



# *English Studies in Latin America*

## **“LOOKING FOR TRUTH”**

**Interview with Joseph Pearce about his recently-published book on Shakespeare, his books on literary converts, and his own conversion**

**Author:** Paula Baldwin

**Source:** *White Rabbit: English Studies in Latin America*, No. 8 (December 2014)

**ISSN:** 0719-0921

**Publishedby:** Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

---

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

Your use of this work indicates your acceptance of these terms.





## **“LOOKING FOR TRUTH”**

**Interview with Joseph Pearce about his recently-published book on Shakespeare, his books on literary converts, and his own conversion (Santiago of Chile/ May 29, 2008).**

Paula Baldwin<sup>1</sup>

Joseph Pearce, one of the premier literary biographers of our time and the author of acclaimed biographies of G.K. Chesterton, Oscar Wilde, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and books on English literature and literary converts, has recently published *The Quest for Shakespeare*, a book that has provoked a tremendous amount of debate as he states that Shakespeare was a Catholic.

He is Writer-in-Residence and Associate Professor of Literature at Ave Maria University in Naples, Florida, and is the Co-Editor of the St. Austin Review and the Editor-in-Chief of Sapientia Press.

---

<sup>1</sup>Paula Baldwin Lind is BA in Literature, Universidad Católica de Chile, MSt in English Literature (1550-1780), University of Oxford, England, and PhD (c) in Shakespeare Studies, The Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham, England. She has translated William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (Universitaria, 2010) and *Twelfth Night* (Universitaria, 2014) with Braulio Fernández Biggs. Her research is focused on Shakespearean female characters’ spaces and Elizabethan spatial conditions of representation. She is currently a lecturer at the Institute of Literature, Universidad de los Andes, Santiago de Chile, where she teaches subjects such as: Shakespeare Seminar, Romantic Literature, C. S. Lewis Seminar, Short Story, and 19th-20th Century Theatre.

**Interviewer:** In the first chapter of your recently published book, *The Quest for Shakespeare*, you state that it is necessary to understand the personhood and philosophy of the author to give flesh to his words. Moreover, that ‘knowing Shakespeare increases our knowledge of the plays.’(18)

I would like to begin this interview applying the same principle; that is to say, getting to know Joseph Pearce in order to understand his writings better.

Pearce: I fully approve of your *modus operandi*.

**Interviewer:** How has your conversion to Catholicism influenced your readings and your work as a literary biographer?

Pearce: Well, obviously as a Catholic I’m interested in other Catholics and as a convert I’m interested in other converts. Converts are fascinated by other conversion stories because you want to know the path other people took and whether they ended up at the same place. To see how it is similar to yours, how it is different to yours. And of course also in my case many of these people I’ve written about were very influential upon my own conversion, so for me, writing biographies of people like Chesterton was an act of thanksgiving. Basically that he gave so much of himself to me in his ideas, in his writings, and in his art that I wanted to say thank you both to God for giving me Chesterton and to Chesterton for giving me Chesterton.

**Interviewer:** Most of the authors you have chosen for your biographies are converts. It seems that their conversion is the key event that changes their lives and brings them together as a group. Do you think that they have got things in common? Is it the experience of pain or suffering? Or is it the search for Truth and beauty? Did any of these elements trigger your own process of conversion?

Pearce: To answer the first question first, the answer would be yes and no, and that's not an equivocating answer; it's a nuanced answer in the sense that there are things that we can say that these converts have in common, but they are also very, very different. If you look at Evelyn Waugh or Graham Greene and compare them to G. K. Chesterton or John Knox, or John Henry Newman, you're talking about people that couldn't be more different from each other. It's not "a one size fits all" that to be a Catholic you have to be a certain type of person. But there are common factors involved. For instance, certainly a conversion is a process of both the head and the heart, the objective and the subjective, reason and faith, *fides et ratio*, so it is a genuine desire for Truth, and that desire for Truth is, I think, what animates things, and of course this desire for Truth can be triggered by suffering, by moments in our lives that force us to make fundamental questions and seek fundamental answers. So there are points of reference where there are similarities, but it will be wrong to say certain type of people become Catholics and certain type of people don't become Catholics.

