



Walton, H. (2019) A theopoetics of practice: re-forming in practical theology. *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 23(1), pp. 3-23. (doi:[10.1515/ijpt-2018-0033](https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2018-0033))

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/169387/>

Deposited on: 18 October 2018

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

A Theopoetics of Practice: Re-forming in Practical Theology.
Presidential Address to the International Academy of Practical Theology
Eastertide 2017.¹

PROLOGUE

The creative moment begins in lack. What is available to work with has all been used before and is no longer in a good state. It would be nice to tidy up the place, sweep the ground, turn over a new leaf and start again from fresh. But there is no fresh. Only rubble, reworkings and repetition. Dust suspended in darkness. And then what comes is a ray. Not the sun's ray but the damaged and derelict re-forming into a piercing power. That is it. The creative moment.

I think there should be two holy weeks. The first, before Easter, could carry on much as before. So we would move through the days of feasting and betrayal. Walk the road of sorrows and, in particular, make our journey at a proper pace from good Friday through Holy Saturday to Easter day. But we would not stop there. There is so much to experience in the strange season of the empty tomb. Surely it should also be marked by a reverent week of slow pilgrimage in order to focus our attention on what so easily escapes us in the daffodil yellow, egg hatching, grain-rising glory of Easter celebrations? We then could go deeper into that time of absence and loss; wild hope and tender comfort. The season of telling, and telling no-one because you are afraid. The time of *noli me tangere*, and plunge your fist into my side; hold my hand, and trace the wound in my palm with your finger. We need to recognize the loved one - just right at the moment when He is hidden from our sight. We should take breakfast on the beach because we laboured and laboured all night but caught nothing - yet never have our nets been so full.

¹ The theme of the 2017 Oslo conference was 'Reforming: Space, Body and Politics'.

We need, the Church needs, the world needs a second holy week. This is because right now we are living in the strange season of the empty tomb. We inhabit a culture, and we practice a religion, suspended between secularism and enchantment; participatory inclusiveness and populism, faith and terror. This paper is about the theopoetics of practice and the re-forming of practical theology. I situate it in holy week two .

There is a ray. It does not come from the sun. It comes from the damaged and the derelict re-formed into piercing power.

To begin I invoke an image. Entitled *Madonna and Singing Angels* it was painted by Sandro Boticelli in Florence around 1477. It has the clear, luminous beauty that characterizes the artist's work, and shows the Virgin holding her child with an expression of sombre contemplation that conveys both blessedness and awareness of impending loss. Around her a choir of angels, in the form of lovely young men holding white lilies, contribute to a scene that combines serene perfection with palpable pity.

Boticelli's work has an arresting presence. It evokes the creative collision of classical and Christian art that shaped this extraordinary Florentine awakening. But there is sadness in its beautiful lines, causing me to remember that despite its brilliance Florence would shortly experience the dark days of religious revival lead by the millinairian preacher Savaronola. Tradition has it that Boticelli (pupil of Fra Lippi, devotee of Dante, suspected sodomite and painter of too-beautiful images) threw many of his own paintings on the bonfire of the vanities that was the culmination of that particular reign of terror.

The picture has a piercing power. Or so it seemed to a young man who encountered it at the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin in 1918 while on leave from the terrible conflagration of his own generation in the trenches of World War One. Paul Tillich, weary and shaken in faith, was transfigured by the image:

Gazing up at it, I felt a state approaching ecstasy. In the beauty of the painting there was Beauty itself. It shone through the colors of the paint as

the light of day shines through the stained-glass windows of a medieval church. As I stood there, bathed in the beauty its painter had envisioned so long ago, something of the divine source of all things came through to me. I turned away shaken. That moment has affected my whole life, given me the keys for the interpretation of human existence, brought vital joy and spiritual truth. I compare it with what is usually called revelation in the language of religion.²

This first 'shaking of the foundations' that brought a never to be forgotten vital joy to Tillich took place in the encounter with this great work. However, later he was to argue it was not the religious content of art that produced this effect. Not the Madonna, child or the handsome, adolescent angels. No it was something harder to define. Something closer to what the image evokes than to what it represents: a certain style or substance or manner of being. In fact for Tillich, as he sought in later years to travel deeper into revelation through art, a very different type of image came to represent what he perceived, rather quaintly, as a reformation painting *par excellence*. The work which he believed best embodied the qualities of the protesting and re-forming imagination in art was *Guernica*. This picture Tillich described as the most Protestant picture of the modern era.³ Pablo Picasso's massive, ugly, disturbing yet sublime work represented for Tillich the great travail of the 20th century and spoke the questions that he believed demanded an answer from any kind of morally speakable theology. In its style and substance he identified the signs of the times.

Guernica was painted in ordinary house paint. It is matt and flat and black and white. The medium is thought to convey the mundane qualities of newsheet through which Picasso had first learned of the Spanish civil war outrage. In its construction it employs the techniques of late Cubism, offering fragmented, multi-perspectives on its theme. It is a visual assemblage – recalling the mode of

² Paul Tillich, *On Art and Architecture*, ed. John and Jane Dillenberger (New York, Crossroad, 1989), 235.

