

Theological Creative Nonfiction: A Model of Christian Literature For Christian Life

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Abstract

Since the Christian worldview is composed of more than theoretical truth, Christian literature should reflect these other aspects, such as how that truth is applied in the lives of the saints. Furthermore, the praxis element of worldview is reflected in literature more naturally in narrative genres than in more expository writings like systematic theology. Narrative genres mirror the complex, temporal way a person lives his life, and because of this are able to show how objective truth is applied in subjective situations. For this reason, Christians need contemporary writing that reflects the process of everyday Christian living to offer a model for growth and encouragement. Several authors have written books that can be classified as theological creative Nonfiction. They share the goal of encouraging the saints in everyday circumstances of faith as well as the methodology of drawing from the author's own life and experience and are examples of the same model of theological writing that directly reflects and informs praxis.

Theological Creative Non-Fiction: A Model of Christian Literature for Christian Life

Because the Christian faith places such a high emphasis on truth, the evangelical world tends to de-emphasize truth's sisters in the classical triad: goodness and beauty. A claim or a theory can be autonomously true, but as long as truth remains in a scholarly tome or filed away in a theologian's brain and does not move people to love God and his creation more perfectly, that truth benefits no one. Theological truth must be embodied in the lives of the saints to have power to affect lives. The careful exegesis and nuanced arguments that go into formal theological treatises are good and necessary, but are often not accessible to the average Christian reader because of style and complexity. However the lay reader also needs theological literature that will help him grow in his understanding of the faith, preferably a literature that will engage the emotions and the will as well as the intellect by illustrating how truth looks when it is clothed in the trappings of real life.

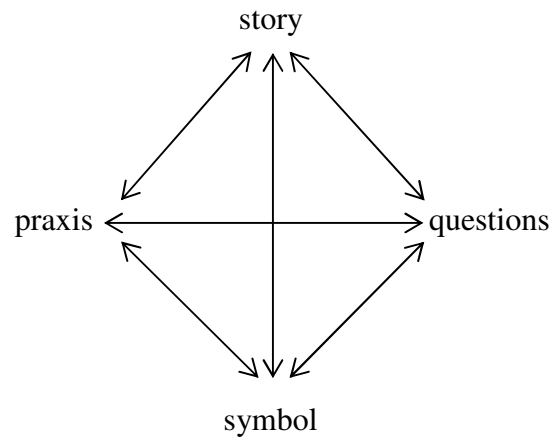
Scripture, the primary source of Christian theology, is not a set of commands and propositions, but a narrative story filled with a variety of genres including poetry, history, epistle and others. If the distribution of genres in the Bible is taken as a model, then theological writing should not only reflect the epistles of Paul, but also the parables of Jesus, the history of the Old Testament and Gospels, and the poetry of the Psalms. The emerging genre of Theological Creative Nonfiction is a form of theological writing that shows the application of the theoretical truth of systematic theology, and consequently is a valuable tool for bringing truth into the lives of Christians and building the up in their faith.

To say that theological writing should reflect more of life and be influenced by creative writing is profoundly not to deny the important role that theology plays in the Christian faith. Author Anthony Baker writes concerning theology, “the core of the discipline is reasoned argumentation ... so that one theologian can challenge another’s line of reasoning that there is no resurrection, for instance, with a classic if-then rebuttal: ‘If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised’ (1 Cor. 15:13)” (Baker paragraph 8.). Giving up reasoned argumentation in favor of stories and poetry would open the door to all kinds of heresies and ambiguities that would endanger the faith and lives of the saints. But at the same time that Baker argues for prioritizing reason in theological discourse he still calls for a more creative approach, saying, “to say that the theologian ought to become like the poet is not to suggest that she must surrender her quest for logic and precision” (paragraph 26). Logic and precision are essential to theology, but they are far from the only essentials. Pastor and author Douglas Wilson says that “we have to be careful because we are not drifting toward any postmodern nonsense which rejects timeless truths because they are *true*. Rather, we complain about timeless truths because they are not true *enough*. We are seeking to be incarnational Christians who believe that truth is *not* a collection of dead abstractions—truth *lives*” (“Love Story” paragraph 3). Christians need Christian novels, poetry and histories, and also a way of writing about theology that embraces the creative elements of story that make these other genres appealing and influential in people’s lives.