**Interviewer: In many conferences and interviews you have given around the world you have been quite clear about the dangers of relativism not only in literary criticism, but also in education. What is Joseph Pearce's proposal against radical relativism?**

Pearce: We need to escape from the prison of ourselves. Relativism basically makes ourselves the arbiters of Truth, makes effectively ourselves God because we make ourselves the centre of the universe, we make ourselves the judge of what is true, but truth is an objective reality beyond ourselves. Returning to Shakespeare, in *Hamlet* the character of Polonius is a buffoon and in his advice to his son Laertes what he gives is this new relativistic secularist utilitarian philosophy: no mention of God, no mention of the transcendent, no mention of self-sacrifice and it ends with this 'above all to thy own self be true.' This for me is the fundamental mistake of relativism and of secular fundamentalism, to say 'this above all and to thy own self be true'. We have given no way of

knowing what our self is or what the truth is. If we don't know who we are, how can we know the truth? And the truth is not something that subsists within us; it is something that exists beyond us objectively, so we have to get beyond ourselves to find the truth. For me, overcoming relativism is a great liberating moment in each of our lives as individuals. To realise there's a wonderful world beyond us to be discovered, a world of objective reality, of objective truth and that is escaping from the prison of the self which relativism places us in.

**Interviewer: Let's talk now about some of your books...One of the authors you present in *Literary Converts* is J. R. R. Tolkien. Why do you include him in this book if he was raised as a Catholic? Do you want to suggest that conversion to faith is the first step towards Truth, but that we experience a series of other conversions during our life?**

Pearce: *Literary Converts* is about literary converts, but at least as importantly it is about the movement of the Catholic cultural revival, so for instance, Hilaire Belloc plays an important part in that group and he is a cradle Catholic. And on the other hand, C. S. Lewis plays an important part in that book and he never becomes a Catholic; he is a convert to Christianity. In a way he's very much a part of that movement. I mean, "The Inklings", with Tolkien and Charles Williams, is very much a part of this Catholic cultural revival, so just to leave someone out for reasons because they were either a cradle Catholic or a convert to Anglicanism would be petty. What I was trying to map out in that book was the Catholic hopeful revival as an intellectual, artistic, and aesthetic movement, so that's the reason that Tolkien is in there. I would also add about Tolkien that in my book *Tolkien Man and Myth* there is a chapter entitled "Cradle Convert to the Grave" because Tolkien is not technically speaking a cradle Catholic. His mother converted when he was a boy and he had also seen the church as a boy, so he is neither a cradle Catholic nor a convert really; he is a funny thing in between.

Now as regards ongoing conversions, one thing that I fully believe is that the vast majority of cradle Catholics have had a moment of conversion because we live in a very hostile culture, we live in a secular fundamentalist culture that forces us to ask fundamental questions about our faith, about truth. You cannot just believe, you're forced to question and that is in fact a good thing. So this culture is always asking the question of Pilate: What is truth? For us to accept the answer of Christ that "I'm the Way, the Truth, and the Life", we need to make sense of this. So for cradle Catholics at some points in their life there is a moment of conversion when they say 'yes' rationally and emotionally at the same time. In that sense, nearly everybody is a convert.

**Why do you think that C. S. Lewis converted to Christianity, but didn't embrace the Catholic faith? Do you believe that he missed something fundamental or was it just a matter of time?**

Pearce: I would probably say both. This question is one of those questions that when you when you are asked your heart sinks because to answer it in a very short way is not very easy. That's why I wrote a whole book on the subject. I'll try to give the short answer... Basically Lewis moved closer and closer to the Catholic Church throughout his life. In his last book *Letters from Malcolm* he states specifically that he believes in Purgatory, for instance, and in fact with his first book, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, the majority of critics believed that the author was a convert to Catholicism. So why did he didn't take the final step? Well, Tolkien put it very succinctly and I think it is an oversimplification, but there is a grain of truth in it. Lewis was born to Protestant parents in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and as we know Belfast is one of the most sectarian cities in the world. The true things that held Lewis back from Catholicism were being uncomfortable with the position of the Pope, and being uncomfortable with the position of the Blessed Virgin. These are the two major stumbling blocks and the two major causes of animosity amongst Belfast Protestants towards Catholics. So in other words, he never really managed to get rid these fundamental prejudices that

he, if you like, almost drank in with his mother's milk, but we know that Lewis despised theological modernism and water diluting the purity of Christianity by the zeitgeist. Chesterton said 'we don't want a church that would move with the world; we want a church that would move the world' and Lewis completely agreed with Chesterton in this. We know that just before he died, an Anglican bishop called Robertson wrote a book called *Honest to God* which was Christianity basically following the times. Lewis refused to comment on this book because he said that he would find it difficult to do so and remain charitable. That's how strongly he felt. So to see what's happened to the Anglican Church in the fourteen years since Lewis died with this complete caving in of all sorts of manners of orthodox Christian belief one cannot imagine Lewis staying in the Anglican Church if he was still alive. It's almost as if Lewis didn't leave the Anglican Church, but the Anglican Church has left him since he's dead. So he's left standing there looking rather awkward as an Anglican because he's preaching all these things that the Anglican Church no longer preaches.