³ See Joseph L. Price, 'Expressionism and Ultimate Reality: Paul Tillich's Theology of Art', *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 69, no. 4 (Winter 1986): 479-98, 496.

bricolage that Picasso himself pioneered. This transports everyday objects into art through collage in a manner that simultaneously challenges our views of the objects and our understanding of art itself. In this case the 'found objects' are the debris of an atrocity and they are painted rather than attached to the picture. The whole is an assemblage of broken bodies, brutalized animals and domestic fragments. The picture is not illuminated by the divine radiance which inspired Botticelli but rather by the modern hell of the blank electric light which shines in factory, interrogation room and mortuary. But here too are traces of Christian symbols. They are in disordered array but also part of the image. There are stigmata on the hands of the dead soldier: place your fingers here. A dove is descending and there is a little lamp that brings a different kind of light to that of the naked bulb.

In nominating the broken agony of *Guernica* as a revelatory protest, Tillich made a bold move. The theologian of art and imagination, David Brown, has persuasively argued that if we were to seek our own generation's re-forming spiritual vision in a similar way we should contemplate, for example, the abortion drawings of Tracy Emin or Francis Bacon's triptych imaging the suicide of his lover George Dyer in a hotel toilet.⁴ For Tillich would be adamant that we won't encounter revelation by seeking it first in contemporary religious art, which he regarded as so much kitsch. Of Salvador Dali's *Last Supper* he declared, '[i]t is sentimental naturalism of the worst kind. Simply junk!' *Time Magazine* gleefully reported Dali's response to this criticism: "drunk... I have been drinking mineral water exclusively for more than ten years".⁵

PART ONE. APPROACHING THEOPOETICS

It is very early morning on the first day of the week. The faint light gives shapes but not yet colours. What use have we for colours now? We could wait outside until the

⁴ David Brown, *Divine Generosity and Human Creativity: Theology Through Symbol, Painting and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁵ Quoted in Russell Manning 'Tillich's Theology of Art', in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich*, ed. Russell Manning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 152-172, 159.

light is stronger. Instead we bow our heads as we enter the darkened place where the beloved was lain.

I take Tillich's encounter with art as witnessing to the piercing power of theo-poetics. It testifies that making, *poesis*, creative work is not merely illustrative; it is epiphanic. Art embodies fundamental questions and, given form, re-formed, they approach us as revelation. This insight should be more explicitly acknowledged by those of us whose work in practical theology draws energy from the dialectical relation between faith and culture. I remember sitting with the modern re-former of practical theology, Don Browning, in the restaurant. It was my first visit to the United States. I had just read *A Fundamental Practical Theology* and it had caught my imagination.⁶ 'I might just become a practical theologian,' I thought. Don acknowledged his debt to Tillich. 'He used to sometimes eat here,' he told me, and he said he liked to sit in that restaurant where Tillich had been. Of course I know that looking to Tillich is not unproblematic. His relations with women were structured by abuses of sexual and gendered power. And yet I covet for practical theology a similarly passionate, revelatory encounter with creative making that will transfigure our theological imaginations. To date theo-poetics, which is shaking foundations elsewhere, has not significantly impacted upon our discipline.⁷ This being the case, in order to assemble a theo-poetics of practice, I will look first to constructive theology – why not since it lies so close to us we can whisper on the same pillow – and explore work being undertaken in this theological mode. I take as exemplary the writings of Catherine Keller, perhaps our greatest contemporary theologian, whose work is inspired by a theo-poetic vision.⁸

⁶ Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991). This book effected a transformation for many people—including myself—in their appreciation of the potential of practical theology.

⁷ However, L. Callid Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water: A Theo-poetics Primer* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014) and Silas C. Krabbe, *A Beautiful Bricolage: Theo-poetics as God-Talk for Our Time* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016) have begun work that explicitly addresses the potential importance of a theo-poetic approach to topics related to practical theology. Interestingly, Krabbe also uses 'bricolage' as a metaphor for theo-poetics—I was unaware of his work when I delivered this address. See also my own book *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection* (London: SCM Press, 2014).

⁸ See Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

In constructing her theopoetics, Keller looks first to ancient Christian traditions. Particularly significant is the doctrine, cherished by the Eastern Churches, known variously as *theosis* and *theopoesis*. This understands both creation and incarnation as part of the same cosmic making process through which we humans, along with the whole cosmos, are being taken up into the very being of God. Also vitally important for Keller are apophatic mystical traditions which simultaneously find the divine unspeakable and use the most vivid and sparkling resources of language to describe God's piercing darkness.

From more contemporary resources, Keller acknowledges a debt to the heterogeneous forms of theopoetics that emerged with the 'death of God' movement in the 1960's.⁹ There is no consensus in this movement as to whether God has been implicated in a fatal metaphysical event or whether the worn-out forms of religious doctrines have killed the sense of God for our culture. However, in whatever mode, we are presented with the Passion as a radical kenosis. God in flesh entirely abandoning divine power, and this ultimate divine passion demands a similar kenotic sacrifice from traditional God language, from theology. It too must endure a passion through which it becomes utterly transformed. God's passionate act of worlding requires us to become the poetic makers of new words which create new worlds. God is now formed and re-formed in active human processes of poesis – of making.

Lastly Keller draws upon the process thinking of Alfred North Whitehead, who famously sought to unite science and religion in a vision of the cosmos coming into being through the lure of God at work in all motions and all life, all force. This vision for opens for her a pluriverse of divinely active becoming; a making to be experienced in the pulsing chaosmos bursting with relational intensity powerfully generative and mysterious. Her Whiteheadian vision is able to encompass the biblical drama of creation out of the depths;¹⁰ contemporary

⁹ For an overview of Keller's theopoetics see Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*, 78-86.

