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## THEOLOGY IN THE WAY WE LIVE NOW: A THEOPOETICS OF LIFE WRITING

*You seem to be still in pain and somehow angry,' said the nice young man who had travelled all the way from his University on the Eastern edge of Europe (mountains and pine forests) to be with us in Scotland at the theological symposium. He had given his perfectly conventional, well-behaved paper the evening before and it had been warmly received. 'Also,' he said, 'you are writing about experiences in your life that took place nearly twenty years ago.' He would have been an adolescent boy with sun-bleached hair playing beside a lake. 'I wonder why they are still unresolved for you.'*

*This pleasant boy had looked at me and seen my wounds.*

*I have always known God. When I was young we talked together in an easy way and liked each other a lot. Belief became passion as I grew into adulthood. I fell in love. I preached. I prayed, I taught the faith. But it was infertility that made me a theologian.*

*How to describe this? I wanted a child. I longed for a child. These are not adequate words. My limbs were cut off? I was consumed with a fever? Like the girl in cursed, magic shoes every step I took was walking upon broken glass? These images are too crude and dramatic to describe the nature of an intimate suffering that goes with you everywhere; which is tattooed on your skin and inscribed on the lenses of your eyes. Also my infertility extended beyond my body. It reached past me and was connected to the derelict buildings of my neighbourhood, the blasted young lives, the interminable war, the famines and the spreading deserts. It gazed upwards to the endless, cycling rounds of dead, cold stars.*

*It was the empty page.*

*But if I could not conceive and carry or give suck I could write. My pain was energy and I wrote and wrote. I hurried home from work to write. In the evenings I sat at the kitchen table, drinking wine with my husband, surrounded by notebooks and pens. Writing was the only thing that helped. But I was not writing smooth words; they were angry and jagged and exposed my loss.*

*I was writing to God.*

*I have been writing now these twenty years. The notebooks have become published volumes on library shelves; 'theology through life writing'. I have a daughter whose grace is beyond words. Her birth is also witnessed in my writing. Although my laptop has replaced the notebooks I still do my theological work at the kitchen table because for me it is a place of revelation. Here I am centred in the pains and joys what passes through me and goes on around me. Now I see myself as both barren and blessed. And sometimes I think that is the situation of all of us who try to bear truthful witness in our times. I cannot honestly say that the words or the wounds have healed. It is embarrassing when a young man can see this so clearly but what am I to do? These are the wounds I carry and they are the wounds of God.*

### *Creative Tensions*

Theopoetics is transforming the way theology is written and understood. As this edition of the journal demonstrates a new energy and creativity is entering theological discourse. This reaches back to draw upon the rich inheritance of

imaginative thinking within our ancient traditions and it also responds to the distinct cultural and spiritual needs of our times. The sacred currents of this age flow through suffering and desiring bodies, everyday material life and all forms of aesthetic creativity. They increasingly bypass the old circuitry wired by abstract reason and ideal forms. However, while this movement is often welcomed as a source of theological renewal it is important to ask what kind of refreshment it is bringing to the traditions of faith. Is it offering rich, new life to theology that is over circumscribed by its conventions and distanced from contemporary concerns and sensibilities? Or is its impact rather more disturbing and radical – new wine tearing through the old skins?

Both ways of approaching theo-poetics stand in lively tension at the present moment. The first, drawing upon approaches established in theological aesthetics, is keen to stress *both* the challenging difference *and* the deep complementarity between poesis (human creative making) and theology. It is their asymmetry that allows their fruitful coupling within the divine economy. The second approach ascribes to human creative making a much more powerful revelatory significance; poesis is seen as a mode through which the divine speaks in strange and disruptive ways that theology may not contain and sometimes cannot comprehend. In this perspective artistic creativity does not supplement the theological enterprise it also deconstructs and fundamentally undermines its authority.

In this essay I shall explore these two contrasting visions of theo-poetics with particular reference to my own area of research and practice. This was known in the past as spiritual biography - a broad term including biographical reflection on the lives exemplary 'saints' and also confessional autobiographical writing. It is now more frequently termed *spiritual life writing* in recognition that it shares much in common with other forms of literary production. As my reflection develops, I shall focus particularly upon women's life writing. However, I begin with briefly noting the ancient uses of life writing within Christian tradition and the creative tensions have been present from the beginning.