**Interviewer: Shakespeare has always been a controversial figure among academics. Every year new theories emerge about his identity, his education, etc. Your new book, *The Quest for Shakespeare*, in which you study Shakespeare's possible Catholicism, will certainly provoke discussion, especially among Anglo-Saxon academics. Among the evidence you show to support your thesis, you mention two textual elements that might reveal Shakespeare's religion: the Catholic expressions that were taken from the First Folio edition and the accuracy of Catholic allusions in his plays (23). Can't these elements show only that Shakespeare was instructed as a Catholic, he knew the theory, but was not necessarily a practising Catholic? Wouldn't you say that a Catholic is someone who not only knows his faith's doctrine, but also lives according to it?**

Pearce: Absolutely, that textual evidence in itself is not definitive evidence of Shakespeare's Catholicism. It is however very convincing evidence of the fact that Shakespeare was raised a

Catholic because most of his contemporaries in their own place filled their plots with anti-Catholic invective and/or incorrect statements about Catholic doctrine. We do not find these inaccuracies in Shakespeare, so it does show fairly clear that he was raised in a Catholic family. This was part of the evidence I give in the opening chapters of my book to prove that his father and his mother were devout practising Catholics. So Shakespeare was raised a Catholic. The secular academy has largely accepted that. The fallback position they've gone to is that 'yes, he was raised a Catholic, but then he loses his faith when he comes to London', which is about the period when he's writing his plays. Many of them, the secular biographers, now accept, that he may well also have died a Catholic because of the evidence they've got. The secular scholars seem to accept that he was brought up a Catholic and that he might have died a Catholic, but for the period he was writing his plays, he is a good secularist like themselves and that's quite convenient for them. That would be even better because it would mean that he's rejected Catholicism. It's even better than not being a Catholic. So this is their position now. But the evidence that I show in my book is that this is not the case. The evidence of Shakespeare's life that we have from the late 1580s to 1612 or so when he retires back to Stratford-Upon-Avon is that he remains a Catholic. And I'm not talking about theory. I was not interested in building a case on speculation and there is very little speculative stuff in my biography and if there is I'm saying it is. We're talking about documentary evidence of house purchases, people he knew as friends, people he knew as enemies, court cases, fines, and the documentary evidence of history. I'll give you in fact a good example. We know that Shakespeare's father, John Shakespeare, was fined for his recusancy, for his refusal to attend the Anglican Church. We also know that his daughter, Susana, was fined for refusing to attend the Anglican Church as a recusant. When secular scholars look in the parish records in Southwark where Shakespeare lived, they see that many of Shakespeare contemporaries' didn't go to the Church; they see no sign of Shakespeare attending either. Their unanimous conclusion is: 'this proves Shakespeare did not believe in Christianity. He



did not go to Church because he was an Agnostic or an atheist; he had no beliefs, no Christian beliefs'. But surely the logical position would be that the reason that Shakespeare doesn't attend Church is the same reason his father doesn't attend Church and the same reason his daughter doesn't attend Church. So this is a practical example where secularists have not been logical in the conclusions they draw and I think what I've done is to declare the evidence, the factual documentary objective evidence of Shakespeare's Catholicism and I would like to say to the secularists: You showed me a different reasoning of the same evidence. It has to be done that way because with textual reading there are two ways of reading a text: objectively or subjectively. A subjective reading of the text is merely having your own prejudices reflected back to you. It's an act of Narcissism and it doesn't allow you to grow, you just reflect those prejudices. An objective reading of a text must take into account the greatest and biggest authority of any work of literature which is the author. So any work of literature is in a profound way a creative incarnation of the personhood of the author. So the more we know about the personhood of the author, the more we can objectively read the work. The next book that I'm working on now is looking at the textual evidence. But it is very important to do the objective biographical historical evidence first. Otherwise, people could just say, 'You're saying that because you're a Catholic' and I would say, I'm saying it because we know that Shakespeare is a Catholic.