¹⁰ Keller, *Face of the Deep*.

physics from Einstein and beyond with its profound images of relational entanglement;¹¹ and unite these with her beloved apophatic traditions.¹² At the same time as all this, her work remains in urgent conversation with mainstream Christian theology, particularly challenging it to engage with the broken web of creation. As she writes:

theology is not discarded... Rather it becomes liberated from its world transcending, male divinizing, human-centred habits.¹³

Each local quantum throb of experience is a node of energies that entangles us in the far reaches of the planet ... into a multiverse whose magnitudes and multiplicities escape all canons of confident knowledge.¹⁴

I for one am no longer interested in theology that does not return to the dark brilliance of unknowing.¹⁵

I love to read Keller's work. I find it dazzling. I read it as an intellectual exercise and as a spiritual discipline. In its theopoiesis, in its creative making, are combined an ancient and universal vision of the creator at work in creation with the stark image, raised up and stretching across the cosmos of Christ's passion and God's self-emptying into the potentiality of human creative making. These are brought together in a process charged, politically-engaged, ecologically-orientated embrace of mystery illuminated by the dark brilliance of mystical longing. And it all fits together so wonderfully. It is not odd or strange. It hums with power and it speaks a new word. Jeffrey Hocking describes such new words as something normatively different from the old forms of theology (imaged as enclosed, self-referential and no longer signifying) in its orientation both to God and the world.¹⁶ Jack Caputo, a fellow traveller with Keller, describes poetics in this sense as 'a constellation of idioms, strategies, stories, tropes, paradigms and

¹¹ Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*.

¹² Keller, *On the Mystery*.

¹³ Catherine Keller, 'The Energy We are: A Meditation in Seven Pulsations', in *Cosmology, Ecology and the Energy of God*, eds. Donna Bowman and Clayton Crockett (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 11-25, 18.

¹⁴ Keller, 'The Energy We Are', 22.

¹⁵ Keller, 'The Energy We Are', 24.

¹⁶ Jeffrey S. Hocking, 'Risking Idolatry? Theopoetics and the Promise of Embodiment', *Theopoetics: A Journal of Theological Imagination, Literature, Embodiment, and Aesthetics* 1, no. 2 (2015): 17-42.

metaphors'¹⁷ that is now enfolded with revolutionary militancy to bring change. And, reading Keller, it is easy to believe theopoetics really does have such significance and momentum.

However, although I admit to being enthralled by the theopoetic murmurings that have crossed my pillow, I think I have decided—I am pretty certain—I am not going to abandon myself to constructive theology. I am going to remain a faithful practical theologian and stay on my own side of the bed.

Like Sandro Botticelli's art, I find the forms of theopoetics currently being explored in constructive theology just too beautiful, too brilliant—even if this brilliance comes from darkness—for me to absorb. What is my problem? Well briefly, in fact almost shorthand because there are other things I want to do in this paper, there are four reasons why I retain my distance.

First, although I love the ancient doctrine of *theopoesis*, and am comfortable also with the panentheism it inevitably occasions, the notion of creation being raised up into the divine can cast a negative shadow on the material order which becomes iconic rather than incarnational in itself—although I recognize there is no absolute division here. I am, personally, more challenged by the messier worldings of God that come through Franciscan theology into the work of Scotus and then on into poetry of Hopkins and others—which affirm God's radical discharging into the haecity of matter.¹⁸

Second, whatever interpretation you make of 'death of God' theology it has a pure, finality to it.¹⁹ A kind of closure. God has disclosed God's self to us in this way as pure kenotic self-emptying, and that is it. Breathtaking, beautiful and

¹⁷ John Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2006), 104

¹⁸ See Heather Walton 'Desiring Things: Practical Theology and the New Materialisms' in *City of Desires—A Place for God: Practical Theological Perspectives*, eds. Reinder Ruard Ganzevoort, Rein Brouwer, and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2013), 131-140; 'The Consolation of Everyday Things' *LIR:journal* 4 (2015): 138-53.

¹⁹ This is a point that Keller herself has raised in her recent work. See *Intercarnations: Exercises in Theological Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press), 7.

complete. While this central event does not necessarily preclude the profound experience of absent presence that we narrate in stories of ointment, stones and bandages, it does not really wish to touch wounded hands, walk a dusty road at dusk. It lacks the taste of salt by the seashore.

Third, process thought and the theology it engenders seems in danger, to me, of becoming too coherent a system. Too much a theory of everything (ecology, philosophy via the hugely influential work of Gilles Deleuze, physics, mysticism). I acknowledge it is a pretty cool theory of everything in its own way (political, relational, intense, throbbing—what’s not to love?) but I want to continue to think God otherwise than through this frame. And also there is a kind of covert theodicy at play in the concept of God’s long-term lure of creation that I don’t quite like the taste of. I don’t think God can be caught, not even in the tangled web, or mesh, of process thinking. I am suspicious of *all* forms of theodical accounting. So I can see power and goodness here, and there is so much in Keller’s theo-poetics/theo-politics that inspires me, but there are alternative makings I can construct out of tradition, theory and imagination. I can imagine cosmos and creator also differently...and then differently again. God always escapes. Theodical equations never balance.