Theology, the explanation of belief about God and his work in the world, is only one element (albeit a crucial one) of the Christian worldview. Christianity is not only a set of beliefs, but a complex worldview system made up also of other elements such as

foundational stories, important symbols, and day-to-day practice. In his book *The New Testament and the People of God*, Bishop N. T. Wright says that worldviews are inherently theological, and therefore theology should be considered through the interpretive structure of worldviews (122). Theology cannot be properly understood outside of the interpretive framework in which it was written and necessarily must be read due to the theological nature of every person's worldview. Wright argues that the four main elements of a worldview are story, questions about the ultimate nature of human existence, symbol, and praxis. By "story," Wright is referring to different cultural narratives or foundational stories, "the most characteristic expression of worldview, going deeper than the isolated observation or fragmented remark" (122). A symbol is "an aesthetic device or a sign used to convey information visually" ("symbol"). As an illustration Wright refers to skyscrapers and the New York victory parade as two symbols of the American Way. One of the most important elements of worldview, but at the same time the easiest to overlook because of its pervasiveness, is that of praxis, the routine actions and structure of life, "a way-of-being-in-the-world" (122). A person may think he clearly grasps his belief system and consistently holds to it, but his actions, if inconsistent with his articulated beliefs, may reveal more truly how he understands, or misunderstands, the world. As Wright says, "the real shape of someone's worldview can often be seen in the sort of actions they perform, particularly if the actions are so instinctive or habitual as to be taken for granted" (122-123). For Christians, the goal is that every aspect of worldview is inextricably related without contradiction and the content of belief directly relates to how life is lived on a daily basis.

The following diagram taken from Wright's *The New Testament and the People of God* (124), illustrates the interrelationship of the four elements of a worldview.



When these different terms are plotted on the chart, the potential separation between elements becomes apparent even while their interdependence is illustrated. Wright plots theology proper between questions and story, which is visually the farthest removed from praxis. Wright draws attention to this distance, saying, “*theology* concentrates on the questions and answers, and focuses specifically on certain aspects of them,” but points to the solution at the same time as the potential problem by saying that theology “is bound to integrate these with the controlling stories, and it will be wise if it goes about this task fully conscious of the interrelation between questions and stories on the one hand and praxis and symbol on the other” (125). The conceptual distance between theology and praxis become a moot point if a worldview is truly integrated like it should be.

Wright’s visual representation may seem arbitrary, but a brief reflection on history and culture indicates that at least in the instance of theology and praxis the charted representation holds true. From Jesus’ warning to his disciples to listen to the Pharisees’ words and not their deeds, to current exhortations to practice what is preached,

the divide between theology and practice is frequently seen and felt. Theology is in danger of, and perhaps has tendency towards, being isolated as a heady intellectual discipline even though it should have everything to do with practice because it explains the great questions of who we are, why we were created, where we are going, and what we should do in our lives. But the way theology explains these questions often does not translate into the language of getting up early and working hard all day, the language of loving family when they are lovable and when they are not, in short, the language of everyday living. Author Douglas Huffman says that “we cannot have an accurate knowledge of the Bible that is unrelated to life; nor should we have knowledge of life that is ungoverned by Scripture” (145). Knowledge of the Bible unapplied to life brings none of the blessing that Scripture was intended for. James 1:22-25 says, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.” In this passage as well as many others, the Bible continually warns against faith without works, words without action.

An internally consistent framework is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for an adequate worldview. In addition to consistency, the framework must also offer purpose and at least the potential for happiness, which is ultimately only possible if it conforms to the objective truth of God’s creation and plan for salvation. Arthur Holmes says that “the perennial quest for a worldview [is]... a quest for a life that is good rather than bad, for purpose in life rather than emptiness, for something that promises hope

rather than despair” (*The Contours of a Worldview* 3-4). Literature that embodies a worldview shows its fleshed-out ramifications, and thus shows more clearly the hope offered by a worldview, or reveals pitfalls therein.

Theological literature that portrays how Christians live is one way that theology can be more fully integrated into practice. Sallie M. TeSelle argues for a form of biblical theological writing where the message and the way the message is applied go hand in hand. She argues that “if theology becomes overly abstract, conceptual, and systematic, it separates thought and life, belief and practice, words and their embodiment” (630). TeSelle makes no concession for treatises intended for theologians and scholars that explain complex doctrine, arguing that all theology should be parabolic in nature. However, though her argument may be overshot, she is right in saying that all theology cannot be abstract. This abstraction can be avoided in some cases if the mode of expression of the gospel and theological truths translates directly into the mode of living them out.

TeSelle’s models for such writing are the parables of Jesus, told using the language and practical life situations of the audience he was speaking to, yet pointing to a way of life that bears a fuller purpose: “The secure, familiar everydayness of the story of their own lives has been torn apart and they have seen another story – the story of a mundane life like their own moving by a different ‘logic,’ and they begin to understand (not just with their heads) that another way of believing and living – another frame or context for their lives might be a possibility *for them*” (634). The parable conveys theological truth that theoretically could be abstracted from the story, but it is the context of the story itself that brings the truth to bear on the lives of Jesus’ hearers. TeSelle says

that “if Jesus as the parable of God, as well as Jesus’ parables, are taken as models of theological reflection, we have a form that insists on uniting language, belief, and life” (631). Christians today should tell stories like Jesus did, in a way where the message and the story are one and the same, with apparent, full application to life.