**Interviewer: If Shakespeare was a Catholic, How did he manage to combine his faith with his work? In other words, how could he receive the praise and admiration of Queen Elizabeth I if she was so anti-Catholic? Is that what you deal with in the chapter "Playing Safe with the Queen"?**

Pearce: Yes, in this chapter I dig from other scholars who maintain Shakespeare's Catholicism. Most of those seem to think that somehow Shakespeare kept his Catholicism secret. I don't believe that is tenable because he was a successful and popular playwright. How can he be a

known Catholic and be in that position? Therefore, if he was a Catholic he must have kept it secret. We know that Queen Elizabeth had favourites, people she liked. If she liked them and felt that they were not a personal threat to her, she didn't mind what their faith was as long as they were tactful about it and didn't parade in public. I used the example of the Earl of Southampton, Shakespeare's patron, who was a known Catholic and was a favourite at court at the same time and this was of course completely contemporary with Shakespeare writing the plays. And I used the example of William Byrd, the court composer, the gentleman. Basically the Queen's official composer who was a known Catholic was fined for his recusancy and the Queen told the authorities to forget it, to leave it alone, so William Byrd was actually protected by the Queen even though he was a Catholic. So my argument is that Shakespeare was similar to William Byrd. That she liked Shakespeare in the same way she loved William Byrd and therefore Shakespeare was left alone which is why he seems not to have attended Church and not having been fined for it. You would have thought he would have been fined even if he was a good atheist because the offence was specifically not attending the Anglican Church. The offence was not related to being a Catholic. The Catholic recusants in conscience wouldn't attend. So one thing, after another, and after another just add to the evidence.

**Interviewer: And following the same conjecture... if he was a Catholic, Why doesn't he highlight the role of the family - which is central to Christianity - in his plays?**

Pearce: That is actually a very good point, but I think that you'll find that your answer to it lies just in the way that the Elizabethan culture was. If you look at all of the poetry, drama, literature of the Elizabethan culture it was an adult world and they wrote about an adult world and the whole thing worked on that adult plane and didn't take hold of a generational thing.

**Interviewer: Yes, but you find disintegrated families in Shakespeare's plays...**

Pearce: Yes but only because Shakespeare is "delirious", as Chesterton called him. He is living in very delirious times and most of his plays are dialectic between basically traditional Christian belief

and Machiavellian cynicism and opportunism. So in order to show this conflict between traditional Christian virtue and Machiavellian cynicism you have to have the conflict between the two. What does that lead to? It leads to the breakdown of families and the breakdown of society. The family is being used here many times as a metaphor for the wider society. He's living in an age where all the unity of politics and faith has disintegrated. It was a time when all the things that were taken for granted for hundreds of years were being questioned. As a Catholic he writes about heroes and heroines who are exemplars of old traditional virtue.

**Interviewer: What elements do you think readers should bear in mind when choosing to read a biography? Would you recommend any biography about Shakespeare? Why?**

If we're talking about Shakespeare I would be forced to either recommend my own for the reasons that I've just said. Many of the recent secular biographies of Shakespeare get him so profoundly wrong since they either misread or just ignore the evidence. But just to show I'm not trying to sell my products here, there is also an excellent new book on Shakespeare, *The Life and Times of William Shakespeare 1564-1616* (London, 2007) by a German scholar, Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel. It is very well researched.

**Interviewer: In "Finding Shakespeare and Reclaiming the Classics", an interview with Carl E. Olson, the editor of *Ignatius Insight*, you explained that there are so many books about Shakespeare, that you have relied on secondary sources for your research, instead of 'rummaging through sixteenth and seventeenth century documents.' Doesn't this decision contradict your idea of 'reading texts objectively'? How can you rely on sources that have been already interpreted and processed by others?**

Pearce: Absolutely, very good question! That is exactly why I stated candidly in the Preface or introduction to the book. The point is that these documents that I built my case on have been rummaged through by dozens and dozens of scholars already. I would merely be going back and

rummaging through the same documents. I would love to do that and it's possible that I might find something different but it will be unlikely because many scholars have looked at these documents already. It didn't seem necessary to me. I've written biographies where I've been blessed with hundreds of unpublished letters, unpublished photographs, unpublished poems and this is a gold mine for a biographer and you thank God when you have that information. But with Shakespeare because the physical evidence is limited everything has been gone over and over already. Nobody is going to question the validity of the facts. Most biographies are based upon the same sources and ultimately most of those rely on the fact that these documents are true and there is no question. So really, the secondary sources that I'm applying are not questionable. They are not subjective in the sense that I'm not relying on someone else's opinion. The secondary resources are relying upon documents that are facts so they are objective. It's just that I'm being honest saying that I'm getting this information from other people's books not from myself going to Stratford-Upon-Avon or London or Oxford and looking at these documents.