Last, there are personal factors at work also. I am perverse. When I hear, ‘Wow! Now here are words and images that invoke God’s glorious passion as an ecstasy made manifest and witnessed in all creation. Now you can both engage with that mystery and name it poetically to create a new theology that does not require the abandonment of reason or, the worse, betrayal of political responsibility. Does that not console you for the fact no-one now calls your name softly in the garden?’ I reply, ‘No. No. I miss that beloved voice.’ And, oh let’s be frank, I am a bit too noisy; a bit too fond of a new dress and a glass of red wine; a bit too materially embedded to be properly apophatic. The light that pierces my soul does not emerge from creation’s mysterious dark energy, but from the damaged and the derelict material stuff of this world forming and re-forming itself all around me with a piercing power.

What do I see in the gloom of this place? Nothing holy or majestic. Grave clothes discarded. They remind me of the swaddling bands in which we bind our babies. And so are these too to be left behind now? Outgrown? No longer needed? I reach out and touch them. Softly because they still hold the presence of you. Holding them I am connected to something very small and infinitely tender.

Although, somewhat regretfully, I am not reaching out to embrace its brilliance, I wanted to approach theopoetics through the modes developed in the work of Keller and her companions in order to make something very clear. This is that an engagement with theopoetics reaches far beyond using the resources of poetry to ornament, supplement or even slightly revision our understanding of the divine. I am totally with Keller when she says theopoetics is not in the business of decorating God's coffin with verse.²⁰ The challenge of theopoetics is rather to commit to theo-making; a making that is taking place across all levels: in the heart of God, in the world all around us as it groans in travail and births in glory, in our political and everyday lives. And yes it is manifest also, but not only, in our faith communities: in our pastoral practices, in our scriptural readings, in our spiritual selves and the accounts we give of faith. The reach is wide and encompasses all that is forming and re-forming around us. It is within the context of this much larger vision of theopoetics that the creative arts (which theologians frequently lump together as 'poesis'²¹) have their very significant role to play with their particular and piercing re-forming, revelatory potential.

And, I think you may well have anticipated this. I think that practical theologians have particular insights to bring to reflecting upon this theopoetic process. I think we may be more able to comprehend, from the habitus of our discipline, the ambivalent, messy, painful, provisional elements that surely characterise theo-making. It is, after all, practice and practice is our business. However, before I come to this I would like to state that if there is a temptation to closure in the

²⁰ Catherine Keller, 'Theopoetics and the Pluriverse' in Roland Faber and Jeremy Fackenthal (eds) *Theopoetic Folds: Philosophizing Multifariousness* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013, 180-195), 187.

²¹ See Heather Walton, 'When Love is not True: Literature and Theology After Romance' in *Literature and Theology: New Interdisciplinary Spaces*, ed. Heather Walton (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), 37-54.

vision of theo-poetics I have outlined from constructive theology, I think we also face temptations of a similar kind in our own world.

If the death of God movement has made the Passion into its fixed pole of meaning, perhaps we may be in danger of making Pentecost our own? Much of the very best of contemporary practical theology is ecclesiocentric. Perhaps, this represents a long overdue return to religious observance on our part after too long a lapse in attendance? I think this may be so and certainly the move has been fruitful. But if theo-poetics within constructive theology has in its kenotic gesture issued in the long Good Friday of theology, then in an opposite gesture many of us are seeking a pentecostal revival in the primacy of theology, its givenness and full presence, even as we explore the living organism of the church. So, from Empirical Theology's espousal of theological normativity and its decision to transubstantiate social science research methods into an intra-disciplinary endeavour, to the espousal of a Chalcedonian model by some—though notably not all—writers on ecclesiology and ethnography (that is one which emphasizes the proper distinction and logical priority of theology over auxiliary disciplines), to John Swinton's kindlier model of theological hospitality to other disciplines (but theology here is the householder not the stranger),²² or even Theological Action Research's model of theology all the way down.²³ In all of these I sense an understandable, but to me problematic, desire to be purged by tongues of fire. I am seeking something humbler and less coherent as a theological approach.

PART TWO: TOWARDS A THEOPOETICS OF PRACTICE

Two people walking the road at dusk. Trying to piece together all that has happened in these last few days. But like a cheap clay lamp smashed on the floor the fragments can't be joined. Dust and tiny pieces. No light here.

²² For essays engaging with these issues see Pete Ward's important edited collection, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

²³ For an introduction to Theological Action Research (TAR) see Helen Cameron et al, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010).

In the first part of this paper I set before us one conceptual approach to theopoetics that attempts to do very much more than suggest that an artistic sensibility can enrich our understanding of the divine. This approach folds and enfolds God's making, cosmic becoming and our own making of environment, culture and theology into one seamless garment. However, I also argued that to my practical theological taste the vision was too totalizing, too invisibly stitched. I then raised the possibility that practical theology might be able to birth a rather different genre of theopoetics but also suggested that we might succumb to the temptation to enact our own form of closure. Not through a delight in the power of our theopoetic constructions in our case but rather the opposite. A fear of the taint of impurity in our creative and making power. So where now?