TeSelle is not arguing that Christian writing should look the same today as the first century parables, but that it should contain the same qualities of being “ordinary, contemporary, and imagistic” that made them so effective when Jesus spoke them (631). If TeSelle’s criteria of being contemporary is an accurate evaluation of a parable’s key elements, modern Christian language modeled after the parables will in fact look on the surface rather different from the ancient agrarian narratives that come immediately to mind. Contemporary writing based on the parables will make use of current settings and characterization, as well as contemporary generic modes of expression. As TeSelle says, “a theology that takes its cues from the parables finds that the genres most closely associated with it are the poem, the novel, and the autobiography, since these genres manifest the ways metaphor operates in language, belief, and life” (361). Parables convey their message through metaphor, not in the sense that each component of the parable stands for something else, but in the sense that the entire parable is a case-in-point fiction that points beyond itself. In the same way, contemporary writing meant to serve the same purpose as Jesus’ parables should apply truth in a story that relates to the lives of readers and shows them their responsibility to apply the truth in a similar way.

The application of the truth found in literature to the life of the reader is part of a process of worldview transformation. The work of Owen Barfield in his book *Poetic Diction* helps to explain how this process takes place. Barfield is speaking primarily of

poetry, but his broad definition of poetry as words “selected and arranged in such a way that their meaning either arouses, or is obviously intended to arouse, aesthetic imagination” (Barfield 41) encompasses a great range of creative work. Barfield argues that humans interpret life while they experience it through the lens of past perceptions, recalled primarily through language. He says, “On the basis of past perceptions, using language as a kind of storehouse, we gradually build up our ideas, and it is only these which enable us to become conscious, as human beings, of the world around us” (Barfield 56). Experience gives rise to new ways of speaking about things in the world, which in turn gives rise to broader ability to experience. When a person reads poetry or other creative writing, he can learn from the author a new vocabulary and perspective that allow him to experience things he would not have had access to before based on his personal perceptions alone. Barfield illustrates this point with the example of seeing a steamship after reading the South Sea pidgin description ‘thlee-piecee bamboo, two-piecee puff-puff, walk-along-inside, no-can-see.’ Barfield says that “the absorption of this metaphor into my imagination has enabled me to bring more than I could before. It has created something in me, a faculty or a part of a faculty, enabling me to observe what I could not hitherto observe” (55). Because he had read this description, he saw the steamship not just through Western eyes, but also through the perception of a South Sea Islander. His consciousness and his ability to experience and enjoy the world were enlarged.

C. S. Lewis echoes his friend Barfield’s idea, saying, “Each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and a selectiveness peculiar to himself. ... We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel

with other hearts, as well as with our own. ... We demand windows. Literature as Logos is a series of windows, even of doors" ("We Demand Windows" 51). Lewis' window metaphor illustrates how worldview is changed through literature by becoming the pane through which the world is seen. Gene Edward Veith Jr. articulates a similar idea when he says, "Literature presents a worldview from the inside. Reading a poem or a novel puts the reader inside the author's consciousness. The author's assumptions, emotional reactions, priorities, and sense of what is important are part of the texture of the work" ("Reading and Writing Worldviews" 125). Literature is not only window and door, but it is also the hearth rug and furniture of a worldview. The details that an author includes, the type of story that he chooses to tell, and the subtle nuances of the way he portrays characters, are all an outflow of the way he sees the world, and can influence the reader in his own outlook. Barfield's theory complements TeSelle's call for the parables to be a model of theological writing by illustrating more clearly how the parables can change people's way of thinking. The meaning invested in the mundane events and objects in the parable will continue to reverberate in the life of the hearer.

In evaluating and understanding works secondary to Scripture the final authority must be the word of God as revealed therein. All other works have value insofar as they reflect God's truth, but this can be done in more ways, and at times better ways, than explaining what Scripture means. The Bible tells a story. God delights in telling stories. To fully and accurately understand the Bible we must also tell stories. Still, no matter how well written a book is, how engagingly it presents the faith or accurately it reflects God's truth in the world, any piece of literature does not directly mediate salvation or grace to the reader by an automatic process necessitated by the quality of the work itself.

Like fellowship with other believers, enjoyment of nature, or academic study, God uses literature to enlighten the believer through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Application

The genre of creative nonfiction is growing in popularity over a wide variety of fields, and when employed in the area of theology can answer the needs of theological writing outlined above. Since creative nonfiction is a fairly new and still evolving genre, scholars still find it difficult to pin down a list of necessary attributes that place a work within its circle. Lee Gutkind, founder and editor of the magazine *Creative Nonfiction*, and author of multiple books on the genre defines it cursorily on the magazine's web page as "true stories well told." This succinct definition gets at the heart of the matter, but Gutkind lists a fuller set of criteria to complete the picture.

The concept in question is related through scenes

Narrative scenes are the driving force behind creative nonfiction. Whether an author is trying to communicate the history of the Appalachians or facts about the flight patterns of migratory birds, he does so through scenes reminiscent in style of a novel or short story. In the book *Keep it Real*, Gutkind says "the primary way [making a story meaningful] is accomplished in creative nonfiction is through the use of scene" (21). Effectively employing this method is quite difficult: "the stories or scenes not only have to be factual and true (You can't make them up!), they have to make a point or communicate information, as I have said, and they have to fit into the overall structure of the essay or chapter or book. It is often a daunting task. But it's essential" (creativenonfiction.com). If the author is successful at relating a concept through a narrative scene he gains the double achievement of telling a good story and framing

information in a way that is received with pleasure. In some creative nonfiction works an entire book is told as a unified, semi-chronological whole. In other cases the scenes are more obviously chosen deliberately to convey a point and may have more of a thematic unity than narrative unity.

