in an I-Thou relationship. This dialogic encounter manifests the self in relation to God as a response in which the speaker relates to God through an act that refrains from locating himself in the world of the It. The I is brought into being through God mastering the speaker. Here the speaker answers to the Divine call by ultimately bringing the self into a state of observance that accepts God’s ultimate reign.

In an intertextual reference to the creation narrative from Genesis, the first stanza then links this spiritual construction of the self to the physical assembly of the human body due to the Divine will: ‘Thou hast bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh’ (1,5). The second stanza highlights the responsive mode of the self even more and, at the same time, introduces the author’s conversion as a direct response to the condition of the world which is understood as a Divine call. ‘I did say yes / O at lightning and lashed rod; / Thou heardst me truer than tongue confess / Thy terror, O Christ, O God’ (2,1–4) The poem stresses violent aspects in the encounter with the God as forceful power to which the responsive mind can only yield. Yet, the mode of responsiveness, as outlined by Buber, is rooted in free will. Through this, the text

foregrounds the fundamental paradox of encounters with the Divine: The speaker is *free* to engage in the response to the Divine Thou. As Peter Milward explains, the first part mirrors the shipwreck of the second part: the poet's own wreck on the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ingatius of Loyola is put into an equivalent position with the tall nun's final cry.

There are two parallel wrecks in the poem. Both force dire spiritual and physical consequences on the stranded. [...] Both are providential in that each must make an 'election' regarding his salvation. Both end in God's mastery. Part the First deals with Hopkins's own 'wreck' on the *Spiritual Exercises*; Part the Second deals with the nuns' 'crash' in the wreck of the *Deutschland* [...]. (Milward 1994, 37)

The story of the shipwreck narrates a fundamental form of encounter with the Divine: From the horrors of the world the individual screams to God in response. Thus, the self relates to God and to the world in dialogic encounters, and, at the same time, proclaims God's presence in the world as well as His dominion over the world. The autobiographic reflections on the poet's conversion provide a second layer for the account of the shipwreck, as in both parts the relation between the suffering self and God is represented through dialogic processes. Following this, the spiritual strain of the convert self, the autobiographic speaker's pain in response to the nuns' death in the shipwreck, and the nuns' actual death jointly form forceful speech acts within the dialogic encounter between God and human addressee.

The *Deutschland* sets out from Bremen with five Franciscan nuns on board fleeing from Bismarck's anti-Catholic laws. The shipwreck near the English coast and the subsequent death of passengers and crew depict this world as a hostile place, after all, human cruelty and oppression are the reasons for the nuns to leave Prussia. The element of violence becomes even more prominent as, although the ship sank near the English coast, no help was sent. Oppression drives the nuns into a situation in which they are confronted with the forces of nature because in the stormy night, the ship hits a sandbank and is caught between the 'white-firey and whirlwind-swivelléd snow' (13,7) and the 'widow-making unchilding unfathering depths' (13,8). Nature's forces appear in stark opposition to nurturing aspects of the nature frame of reference, which is stressed through the contrast between childbirth as beginning of the natural circle of life and the 'unchilding unfathering' qualities of the sea that reverse the biological process. The sea thus undoes nature's course, which is further stressed through the fiery quality of the snow bringing together the opposites of cold and heat through the burning pain both cause to the human body. The crew's

attempts to save lives fail and only add to the horror of the scene: In plain view of the passengers the body of a dead sailor dangles from the ropes: 'They could tell him for hours, dandled the to and fro / Through the cobbled foam-fleece. What could he do / With the burl of the fountains of air, buck and the flood of wave?' (16,6–8) Human beings are isolated in a hostile world, and against the raging sea all hope is lost.