In what follows I shall begin to evoke what a theopoetics of practice might look, feel and taste like. Space and time prevent me from giving a systematic form to this creative development and nor, indeed, would I wish to. But first a genuine and necessary disclaimer. Before progressing further I need to state unequivocally that by engaging with poetics we are not embarking on a new venture. The list of names of colleagues from many years ago to the present who have been engaging with practical theology from a poetic perspective is simply too long to list.²⁴ There are also many more of us who make an occasional creative turn as we seek spiritual depth in our writing. Or perhaps we understand ourselves as academic practical theologians in the day job and in another space we are musicians, poets, artists, passionate preachers, liturgists and lovers of lovely things besides. My intention is not at all to suggest that we have been lacking in either energy or creativity, but rather to attempt something different. To date in practical theology we have not engaged in great depth

²⁴I think of Terry Veling's beautiful, brave and vulnerable oeuvre. Nicola Slee's profound work in poetry and spirituality. Pam Couture's pioneering work in theology and creative non-fiction. Others deeply engaged in exploring various aspects of a of life writing include Claire Wolfeich, Jeanne Moessner, Darren Cronshaw, Mary Moschella, and Joyce Mercer. Pete Ward is a theoautoethnographer, Cas Wepener is a novelist, Tom Beaudoin is a musician theologian of postmodernity, and Doug Gay is a songwriter. Micheal Stoebber works on spirituality and art. Daniel Louw has advocated new forms of aesthetic reasoning. Bonnie Miller-McLemore has called for a poetics of resistance and has more recently turned her thoughts to the work of theological writing.

conceptually with what theopoetics means for us— although a lot of very interesting and important work has been done in the realm of practice.

I am asking ‘if we were to attempt construct a way of imaging a theopoetics out of the wisdom of our discipline what would it look like?’

Perhaps we could also start with something Tillich’s protesting image.

Something like *Guernica* indeed.

To recap, it is painted in black and white and in flat housepaint – these qualities link it back to the ‘everyday’ nature of the passion it portrays. And although it does not use found objects as such it draws upon the technique of assemblage, collage, bricolage, the surreal turning of the familiar into the *unheimlich* which marks Picasso’s major contributions to modern art. I think the theopoetics that we might offer the world will have similar qualities. It will be a fragmented, wounded making out of the depths of everyday life and practice that draws us into the surprising making and remaking of God.

At first the stranger just listened to us talking and then they started to speak. Not to tell a new story but to help us to make sense of ours. An old prophecy here, a new word there and the scenes started to come together somehow. The picture emerging was not any less painful, I wouldn’t say that, but now we could look at it more clearly somehow.

Bricolage. A word that became important in the vocabulary of art and also political and cultural theory as we passed through the dark portal of World War One to face the great challenges of living in modern times. I won’t give an extensive genealogy of the term - just point to three intense instances in its development.

First, I highlight the contribution of Walter Benjamin whose brief oeuvre contains short brilliant essays and the fabulous theses on the philosophy of

history with which theology is very familiar.²⁵ However it was his unfinished Arcades Project which he conceived as a *literary collage* or bricolage to which I principally refer.²⁶ This was intended to present a radical alternative history of the 19th century and the birth of the modern. It would be compiled through a process of adaptation, pilfering and cunning which, in opposition to the established techniques of historiography fixated upon big events and great men, would instead, craftily redeploy the, “refuse” and “detritus” of history, the half concealed variegated traces of ... daily life’.²⁷ Benjamin saw himself proceeding more in the manner of a canny dodger, a magpie collector of common things, or a ragpicker working through cast offs of culture to create a vivid and revealing assemblage from its discarded scraps. From Benjamin we receive a vision of bricolage that will resonate deeply with the ethos of practical theological reflection.

In a very different vein I turn to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s book *The Savage Mind*.²⁸ In this he contrasts the way traditional societies generate knowledge through processes of adaptive myth-making with modern scientific forms of understanding. He creates two characters representing these positions: ‘the bricoleur’ and ‘the engineer’. The bricoleur (representing the traditional meaning maker) is a person who reworks and recycles existing materials, scraps they have accumulated over the years and shapes these to meet needs as they arise. My father was such a bricoleur, keeping in his shed old nails, screws, wires, string handy bits of wood and leather out of which he fixed our shoes, mended the washing machine, made us toy boats and rabbit hutches. The bricoleur must work with fragments and detritus, having neither resources or opportunity to enrich or renew their stock. To quote Lévi-Strauss, the bricoleur works ‘with whatever is to hand, that is with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and... heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zorn (London: The Bodley Head, 2015).

²⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, tr. Eiland Howard and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

²⁷ Eiland Howard and Kevin McLaughlin, ‘Translators’ Foreword’ in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ix.

²⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

current project or indeed to any particular project'.²⁹ They are in this sense always mired in forms of cultural entanglement—there is no pure or original making. In contrast, the engineer, representing the modern rationalized disciplines and their technical expertise, uses the correct tools for the job and the materials which are appropriate. This being the case, unlike the bricoleur, they can intentionally engineer a new design and in this sense at least, 'it might be said that the engineer questions the universe, while the 'bricoleur' addresses himself to a collection of oddments left over from human endeavours.'³⁰

So the engineer is a systematic theologian and the bricoleur a practical theologian, perhaps?

The smell of smoke and cooking fires. Small lights of simple houses. Orange glow in the darkness. We had reached the shelter of the village; our home. The stranger made as if to continue on the road which stretched out to a horizon far beyond us – but we would not allow this. 'Perhaps you might shelter here tonight in this humble place?'

Of course, Lévi-Strauss was writing in the days before the challenges of poststructuralism emerged to critique the distinctions previously made between traditional myths and metaphors on the one hand and logocentric discourses and grand narratives on the other. Jaques Derrida's reposte to this mode that of course 'the engineer is a myth'³¹—is one that we would now assent to, aware as we now are of the necessity of creative borrowing and crafting from what already lies to hand even in our most ambitious attempts to question the universe. However, although there are numerous problems with Levi-Strauss's model (its ethnocentrism as well as its logocentrism) it presents bricolage as a kind of popular process of making with resources to hand able to sustain a way of life at variance to those envisaged in the totalising systems of the modern age.