Stories related are factually true

As the *nonfiction* element of the name indicates, in creative nonfiction, the scenes used to communicate a point or concept are firmly based in reality. By writing in this accepted genre, the author enters into an implied agreement with his audience that he will not falsify facts as she tries to communicate a broader theme. The detail necessary to create a believable and engaging scene is more specific than most people can remember accurately. The ethic of the genre demands that the author remain as close to the details as memory will allow, but assumes that minor or texture details will have shifted within her memory.

The scenes are arranged to develop a theme

Even though the scenes that make up works of creative nonfiction are true, they still are carefully used to communicate meaning beyond themselves in the way that novels can communicate universal themes. The method here used is also similar to that employed by the authors of the narrative portions of Scripture. Grant Osborne argues that the Biblical authors were historically accurate and at the same deliberately framed events to portray their full theological significance. Osborn quotes authors Provan, Long and Longman, saying “all historiography is story, whether ancient, medieval, or modern. Historiography is ideological narrative about the past that involves, among other things, the selection of material and its interpretation by authors who are intent on persuading

themselves or their readership of certain truths about the past” (688). The fact that historical events are carefully selected and arranged does not diminish the veracity of the work, but reveals truths out of mundane events.

Stories are told using literary devices common to other forms of creative writing

A large part of the creativity in creative nonfiction is seen in the narrative, scene by scene style. In conjunction with the scenes, authors of creative nonfiction use the literary devices commonly employed in good fiction such as different points of view, metaphor, dialogue, figurative language, and more. The same criteria that make fiction pleasurable to read make creative nonfiction a pleasure to read. The very form and flow of the language should contribute to the readers desire to continue to enjoy reading.

Stories are often, though not necessarily, about the author’s own life and experience

Because the narrative style necessitates that the author recreate a believable situation for his scene, the author of creative nonfiction must be highly knowledgeable about her subject. The most natural way to ensure this familiarity is for the author to write from her own personal experience, which is what many authors in fact do. The author’s actions offer an example of living, while her reflections and reactions offer commentary on the quality of that life. T. S. Eliot says that “when we read of human beings behaving in certain ways... we can be influenced towards behaving in the same way” (Eliot 100-01). Eliot is speaking primarily of fictional stories, but the same principle holds for creative nonfiction because of its essentially narrative form. As theologian Rene Girard points out, humans are fundamentally mimetic beings, always modeling their desires and goals on models around them (I See Satan Fall Like Lightning

xi). The authors of creative nonfiction self-consciously offer themselves as models, sometimes as a positive example and sometimes as warning.

Theological creative nonfiction: goal of work is to bring the reader into a fuller life in the faith

Among the many subjects addressed by means of creative nonfiction are those of God, Christianity, and what it means to live out a life of faith. Writings on these subjects can be said to constitute their own smaller genre of theological creative nonfiction. Authors can focus on anything from day to day living, to creation, to the language of Christianity and a whole range of different subjects, but the common theme that unites all theological creative nonfiction is the goal of bringing the reader into a closer relationship with God and a fuller life in the faith. When it is thus employed, creative nonfiction functions in a similar way to the sermons of a good preacher. The preacher's duty is to study the Scriptures and understand them accurately, and to convey this understanding to his congregation. He does so by telling stories, and making direct application to his congregation's lives. The application of the truth of Scripture through the guiding and conviction of the Holy Spirit in the words of the preacher and the hearts of the congregation is what constitutes good preaching over against academic teaching. Like the sermon, theological creative nonfiction applies the truth of Scripture, showing its relevance to real life circumstances.

Creative nonfiction has the appeal of both relevant factual material and pleasing form, and as a genre is enjoying great popularity both in publishing houses and in academic writing programs. In his book *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, Theodore Rees Cheney says that nonfiction is the genre of contemporary America because of the rise of

“a new kind of mass audience” (2). More people are being educated now than ever before, and these people want books that are enjoyable to read but at the same time convey relevant information. Rees Cheney claims that “[n]onfiction had begun to function in something of the same way for an educated middle class as the realistic novel had for an emerging economic middle class – it brought the new and brought it engagingly” (Rees Cheney 2). Creative nonfiction is moving into the realm where it can be taken seriously as a means of communicating important facts and ideas, not providing entertainment, though happily entertaining as it informs.