Confronted with the destructive forces in creation one of the nuns calls out to God: 'Night roared, with the heart-break hearing a heart-broke rabble, / The woman's wailing, the crying of child without check – / Till a lioness arose breasting the babble, / A prophetess towered in the tumult, a virginal tongue told.' (17,5–8) The depiction as a lioness links the nun not only to power and agency in nature, as the lion presents the reader with the picture of a strong and skilled predator as well as associations of kingship within nature. In addition, the lion is the symbol of the tribe of Judah and thus King David. Kingship is thus projected from the natural sphere onto the religious one. Both frames of reference are intertwined and focused within a Christian context: The Davidic line is exactly the one into which Jesus Christ was born. A connection which is further stressed through the number of the nuns: The five nuns are linked to the five wounds of Christ: 'Five! the finding and sake / And the cipher of suffering Christ.' (22,1–2). Thus, the death of the nuns is foregrounded as *imitatio dei*, as true imitation of Christ's example. Here the text constructs a context zone in which the sphere of the holy – the wounds of Christ – and the worldly – the actual shipwreck – overlap. This blurring of boundaries presents the speaker with a call to which his interpretation of the catastrophe formulates a response. As the Holy manifests itself within the secular, God is shown to be found even within the destructive forces of nature, even within the death of the righteous who suffer for their faith.

The tall nun is introduced in close proximity to the Divine sphere. In response to the violent conditions of the world she calls out to God, through which the suffering self in spiritual isolation is related to the dialogic process of call and response. The world itself is a Divine call, in answer to which she reaches out, not for rescue but only asking to be near. This call evokes companionship within the speaker who now declares his allegiance with the nun under the same Lord: 'Sister, a sister calling / A master, her master and mine! – ' (19,1–2) Through the call the nun and the speaker are intertwined. In distress and suffering both muster the courage to respond in a powerful articulation of the I-Thou relationship. The nun calls for no other reason than to experience the Thou in radical openness. Her suffering, along with the symbolism of the lion and the number five, links the tall nun to Christ even more so that her ordeal must be understood as *imitatio dei*: She follows Christ in suffering. On

the one hand, she addresses the suffering Christ as the other in Lévinas's sense of dialogic encounter. She does not call for selfish reasons or to provide for her own needs (not even her safety nor that of others) but for no other reason than to establish a relationship to the suffering other in Christ. On the other hand, she addresses the world through her suffering, calling for a response that acknowledges God's presence in the world. 'The poet depicts the tall nun answering the roaring night like a heroic lioness by proclaiming Christ – the Word – who gives meaning to the terrible human predicament' (Downes 1990, 47). As David Anthony Downes here stresses, her response to the world is a declaration of faith which seeks to proclaim glory and meaning within human suffering. 'She to the black-about air, to the breaker, the thickly / Falling flakes, to the throng that catches and quails / Was calling "O Christ, Christ, come quickly": / The cross to her she calls Christ to her, christens her wild-worst Best.' (24,5–8) Amidst the horrors of the world and helpless against the forces of nature, the nun becomes the universal suffering self, drowning in spiritual turmoil and is thus linked to the poet himself.

Following the nun's call, the scene on lake Genesareth is re-enacted: The self is caught in a storm and in need of reassurance to which Christ responds from the water (cf. John 6,18–21; Mark 6,48–51; Mat. 14,23–27). The text is polyvalent with regard to the factuality of the tall nun seeing Christ in similar fashion as the apostles initially mistake Christ for a spirit (Mat. 14,26): 'And they seeing him walk upon the sea, were troubled, saying: It is an apparition. And they cried out for fear.' Thus, it becomes obvious that questions of factuality are irrelevant in an event of faith. The actual reaction to Christ's presence in the world is, on the level of poetic representation, embedded into the uncertainty that makes it hard to distinguish the levels on which the event is taking place. The text then foregrounds this through a fragmented structure. 'But how shall I ... make me room there: / Reach me a ... Fancy, come faster – / Strike you the sight of it? look at it loom there, / thing that she ... there then! the Master, / *Iipse*, the only one, Christ, King, Head:' (28,1–5) This polyphony hints again at an intertwinement of different levels which is further stressed through the relation of the speaker and the tall nun. On a superficial level, it obviously ruptures poetic flow of the verses and mimics the situation on the sinking ship: chaotic screaming drowned by the storm. And yet, the uncertainty of the individual confronted with the Divine sphere being perceivable in nature forms another layer, as does the speaker's relation to the nun's fate, and his relation to God revealing Himself in the event which infuses his own poetic text.