²⁹ Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 21

³⁰ Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 19

³¹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, 2nd rev. ed. (New York; London: Routledge, 2001), 360. Derrida implies here that the myth might be developed from the imagination of the bricoleur.

As a practical theologian immersed in making within the domestic economy of faith I find this evocative and helpful. The mundane location of the bricoleur was particularly important to the last thinker on bricolage I want to introduce today, Michel de Certeau.

De Certeau was to take the concept of bricolage developed by Benjamin, Strauss and others and employ it over the full range of topics that are of interest to us here as academic practical theologians. His reflections spanned the nature of disciplinary activity and research, politics under capitalist systems, theology and faith practice. In all of these areas he sought to explore how those who are marginalised and apparently weak are also possessed of powers in practice that enable them to engage in making and shaping, making up and making do, with what is to hand: that is, they employ disregarded, damaged and derelict cultural and spiritual resources. His two major works on practice, *The Practice of Everyday Life*³² and *The Mystic Fable*,³³ span the entire stretch between the quotidian and the ecstatic apophatic and so, I believe, hold the full potential for us to employ them in creation of a theopoetics that authentically touches our hands, our hearts and our souls. However, although his concerns, like ours, are far reaching they are addressed through a method that creates the opposite of a seamless whole. His dominant paradigm of everyday poesis as bricolage is one that is focussed upon what he believed was the cultural condition of our time. Ours is not an age of full presence. This is not the condition of Holy Week Two. We don't set off towards the horizon questioning the universe. We wander around in early morning mists, we walk a dusty road at dusk, we are lost on the seashore. De Certeau's leitmotif was the Empty Tomb, the Road to Emmaus, the disciples fleeing Jerusalem for Galilee but still enthralled by the lost and beloved other. I shall take De Certeau as my guide for the final part of this paper. With him I am reaching towards a theopoetics that practical theology might recognise and respond to. It will not be one of cosmic coherence and stark beauty, but

³² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

³³ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable, Volume One, The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

rather one of deep and loving attention to what is damaged, derelict and yet possessed of piercing power.

PART THREE: POETICS OF THE BROKEN FORM

There are different types of homecoming but this was not the one we would have sought. Not to go back to Galilee, not to go back to the oldtime places and the oldtime ways. Not to go back without him. This was no glad return, but it was a return we needed to make. I think we knew that.

De Certeau is not a familiar thinker within practical theology so let me introduce him briefly. He was a French theorist, part of the creative intellectual movement that precipitated and reflected upon the Paris 1968 uprisings. He was influenced by Marx, particularly in the insight that the movements pushing history forward emerge from those oppressed, marginalised and deviant. He was also *particularly* indebted to the work of Jacques Lacan, who drew upon psychoanalytical theory to create the powerful modernist image of the subject who can only come to selfhood through a process of separation from the full plenitude of maternal connection. The wounds of this separation are felt in a restless desire for what we can never recover. We are lost seekers. We are weary pilgrims who journey towards a sacred presence they will never reach.

And de Certeau was a Jesuit. Unorthodox but fundamentally shaped by this tradition which seeks to discover God in all things. A tradition that employs a discipline of imaginative contemplation which enfolds the everyday into the context of God's providential purposes, and a tradition which understands vocation as practice, a means of proceeding, of wandering, of moving about from one place to the next. Practice is a form of embodied witness which was, for de Certeau, also a token of restless desire for the lost beloved.

I walk with de Certeau because I believe that drawing upon these diverse influences has made his work particularly insightful for developing a theopoetics of practice and an understanding of the vocation of the practical

theologian as re-former/bricoleur. Fundamental to his oeuvre is the notion that we exist within totalising systems of disciplinary regulation, of capitalist production, of religious authority, but we are not helplessly and hopelessly fixed and immobile within them. A sense of something always lacking in that which is supposed to secure our satisfaction means we always seek space to move and to make—even in situations where the constraints seem overwhelming. Always there is the possibility for engaging the ‘strategy’ (his term) of the system with the tactics (his term) of our imaginative and creative re-forming work. This I shall now briefly explore. First in relation to academic practice, then politics, then faith.

Academic Practice.

In IAPT we are proud of the achievements we have made in relation to advancing the parameters of our discipline and securing its place within the academy. So perhaps it seems very strange for me, as President, to bring a hermeneutics of suspicion to this positive self-assessment. However, I am challenged by de Certeau’s response to the notion that scientific communities, such as our own, create or advance knowledge by processes of intellectual exploration and mutual critique. You must not forget, he stated, that ‘this community is also a factory, its members distributed along assembly lines, subject to budgetary pressures, hence dependent on political decisions and bound by the growing constraints of a sophisticated machinery’.³⁴ I know that this description will have resonance for many of us. I am not denying that academic communities have hugely important work to do in this era of ‘false-truth’— but we must also recognise the less beneficent, ‘knowledge-machine’, aspects of our existence. We must become conscious of how in our work we are often tempted to proceed upon regulated and approved paths of knowing in order to show allegiance to the values of a system in which disciplines are given their allotted space to function.

³⁴ Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1985), 204.