Creative Non-Fiction not only allows authors to arrange true events in significant ways, but also invites stylistic freedom at the broad structural level all the way down to poetic metaphoric language and word choice. Veith commends writers in this vein, saying that they are “sometimes nearly baroque in the passion, ornateness, and swirling beauty of their language. Sometimes criticized for over-writing, for quirky inversions and excessive descriptions, these writers are unintimidated by Modernist austerity as they revel in God’s gift of language” (*Reading Between the Lines* 212). One of the great merits of this genre executed well is the pleasure gained from reading it. Author Douglas Hesse says that creative writing works are “read in leisure, with that term understood in its broadest and most profound dimensions, the very act of reading providing pleasure of experience and ideas made interesting through language” (“Who Owns Creative Nonfiction?” 263). The enjoyment in turn greatly expands the work’s ability to communicate. T. S. Eliot writes that “it is just the literature that we read for ‘amusement’, or ‘purely for pleasure’ that may have the greatest and least suspected influence upon us” (103). Eliot intended this statement as a warning against the influence of the

predominating secular literature, but the principle happily holds true for quality literature that is a pleasure to read.

Many Christian authors have ventured into the realm of creative nonfiction with a devotional motivation. Among these are three authors from widely different backgrounds who utilize the genre to fulfill their various needs of expression: Christian Wiman, a poet struggling with cancer and God, Anne Voskamp, a mother of six and first-time author, and N. D. Wilson, author primarily of children's fantasy and adventure novels. The three authors have widely different backgrounds both in their history as authors as well as in their personal lives. Even though their works all exhibit the essential qualities of theological creative nonfiction they vary widely in style, structure, and content, showing the capacity of the genre to accommodate different purposes and ideas.

Christian Wiman

Christian Wiman's *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer*, published in 2013, is a collection of poetry, prose, and poetic musings attempting to communicate Wiman's thoughts and experiences of spirituality in a secular world. In 2007 Wiman was diagnosed with a rare form of bone marrow cancer, and the book is partly a result of his struggle with God in the face of such pain and suffering. In speaking to other people about his cancer, Wiman realized that many people who do not identify with the Church or understand the standard language of Christianity are still interested in God (Wiman x). Wiman, a poet by profession, wanted to communicate to both believers and those outside the Church some of the spiritual truth he had learned, but not using the traditional vocabulary of spirituality, a lexicon that he sees as worn out from misuse and overuse. As a result, much of the book is concerned with the language and vocabulary of spirituality.

Wiman shoots wide of the mark at times, finding fault with some ways of speaking about Christ that come directly from Scripture. However, to the extent that Wiman is consistent with the teaching of Scripture, his encouragement to develop a contemporary language of Christianity is constructive and thought provoking.

My Bright Abyss does not rely as heavily on scenes as could be expected of a work of creative nonfiction, though it uses enough along with meeting other criteria to merit classification in the genre. Wiman's background as a poet shows through both in the smattering of poetry throughout the book and perhaps also in Wiman's high level of comfort with abstractness and ambiguity. Many sections in the book are neither poem, nor narrative, nor argument, but more the wandering thoughts of a poetic mind struggling with ideas. Wiman uses his stories from childhood all the way through recent years to show how his beliefs were formed as well and to drive home arguments. Wiman's writing would perhaps have been stronger had he relied even more on narrative scenes.

The most persistent thread in *My Bright Abyss* is that faith should be articulated in terms consistent with a modern believer's perception and experience of life. Wiman repeatedly expresses weariness with the language of the Church and systematic theology, saying that it no longer speaks to a contemporary audience. Wiman argues that this need can be met more effectively through art than through the language of the Church that Wiman sees as outdated and void of innovation and creativity. Wiman says, "what I crave now is that integration, some speech that is true to the transcendent nature of grace yet adequate to the hard reality in which daily faith operates. I crave, I suppose, the poetry and the prose of knowing" (4). Wiman desires literature that accurately articulates not just spiritual realities, but that corresponds to the kind of life through which those

realities are experienced. He thinks that by telling stories and writing poetry about experience in addition to writing about the wisdom or truth that can be abstracted from the story, authors are able to convey “the poetry *and* the prose of knowing.”

In its best moments, Wiman’s book is itself the kind of writing that he argues for throughout its pages. At times his language is uplifting and beautiful. His use of poetry is refreshing. The short, sometimes fragmented paragraphs juxtaposing unrelated stories and reflections mimic the seemingly unrelated yet meaningful episodes of human life. Wiman’s way of showing how simple experiences point to truth beyond themselves encourages the reader to reflect on her own simple experiences and discover meaning there.

Throughout the book, in his poetry, reflections, narrative sections, and short essays, Wiman reads like a poet. His use of language is often surprising and at times beautiful. One paragraph in the chapter entitled “Sorrows Flower” reads:

Sorrow is so woven through us, so much a part of our souls, or at least any understanding of our souls that we are able to attain, that every experience is dyed with its color. This is why, even in moments of joy, part of that joy is the seams of ore that are our sorrow. They burn darkly and beautifully in the midst of joy, and they make joy the complete experience that it is. But they still burn. (19)

Wiman does not only explain why and how sorrow is a part of joy, but he shows it using metaphor, even throwing in a pun on the two senses of the word ‘burn’ at the end. Much of the book is written in a similar vein with the rhythm and flow of the words sometimes claiming greater prominence than the meaning, as when he writes, “I believe in absolute

truth and absolute contingency, at the same time. And I believe that Christ is the seam soldering together these wholes that our half vision – and our entire clock – bound, logic-locked way of life – shapes as polarities” (164). The lines have an almost sprung rhythm lilt, embodying in the language the poetic vision of life that Wiman is arguing for.