This intertwinement becomes even more intense, as the utterance 'Ipse, the only one, Christ, King, Head' blends the nuns call onto the speaker's interpretation of the

event. Milward shows how this utterance makes the poet's voice heard within the text: 'At the very moment when the nun calls on Christ, the poet (like another Moses, in Exod. 34:6) – not the nun – calls on him as "Ipse, the only one, Christ, King, Head"' (Milward 1994, 30). Here the poem designs an encounter between the poet, the speaker, and his representation of the nun's call as the poet himself answers to the experience of the nun. The text itself here becomes a contact zone in which the speaker and the nun, the nun and Christ, the speaker and Christ, the speaker and his representation of an event of faith, as well as the poet and the Divine sphere in the text interact.

The poet's design of the text, the speaker's response to the shipwreck, and the nun's call when confronted with the forces of nature all are events of faith. These different events are intertwined and culminate in the speaker's praise of God. At first this is linked to the shipwreck, which is presented in a line with the Biblical narrative of the Great Flood: 'I admire thee, master of the tides, / Of the Yore-flood, of the year's fall' (32,1–2). But as the speaker turns to a universal praise of the Creator, the individual catastrophe is re-interpreted as an event of faith that has universal character. 'Now burn, new born to the world, / Double-naturéd name, / The heaven-flung, heart-fleshed, maiden-furled / Miracle-in-Mary-of-flame, / Mid-numberéd He in thee of the thunder-throne!' (34,1–5) This universal character then again makes it possible to associate the shipwreck as a singular destructive event in nature with the forceful conversion of St Paul. Confronted with a manifestation of Divine power within this world, the self is simultaneously shattered and reconstructed. To give rise to the new self-location of the convert, the old self is destroyed in a powerful intervention from the Divine sphere, which is then the grounds on which an expression of the new faith is developed.

A Glimpse at Heaven

W. Abdullah Quilliam – poet, lawyer, and founder of Britain's first mosque – converted to Islam in 1887.² In his poems, he presents his conversion as the outcome of a process of contemplation, as well as a gradual development of self and soul. In various texts, he blurs the line between literary text and prayer so that the autobiographic religious voice governs the poetic text. On the other hand, the poem also influences the self as the text constitutes a contact zone in which dialogic encounters are negotiated through which the self is defined. 'A Vision of Paradise', published in 1899, already foregrounds the element of encounter through its setting: The speaker is granted a glimpse into the Divine sphere of Paradise sitting at a

window. This moment of bliss is then formed into a poetic text as artistic vision. This vision then presents the speaker with a call to which he seeks an answer; it is this quest for an answer that brings about the re-location of the convert self. The manifestation of Divine power here does not take the shape of catastrophic events or destructive forces of nature. Rather, the poetic vision of Paradise triggers a contemplation which is finally able to articulate the I-Thou. On this basis, the ongoing process of conversion as re-construction of the religious self can unfold.

The speaker beholds the vision at the window, a threshold position that already hints at a crossing of boundaries. 'One eve as I sat at the casement, / And gazed out at the western sky.' (1–2) Similarly to the threshold of the window, the convert is positioned in a hybrid state on the boundary between two religious traditions. The different layers of hybridity linked by the poem – the convert as part of two worlds, the inside and the outside regarding the window, evening as between day and night – stress the position of the convert as part of both spheres: the cultural frame of the old religion as well as the newly acquired position within the new religion. The speaker's heightened perceptive openness is met by an opening of the Heavenly gates so that his eyes are able to see beyond the material world. 'It appeared as if angel fingers / Had thrown open the portals wide, / And given a glimpse of the glory / Of the shore on the other side.' (7–8) The poet-speaker beholds a scenery in the Divine sphere and forms it into an artistic expression of his personal experience. Yet, the personal character of this artistic vision is foregrounded through '[i]t appeared as if.'