### *Coherence and Conflict in Life Writing*

Life writing is a particularly ancient and important way of expressing faith. Indeed it could arguably be described as an archetypal theological form. The Gospels themselves show how the most sacred mysteries can be best expressed in terms of a life lived and sacrificially laid down. Similarly Augustine's *Confessions* (Augustine (1963 [397-400])), which stand as a cornerstone of the Christian tradition, reveals not only the spiritual power of the life writing but also how complex and nuanced doctrinal debates can be powerfully explored through this capacious genre. However, both these paradigmatic examples of spiritual life writing already display the tensions inherent in life writing itself.

The gospel accounts are vivid and beautiful. They appear clear and luminous in their witness. However, their evident heterogeneity and use of deeply crafted narrative forms alert us to the fact that life writing in the theological context is neither transparent or innocent but always artful. We cannot smooth out these

foundational narratives out to protect ourselves from their challenging literary qualities. They do not combine into one seamless whole and indeed their power is partly due to the gaps, divergences and mysterious silences they preserve at the heart of our understanding of the Word made flesh.

Similarly Augustine's great work is deeply ambivalent for faithful readers. Taking his pattern from the epic quest legends of the ancient world (tales of trials, gods and heroes) he carefully crafts a narrative of how, through a perilous journey, the self moves away from the chaos of the unconverted state to find its reconciled fulfillment in God. As the narrative develops self and story are brought into coherence and wayward aspects of experience are braided together into a sanctified whole. As Robert Bell writes 'spiritual autobiography in the Augustinian mode leads ... from sin to grace like a line of melody seeking resolution (Bell, 1977:116). A pattern is established that has dominated the Western literary tradition from *Pilgrim's Progress* to *Harry Potter* and which sets before us an image of the self journeying towards its true identity and its spiritual home.

However, this harmonious project is riddled with conflicts. Augustine himself struggles with the fact that he must bring an autonomous self into being in order to justify the claims he makes for God. However, he also wishes to abject his own agency in creaturely submission and present God as the author of his life and text. In other words he wishes to both 'write' and 'unwrite' himself and the work testifies to the distress these conflicting desires create. 'Let me not be my own life' he cries (1963: 290) Larry Sissons argues that this tension skews and off-centres his writing and 'unsettles notions of individual and freely determined authorship' (1998:98) in the literary form he established. Whenever we encounter spiritual narratives in the Augustinian mode we can expect to witness a strong pull towards harmonious coherence and an equally strong force that must witness to the disruption in a life where divine and human agency both unfold within each other and stand forever in tension.

### *Life Writing in Contemporary Theology.*

I have argued that the earliest forms of spiritual life writing within the Christian tradition demonstrate the tugs of conflicting forces pulling them towards coherence and also displaying elements that defy easy resolution into narrative wholeness. These tensions are part of the gene code of the biographical genre itself<sup>1</sup> and continue to be evident in life writing today. As theology, increasingly drawn towards theopoetics, turns to life writing as a significant resource its ambivalence is both resisted and welcomed.

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<sup>1</sup> This point is made by Linda Anderson in her influential text on biographical writing (2004). She argues that Augustine can be credited with establishing the autobiographical tradition with its authoritative narrative 'I'. Yet, at the same time, he undermines this project through his creaturely acknowledgement of the illusory nature of the independent and singular self; coherence and chaos struggle together in his writing (2004, p. 27).

This can be illustrated in relation to two important recent books by feminist theologians which both use life writing as their chief resource. I shall briefly compare *Sally McFague's Blessed Are the Consumers* (2013) with Claire Wolfeich's *Mothering, Public Leadership, and Women's Life Writing* (2017). Both works address pressing theological challenges and do so by looking to the lives of significant people of faith in order to root their theological thinking in lived experience and develop a truly incarnational theology. Neither book is naïve or simplistic in its use of material from faithful lives. Both acknowledge the complexities of this process and the need to avoid easy generalisations or idealized hagiographies. However, we will find that McFague and Wolfeich take very different approaches to their material and these differences will be most apparent when they in turn come to reflect upon the life of that most attractive, prophetic and difficult woman: Dorothy Day.