My Bright Abyss contains many autobiographical stories. Wiman rarely moves out of writing in first person even those sections that are not strictly narrative. As a result, the entire book has the flavor of “‘I’ writing for an ‘I’ time” that Ronald Weber associates with creative nonfiction (qtd. in Rees Cheney 4). The context for Wiman’s whole struggle with the language of the Church is given through the story of Wiman’s conversion as a young boy. He grew up in a town of which he said “to call the place predominately Christian is like calling the Sahara predominately sand” (5). At Church one Sunday morning when Wiman was twelve he had an overwhelming salvation experience which everyone acknowledged but no one was able to explain satisfactorily to Wiman. Later, in times of doubt, he wondered if he had just faked the experience because he was conditioned by the culture to expect it (6). Though Wiman later accepted that something significant had really happened to him on that day, many of his later questions stem from the inadequacy of his Church to relate to his experience. Whether Wiman’s Church really failed him or he misunderstood what he was taught, the personal context that his conversion story gives to the rest of the work both shows the kind of teaching Wiman is responding to and perhaps what are some of his preconceptions about the subject.

Wiman’s purpose in *My Bright Abyss* is more to raise questions and encourage discussion than to offer guidance and answers. In an interview with Marcia Nelson from

Publishers Weekly, Wiman says that he thinks many Christians are currently skeptical about the language of Christianity, a point of view that he finds healthy and refreshing. His book continues to encourage this skepticism and only makes the slightest attempts to develop or explain what a new language of Christianity should look like. Part of Wiman's issue seems to be with set language which has lost its meaning due to lack of belief, as in the case of highly liturgical Churches whose services are full of wonderful creeds and prayers, but whose people mumble them without conviction. Here the problem is not with the language itself, but with the hearts of the congregation. Whether Wiman's own problem with the language of the Church is a matter of his own belief or not, he is right in saying that we should articulate the faith in new ways as our language changes. New creeds, new prayers, and new analogies should be the result of the growth of a living faith alongside the growth of a living language.

Wiman argues throughout his book for a new kind of writing that does not lean on the worn out language of the Church. He argues instead for a poetic language, which implies a desire for concrete imagery and a closer relationship to the contemporary life that systematic theology supposedly neglects. Wiman's own prose, however, often drifts off into abstraction and at times incomprehensibility. He avoids systematic theology with such fervor that he leaves himself no doctrinal ground to stand on. When he does make explicit statements about what he believes they often stand shakily in the swampy ground of the heterodox, as when he questions the very historical resurrection of Christ (165). Wiman clearly intends to write a form of theological creative nonfiction, but his own theological confusion renders his success questionable. As with any other text, the

believing reader must read *My Bright Abyss* discerningly in the light of Scripture, gleaning the wheat and discarding the chaff.

Anne Voskamp

Anne Voskamp's *One Thousand Gifts*. Published in 2010, also falls within the genre of theological creative nonfiction. The book recounts the journey of a farmer's wife and mother of six learning to see God's giving hand in everything from the simple mail in the mailbox (48) to the hard providences of life such as sickness and accidents. Over the course of the time portrayed in the book, Voskamp moves from a life of anxiety and discontentment to a life of thanksgiving. The impetus for change in Voskamp's life was a friend's challenge to write a list of one thousand things she was thankful for. The active practice of giving thanks was the training Voskamp needed to incorporate what she knew to be true into her life as well as her mind. Through recounting her own story she attempts to open the eyes of her readers to all the good gifts that surround them as well.

In *One Thousand Gifts* Voskamp oscillates between relating important events along her road to a life of thanksgiving, and explaining what the events mean to her. The book opens with the heart rending scene of her younger sister's death after being hit by a truck. Voskamp traces her path of choosing bitterness back to this tragic event when both she and her family blamed God in anger for the young girl's death. Voskamp's road to healing is portrayed in scenes as well. A conversation with a friend about her need to change is narrated with the vivid background detail of children playing outside, light summer dresses, and slicing cucumbers (42). Voskamp's victories and failures are told of in her book as they unfold in life, through interactions with children, friends, and spouse.

The list of one thousand gifts that gives the book its title reads like a series of scenes, though more like snapshots than stories.