Through the speaker's position, which signals openness towards the Divine Thou, the vision can be understood as an address which then again calls for a response from the speaker. Following Buber, such a response takes the form of encountering God in the world by clinging to the openness that makes addressing the Thou possible.

Men do not find God if they stay in the world. They do not find Him if they leave the world. He who goes out with his whole being to meet his Thou and carries to it all being that is in the world, finds Him who cannot be sought. (Buber 1958, 79)

In response to the Divine scenery unfolded before his eyes the speaker prays and thus relates to the Thou in dialogic interaction. 'I saw there a great throne all golden: / It shone with so brilliant a glare / That mine eyes grew dazed with beholding, / So, I faintly muttered a prayer.' (25–28) In prayer he establishes a link that constitutes a hybrid space between the worldly and the Heavenly sphere.

The presentation of the Divine sphere is influenced by literary and religious texts from different traditions, which mirrors the convert's hybrid position. Paradise is described as landscape which draws on the British Christian literary canon from John Bunyan's *The Pilgrims Progress* (1678) to pastoral poetry. 'I could see the high hills of glory / and the lovely valleys between' (11–12) The British tradition is intertwined with references to the Qur'an and the Muslim tradition such as the Lote tree or the Prophet's journey to heaven on the winged horse Al-Buraq. In this way, the British frame of reference encounters the sphere of Islam articulating a polyphonic discourse which mirrors the self-location of the poet in the process of conversion.

Towards the end, the text broadens the scope, so that the development from individual perception to self-location within the Muslim tradition finds its climax in a religious discourse centred on the righteous entering paradise. 'The portals of heaven are ever / Flung open at evening time. / That those then whose time is appointed / May cast on one side earthly ills. / And soar to the heavenly regions / And walk by those bright sparkling rills.' (35–40) The speaker locates himself in the community with a clearly defined goal: To access paradise not only in a poetic vision but through righteous deeds within the worldly sphere.

The poem reaches its climax when the speaker imagines the joyous entry of a true believer into paradise. Here different levels of encounter are again poetically blended onto each other. The believer entering paradise marks a transition from the worldly into the Heavenly sphere; the vision granted to the poet marks an encounter of God and individual, which has a strong impact on the poet's self-construction in conversion; the poetic representation relates the speaker's conversion experience to the community and thus locates himself within this fellowship of believers and, simultaneously, it proposes his conversion as example for others to follow. It is through these multi-layered narratives of encounter that the poem brings forth a conversion tale. At the window, a threshold position, at evening time, the time of transition from day to night, the speaker achieves a state of perceptive openness to being addressed. The readiness to perceive is then met by the Divine call in the poetic vision granted to the speaker. This encounter with God opens up a contact zone between the Divine and the secular sphere wherein the conversion to the new faith is negotiated. Finally, the speaker locates himself within the community of believers and makes his transition into the new faith available in the form of a literary text, which poses a call for others to follow his example.

Conclusion

Both texts use an intertwining of autobiographic conversion experience and religious self-location as the foundation to negotiate encounters with the Divine sphere. Through foregrounding a strong autobiographic voice both texts show how telling the self in a religious context is motivated by narration as speech act in a dialogic encounter with God. It thus becomes obvious that autobiographic writing is by no means tied to the secular sphere. Rather, religious articulation of the self draws heavily on telling the self as well as articulation the I to a Thou as a world-shaping interaction with the Divine presence.

Furthermore, the claim that autobiography is constitutively a-religious or a secular replacement for religion, has come under fire. The question of an autobiography's religious content not only finds answers on the level of content but must also take into account the positing of a relationship between self, world, and God. The taking of both of these levels as a point of departure has led to an interest in the religious dimension of biographical self-reflection. (Kuhn, 2019, 205)

In both texts being in the world means being in dialogue with God, so that every biographic detail is put into relation to the Divine Sphere.