De Certeau's challenge for us then is that we should experience discomfort in our apparent belonging – this for us a hard challenge. IAPT began determined to challenge the marginalisation and exclusion of people like us and a discipline like ours. Yet now I am saying that perhaps a theo-poetics of practical theology might challenge us to embrace a second discomfort, like Paul Ricoeur's second naiveté perhaps, and cause us to remember what we knew before our status was changed, when we were the vulgar and despised bricoleurs of the theological world. And further, de Certeau calls upon those who have realised they are not ever completely at home in the academy to become differently productive. First by proceeding not along the fair, broad highways of academic knowledge, signposted by university strategic plans, KPIs and the guidelines of funding councils and grantmaking foundations, but along the faultlines, cracks and fissures in our disciplinary endeavours in which these grand designs fragment and begin to creatively re-form. So proceed courageously along the faultlines and also become differently productive. And do this, he advises, by using the scraps that the machine-system discards as useless (affective understanding, spirituality, indigenous wisdom, ordinary theology, etc.) as resources in our academic making. In other words, accept that it may be our academic vocation to be poets of the broken form in theology.

It wasn't a bad night to take the boats out but our hands weren't used anymore to the handling of oars and the hauling of nets. We had lost the sense of where the shoals were swimming having been so long away. We worked so hard but caught nothing. We had to be shown. 'SEE! look there, cast there, for the great catch.'

Politics

One of the things I like about de Certeau is the combination of austerity and plenitude in his writing. On the one hand we are confronted with our human predicament as incomplete, forever hungry, never satisfied and enmeshed within the nets of systems that are beyond our power to break. On the other hand, he presents the everyday world as the sight of marvels, over-abundance, joy and poetic creations of resistance.

Let me be a little more specific about the political approach this generates. We have been through many years of political pessimism and to be honest circumstances appear to justify this depression. Influential cultural theories of have lead us to be rather sceptical about human powers of resistance to the overwhelming totalitarianism of consumer capitalism.³⁵ However, alongside and indeed within this system, de Certeau argues, people are resisting. As I have argued elsewhere, we do not notice the resistance because our untrained (or perhaps too trained) eyes cannot perceive its hidden ferment in the everyday and also, crucially, because it cuts its fabric from the same stuff the system is woven out of.³⁶

He gives examples. From his historical studies he presents instances of the way in which the indigenous peoples of Latin America responded to the imposed religion of the conquistadors. As religious bricoleurs they transformed the symbols and rituals, undertaking a work of theopoesis that enabled these to take on a different meaning than the ones intended in the divine economy of colonialization. In similar ways today, he argues, consumers do not only passively accept the material and cultural economy they have no choice but to receive; they also reimaginatively invent it. This applies to watchers of popular TV programmes, wearers of clothes, users of social media. Through their creative work users make (the word he uses is *bricolent*) ‘innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy.’³⁷ The people unthinkingly characterised in much of our writing as passive consumers he celebrates as the marvellous ‘unrecognized producers, poets of their own acts.’³⁸

Such delight and faith in everyday resistance can appear outrageously optimistic and an irresponsibly dangerous approach to politics. But William Connolly, in his influential work *The Fragility of Things*,³⁹ encourages a similar pluralist, relational and spiritual politics of resistance. He argues that unless we recover

³⁵ Scholars like Jean Baudrillard and Zygmunt Bauman

36

³⁷ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xiii-iv.

³⁸ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xviii.

³⁹ William Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

faith in human creativity, wonder and joy in the everyday then we will not discover the energy and resources we need to embrace our fragile existence and re-form it. In a passage that bears striking resemblances to de Certeau's writing, he states that sometimes creativity will be manifest in 'surprising moments'; perhaps a political initiative or a social movement but could also be

an artistic innovation, market spontaneity, a language change, a cooking invention, teaching improvisation a new type of film scene, a musical production, the use of new media, or the invention of a new product. And so on endlessly. Our identification with life ... is grounded... in ...uncanny experiences of creativity by means of which something new enters the world. This may be one of the reasons people cleave to the sweetness of life. It ties the sweetness of life to a *vitality* of being.⁴⁰

What Connolly is looking for is a bricolage politics rooted in everyday creative practice; a 'positive pluralist assemblage' he says which draws its energy from 'creativity, wonder and the sweetness of life'.⁴¹ So in what way does this relate to our project of constructing a theo-poetics of practice? Personally I am dismayed that many of the theological responses we are making to our political situation, and most particularly the ecological crisis, so often seem to involve a turning away from human creative productivity and our common material existence. So, for example, Sally McFague in her recent book on consumer capitalism makes a contrast between the grandeur of the natural world of God's creation and the soiled and sullied world of human making.⁴² She also holds before us as a model of Christian restraint Simone Weil, a woman noted for her anorexic repudiation of sweetness in world of suffering. I cannot consider this approach a political inspiration. As practical theologians we have to reassert our faith in human practice incorporating both the tragedy and glory of human making. A bricolage indeed. But, Connolly, again: 'Existential gratitude ... can go hand in hand with a tragic view of human possibility and can help to render us

⁴⁰ Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 37.

⁴¹ Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 179.

⁴² Sallie McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

alert to the fragility of things [even] as we also allow the sweetness of existence to sink into our pores'.⁴³ I believe that our ragged-edged theo-poetics must be able to touch the depths of tragedy and go dancing, wait wordless with grief and wear a red dress and paint her nails.

Afterwards we rested on the sands and the sun was warm and the coals were glowing and we were full and sleepy. But, rising above the sound of the sea and the murmur of voices, came the same question again and again. I was not sure if I was being asked, 'Do you love me? Will you follow me once more and leave this harbour and this shelter?'. Or 'Do you love me? Then rest here and be comforted. There is a white bird flying. See how the sun shines on the waves and there are small boats upon the water'.