Voskamp is at her best when she simply tells stories of specific events, but often she does not trust that her scenes have communicated what she wants to say and repeats herself by reporting her inner thought process or by explaining the scene. When she seeks to overtly draw out meaning from her experiences Voskamp often overstates what she has already shown in her narrative. In one of her most vivid scenes, Voskamp is inside preparing dinner when her husband comes inside and tells her that the moon is full. She leaves her work behind her for a while to rejoice in the gift of the moon. She runs after it like a little child, reflecting on the beauty of nature:

God is present in all the moments, but I do not deify the wind in the pines, the snow falling on hemlocks, the moon over harvested wheat. Pantheism, seeing the natural world as divine, is a very different thing than seeing divine God present in all things. I know it here kneeling, the twilight so still: nature is not God but God revealing the weight of Himself, all His glory, through the looking glass of nature. (110)

Though *One Thousand Gifts* would be a stronger book if it relied more on the power of imagery and scenes, on the whole the style and method is effective and has certainly touched many readers in a positive way. The book enjoyed nine weeks on the New York Times bestseller list (“Best Sellers”), and is passed from friend to friend, showing that it is answering a need in women’s lives.

The overarching message of *One Thousand Gifts* is that “the crux of Christianity [is] to remember and give thanks, *eucharisteo*” (153). Throughout the book Voskamp

slowly assimilates the head knowledge of *eucharisteo* into an active worldview of giving thanks. This way of living does not come to her through careful rationalization, though the Bible and theologians do teach the very same truths. In fact, Voskamp draws attention to the fact that her ungrateful living was at odds with what she said she believed all along, saying, “If I’m ruthlessly honest, I may have said yes to God, yes to Christianity, but really, I have lived the no” (16). Instead, Voskamp comes to truly live with a spirit of thanksgiving only when she practices daily naming one small gift after another as they come to her. Although the mind can comprehend the importance of thanksgiving, “life-changing gratitude does not fasten to a life unless nailed through with one very specific nail at a time” (57). Following Voskamp through her process of coming to faith by the guidance of the Spirit takes the reader on the same journey of translating theoretical truth into practiced truth.

One Thousand Gifts is almost entirely autobiographical. Some sections are more focused on theological reflection than storytelling, but even these passages are written explicitly as Voskamp’s own reflections on specific circumstances in her life. By specifically talking about the circumstances in her own life however, Voskamp is able to relate more directly to others. The concrete details of caring for a hurt child and trying to find out why farm animals are sick are much more powerful than the abstract ideas of suffering and worry.

The main theological argument that runs throughout Voskamp’s book is that the Christian life should be one of thanksgiving. All gifts are from God, and therefore are good. A fulfilled and joyful life only comes, and *will* come, from giving thanks in all things. Some readers, such as *Christinity Today’s* contributing blogger Rachel Stone,

have taken issue with her focus on thanksgiving, saying that “it threatens to flatten all of Scripture to fit Voskamp's *eucharisteo* vision” (n.pag.). *One Thousand Gifts* does rather one dimensionally focus on thanksgiving, but not because she is arguing that thanksgiving is the way to salvation, rather because thanksgiving had enough of a transformative effect on her life to fill the pages of a whole book. Micha Boyett, responding to Stone's critique of *One Thousand Gifts*, says, “One Thousand Gifts is changing my life, not because gratitude is the key to salvation, but because gratefulness brings me into God's presence every time” (n. pag.). Thanksgiving does not make people saved, but the saved are thankful people. Voskamp does not attempt to explain all of Scripture and the full scope of the gospel. She is writing to fellow believers who understand the foundation but have become lost in the application. One of the strengths of a book like Voskamp's is that they have the freedom to focus on one aspect of Christianity in a way that brings it to life. *One Thousand Gifts* would be theologically misleading if it were read in isolation, but, balanced by a healthy diet of books from other perspectives, can be very convicting and encouraging in the Christian walk.

N. D. Wilson

N. D. Wilson's *Notes From the Tilt-A-Whirl* is an attempt to show, at least in part, the overwhelming goodness and bountiful nature of God's world. The structure of the book roughly follows the course of the year, containing stories from Wilson's life organized in correspondence with the four seasons. This very straightforward broad organization is the frame on which is hung an otherwise extremely diverse and seemingly haphazard collection of narrative, reflection, conversational prose, and witty quips. In his introduction, Wilson says of his own intentions that “this book attempts to find unity in

cacophony. The barrage of elements (philosophy, poetry, theology, narrative, *ad nauseam*) may at times feel random. It isn't. It is intended to be symphonic: dissimilar voices and instruments moving from dissonance to harmony. The emotional spectrum (anger, love, happiness, grief) is meant to be as broad as the material covered" (Wilson xi). Wilson does not attempt to make sense of the entire world, but by showing snapshots of seemingly disconnected events he illustrates a unified way of seeing the world that approaches life and God with wonder and humility.