The representation of the shipwreck in Hopkins's text constructs a dialogic interaction through call and response. The violent condition of the world is understood as God's call for action, for an act of faith that follows Christ in imitation. To the destructive environment the nun responds by evoking the suffering other and thus she engages in the dialogic encounter with the world as outlined by Lévinas. She articulates the I-Thou by explicitly addressing the Divine Thou in radical openness, demanding nothing more than to experience the Divine other. And exactly this happens in response to the nun's call for Christ's presence, which then again leads to the speaker's praise of God. In this series of dialogic actions, the text uses encounters to link different levels: the nun is related to Christ, and, at the same time, to the speaker. Through the autobiographic mode of the speaker's account, which is established in the first part of the text, this voice infiltrates the narration in the second part. The text broadens dialogic encounter up to a degree that the shipwreck becomes a universal event of faith, which then includes the poet himself. Thus, the individual conversion experience is embedded in a general articulation of faith, which addresses the world as well as the individual speaker. The text hereby links the spiritual journey of conversion to the suffering self that is caught in the world's

turmoil calling out to God. A violent rupture in the autobiographic narrative – as represented by the destruction of the ship and the death of passengers and crew – marks a turning point which can only lead to a re-construction of the religious self. The former religious self is thereby destroyed by the powerful impact of the encounter with the Divine sphere and then re-told from a new location within the religious discourse. Through this, the self formulates an answer to the world's hostile condition, which is then inscribed into the poem's dialogic structure.

In Quilliam's poem, conversion does not come as reaction to the world's violent condition or forceful impact of Divine sphere. Rather, the conversion experience is a process of introspection and reflection. Although encounter with the Divine is of crucial importance, the speaker positions himself on the threshold which signals an openness towards the Thou and a readiness to address and to be addressed. This initial dialogic action is then met by a poetic vision which further strengthens the self in the re-location of religious identity. The vision granted to the poet-speaker takes up the transitional movement from old to new faith by presenting traditions of both spheres. This opens up a hybrid space in which the conversion experience can be articulated. In this contact zone the speaker is able to move forward, from a single individual in the process of conversion to being a part of the community in which he confidently locates himself. Again, the poem uses the call and response pattern of dialogic interaction to negotiate the autobiographic experience of the poet.

As Virginia Ridley Ellis argues in regard to 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', the first stanza already presents the reader with a microcosm of the whole poem (cf. Ellis 1991, 70–71). Here the autobiographic mode of speaking is established, and it intertwines with and even governs over the second part of the poem as well. Nature's violent forces present the individual with a rupture which is then used by the poetic autobiographic voice to narrate the conversion experience. In Quilliam's text, on the other hand, the autobiographic voice is covered. The poet's own prominent position within the Liverpool Muslim community, along with the individual thought process which influences the autobiographic mode of speaking in this case, both provide a background from which the autobiographic character of the poem becomes obvious. Rather than forceful confrontation with nature or human cruelty, introspection and soul-searching in this case lead the individual on a quest that brings him to Islam. As opposed as both texts might seem at first glance in their presentation of the conversion experience – one using force and violent intervention in an historic event, the other a slow processual transition in an artistic vision – in both texts an autobiographic mode of speaking is essential to negotiation of the encounters that are then used to form poetic representations of the Divine sphere.

Through these representations the self is able to articulate, as well as perform, a new location within the religious discourse as a convert relating his experience in encountering God through the poetic form.

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Notes

¹ On how Lévinas' work is influenced by Rabbinic literature cf. Handelman 1991, 175–336.

² Cf. Geaves 2010, 25, 60. For a broader discussion of Quilliam's life and work see there as well as Gilham and Geaves 2017; for a selection from his poems see Singleton 2009, 104–158.