Faith and the Beloved

My last brief engagement with the work of de Certeau lies in the realm of faith and love. His last great work before his untimely death in 1986 was *The Mystic Fable*, which explores the creative flowering of the mystic tradition at the birth of the modern era in the 16th and 17th centuries: years of rupture, trauma and reformation. His work on mysticism brings together themes we previously explored. So in one sense mystics are portrayed (like practical theologians) as both at home and not at home in their religious traditions (or disciplines). In this context they will employ the articles of faith as material for construction and reconstruction, just as colonised people employ the materials of their colonisers to construct their own lively and resisting spiritualities. But this does not quite express the deep resonances with which de Certeau speaks of the work of those who dwell within the ruins of faith; people who in times of turmoil seek out the places of debris and dereliction, that even in their emptiness recall the divine other who cannot be contained within them.⁴⁴ For Philip Sheldrake this is de Certeau's greatest insight:

⁴³ Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 181.

⁴⁴ De Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, 25.

[His] primary symbol of discipleship becomes Christ's empty tomb... The Church no longer dominates Western culture and strong dogmatic statements will no longer be heeded. Christians are called to journey onwards with no security apart from the story of Christ that is to be (re)enacted rather than authoritatively proclaimed. "He is not here. He has going ahead of you to Galilee" (Matt 28: 2-7). The Christian vocation for de Certeau is increasingly a question of following the perpetually elusive Christ'.⁴⁵

For Certeau this is the mysticism of practice.

And this mysticism of practice is both something entirely at odds with the way we live now and entirely engaged within it in the manner we explored when discussed the politics of assemblage and the sweetness of life. Always with Certeau there is difference and engagement, loss and wonder. These mystics those who mediate the trauma of their culture by becoming dwellers amongst ruins, these perpetual seekers and lovers are not some strange people from another era whose lives we cannot comprehend. They are ourselves, our ordinary selves seeking our beloved. One of the great influences on de Certeau was the Flemish mystic Jan van Ruusbroec who describes the mystic way as the life common to all. This ordinary existence that we craft and create through our own practice—it is this which is scattered with marvels.⁴⁶ This is where desire experienced also as piercing joy reaches out to us and reminds us that faith and love can be made here.

And then what comes is a ray. Not the sun's ray but the damaged and derelict re-forming into a piercing power. That is it. The creative moment.

So in conclusion what have I attempted to do here is to explore a theopoetics of practice. I held before you a model in constructive theology that combined the

⁴⁵ Philip Sheldrake 'Michel de Certeau: Spirituality and The Practice of Everyday Life', *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 12, no. 2, (2012): 207-16, 209.

⁴⁶ Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life, vol. 2, Living and Cooking* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 213.

ancient traditions of theosis and apophatic mysticism, with radical theology and process thought into a pleasing and coherent whole. And then I said that beautiful as this might be perhaps practical theology might have a different way of approaching theopoetics. And I held before you an image of God in everyday thisness that comes out of the Franciscan tradition, finding its way into Dun Scotus and contemporary poetry and philosophy and also into Jesuit practice. Instead of the finality of a kenotic passion, I displayed the ambiguities of presence and absence in Holy Week 2. Lastly, I suggested that rather than an encompassing theory of everything providing the motif for our theopoetics we would probably better proceed as bricoleurs, makers and remakers. Practical mystics and mystics of practice. Making our poetics out of tragedy and the sweetness of everyday life. Speaking faith and making love out of traditions that are fragmented and yet re-forming. I called upon practical theologians to become poets of the broken form.

But after all this what exactly have I put before you? Simply a framework that may enable us to begin to imagine a theopoetics of practice. It might appear to have content and structure but what is it really? The modernist artist and religious poet David Jones described poetry seeking the divine as still ‘a made thing with a shape’.⁴⁷ This is what this is: a made thing with a shape. To talk about theopoetics is to talk about a made thing, a heuristic frame, a gesture reaching out awkwardly to fashion and form an understanding of what unites God’s making and our own creative practice. In that way it is not any different from the rest of theology actually— although tactically we might claim it to be so. But even as a made thing with a shape it has its own fragile life and purpose and so I place it in your hands.

I would like to close with a memory. When I was little it was a common practice in my part of the world for school children to make Easter Gardens out of scraps

⁴⁷ David Jones in Thomas Dilworth, *David Jones, Engraver, Soldier, Painter, Poet* (Jonathan Cape, London 2017), 20.

of stuff and take them home to display during the Easter holidays. Here is my memory of this.⁴⁸

We each had a box. Most children brought a shoe box but my granddad always took ours to store his flower tubers under the bed over winter. My box was from my dad's new shirt. It was quite big so there was space to work. I took moss, full, cushiony moss of greenest green and laid it over the bottom forming small hills and valleys. Then I took bare twigs and used glue to stick on pink tissue paper flowers to their small branches. Silver paper made a stream and a small pond. It was so lovely now. Then three flat pebbles and some plasticine shaped a cave. Last of all two straight sticks tied with string made a cross on the green, green hill.

When I took it home my moss garden was placed on the centre of the side board between Easter eggs and daffodils and I always looked at it every day in the holidays. Outside we didn't have blossom yet and the grass was never so green. I was not too little, I knew that there was sadness in the garden of course. In my own small, sweet garden not just on some green hill far away.

But how lovely it was.

⁴⁸ An elaboration of this memory is found in my book *Not Eden: Spiritual Life Writing for This World* (SCM Press, London, 2015), 119f.