Wilson's theme of seeing the world as the crazy place it really is lends itself to being conveyed through scenes. Wilson capitalizes on this advantage, effortlessly showing his meaning with no need to lean on the crutch of telling. One of the most vivid stories is about his toddler son Rory chasing a blue butterfly. The son wants to hold it, but Wilson, the wiser, older father, knows that they cannot catch it. But to Wilson's surprise the butterfly lands on his son's outstretched arm while he freezes and watches in rapt amazement. After the butterfly flits off, Rory wants to hold it again. Wilson, again the experienced adult, tells him that he had his one chance and was very lucky at that. But for a second time, wonder of wonders, the butterfly lands on Rory's arm again. Wilson reflects on the incident, saying, "How many lies have I told him? I and the world both. I have repented now. I no longer tell him that he can't touch the moon from my shoulders. I tell him to stretch, and I offer to run and jump" (119-120). Wilson repents of forgetting the wonder of God's creation, and shows his readers a way to remember.

Notes From the Tilt-a-Whirl is a book about seeing the world in a new way.

Wilson is classically educated with a background in philosophy and theology, but refuses to accept the compartments that such disciplines want to divide the world into. In a short

piece for *Christianity Today*, Wilson outlines the problem he is addressing in *Notes*: “We might not be able to tame reality, but we can tame our *perception* of reality. We intellectualize in order to feel in control” (“To Tame The World n. pag.). Wilson applies this criticism primarily to philosophers, but the point can be extended to those theologians who intellectualize their view of God as well as the world. Wilson says that such categorization is a safety mechanism, and a temptation for all people, including himself: “Bombarded with glorious song from a heavenly chorus, we become defensive philosophers. We ponder and discuss reality, thereby ignoring it.” Wilson’s goal is to strip away the façade of dignity and sophistication and reveal the world for the wild ride it really is, only controllable by the one who created it and set it spinning in the first place.

Many portions of the book read more like an essay, more in the military term than the literary one, small forays against a thought or idea. At times both the narrative and essay portions lapse into poetic musings. In one of the key opening passages Wilson approaches the question of worldview in characteristic style through looking directly at the world itself:

I look around at the stuff of the world and I ask myself what it is made of. Words. Magic words. Words spoken by the Infinite, words so potent, spoken by One so potent that they have weight and mass and flavor. They are real. They have taken on flesh and dwelt among us. They are us. In the Christian story, the material world came into existence at the point of speech, and that speech was *ex nihilo*, from nothing. God did not look around for some cosmic goo to sculpt, or other god to dice and recycle. He sang a song, composed a

poem, began a novel so enormous that even the Russians are dwarfed by its heaped up pages. (Wilson 23-24)

Wilson is making more of a point about perspective than a scientific argument, but the creator God so permeates his worldview that he consistently holds the hypothesis of a spoken world throughout the book. Wilson's prose, dominated by parataxis, colorful analogy, and strong assertions, reflects the uncontrolled world he is speaking about. Wilson uses this writing style self-consciously, though it still flows naturally from his pen. In the preface he warns the reader, saying, "at this point, I feel the need to piously admonish all readers to buckle up, as it is the law. But I've forgotten to include seat belts, and I don't know where I left the liability waivers" (Wilson xii). For those strong stomached enough to stay aboard, *Notes From the Tilt-a-Whirl* is a fascinating and eye opening ride.

Through a range of topics as broad as art, death, kittens, and the problem of evil, Wilson again and again calls the believer back to wonder at the good God who is telling such an amazing story. From beginning to end the book is overflowing with profound theological truth. He wrestles with the problem of evil on par with many scholars, but with an added artistic flair that makes hard truth easier to swallow. Wilson does not apologize for his God in the face of the pain and suffering in the world, but constantly rests in knowing that the world is in the all-powerful hands of a good God. Wilson's book has met with a wide variety of responses, from those who claim that the book changed their lives and the way they see the world, to those who could not get past the third chapter, to those who are left nauseous and dizzy from the wild ride.

Devotional Creative Non-Fiction is an effective genre for communicating theological truth both to Christians who also read highly academic theology, as well as to the less academically inclined. Donald Williams, in the essay “Christian Poetics, Past and Present,” says that “the principle of incarnation is why our images communicate so well; that the *imago Dei* is key to our identity as poets as well as human beings” (Williams 11). Christ’s incarnation redeemed this world, allowing it again to become “very good.” Because of Christ’s incarnation, people can rejoice in this world because it has real, eternal meaning. Literature is stronger and more effective the more accurately and fully it reflects God’s world. Theological Creative Non-Fiction can mirror the world in both form and content, being firmly rooted in the images and events of the world that Christ was born into, as well as seeking to point readers towards a fuller understanding of what that birth means. Author Leland Ryken echoes William’s statement, saying, “Like the incarnation of Jesus and similar to the sacraments, literature embodies meaning in concrete form” (Ryken 27). Creative Non-Fiction serves this end better than traditional theology because of its life filled form, and better than fiction because of the explicitly applicable nature of its content.

The Church today needs authors to continue to shape the Christian view of the world and the language used to speak about God’s work in it. If Christians do not have a framework and vocabulary to see the world as created and governed by God, the secular culture will readily supply its own stories and practices to replace it. Christian readers should also support those writers who have made strong efforts to reveal God’s goodness in new and creative ways. The reading community who benefits so much from the work

of the artists also dictates their work to some extent by creating a publishing and economic environment in which authors can make their voices heard.

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