As the title suggest Sally McFague's work concerns the need to discover holy and healing ways of living in the context of a consumer culture that is impacting disastrously upon the fragile ecologies of our planet and the wellbeing of its peoples. In order to do so she is seeking models of lives lived in deep devotion to Christ which have the potential to point us towards ways we can also embody radical obedience and counter the destructive tendencies that threaten our common good. She expects to discover through reading exemplary lives (she chooses as her models the Quaker John Woolman, the radical mystic Simone Weil and the self-sacrificial activist Dorothy Day) confirmation of a religious insight that 'happiness is found in self-emptying and satisfaction is found more in relationships than in things, and that simplicity can lead to a fuller life.' (2013:x). She is particularly interested in how each of these stories can become a form of pedagogy illustrating how contemporary readers might respond to God's love and call today.

In this pedagogical intention McFague is fundamentally aligning herself with a dominant Augustinian motif which we previously described as the melodious resolution of the movement from sin to grace. Indeed, it is the journey of the self from alienation towards reconciliation with the divine that is her chief concern as she hopes that close attention to this process in those she studies will help her readers to undertake this same pilgrimage. McFague considers that all her exemplars undertook forms of the same archetypal spiritual journey. Like Augustine's this entailed an awakening to the divine resulting in a process of transformation and realignment of the will and orientation towards the other. In the particular context of this work McFague has chosen as her examples people who experienced the transformative process particularly in terms of voluntary kenosis, the relinquishing of personal rights and comforts and the full acceptance of voluntary poverty. It is her conviction that this spiritual process enabled Woolman, Weil and Day to overcome self as they were caught up within a universal spiritual vision. This new worldview allowed them not only to achieve personal sanctification but also to make a decisive public and political contribution. It is within this frame that McFague presents her reflections upon Dorothy Day.

For McFague it was Day's gradual recognition that she must renounce those things that prevented her full self-giving to Christ and others that marked her spiritual journey. This process included a painful separation from her lover and the renunciation of direct maternal care for her daughter Tamar. As Day was drawn more and more into the kenotic vision of St Francis and the communitarian ideals of St Benedict through her engagement with the Catholic Worker Movement she also renounced her privacy, space, enjoyment of good books and good music. Her time was devoted to the service of others. Her efforts to make hospitable provision for the poorest and her corresponding commitment to political change required what McFague evocatively terms a 'wild' self-emptying passion; a quality she hopes to invoke in her readers. Through narrating Day's life story in terms of an idealized form of spiritual quest McFague seeks to make enliven and en flesh the teaching of the Church on personal responsibility, social duty and sacrificial service to others.

Claire Wolfeich takes a rather different approach in her work on mothering as a personal and public role. Her intention is to interrogate the messy ambivalence inherent in our experiences of maternal love and to discern what fresh theological understandings might emerge as we reflect without sentimentality upon this key aspect of many women's lives. Strong themes emerge from her study of women's maternal and spiritual life writing across the centuries and from a variety of cultural contexts. These lead Wolfeich to present many challenging ideas concerning the lack of theological engagement with the need for rest, self-nurturing and care. She makes a more radical theological intervention, however, through deconstructing the division between private, personal and political in relation to maternal relations. In so doing she presents a revisioned understanding of mothering as a paradigm for political engagement and theological thinking.

There is much in this work that disrupts the boundary walls of established, gendered theology. However, the use of life writing means that this work is not simply an intellectual challenge to dominant models. The work draws life from the lives it narrates and is nowhere more powerful than in its discussion of the personal trials and conflicts experienced by Dorothy Day. Although she draws upon the same autobiographical writings and contemporary sources as McFague, Wolfeich presents a very different picture of this iconic figure. Wolfeich describes how Day came to faith through her experiences of sensual love and found a mystical satisfaction in her experiences of feeding her baby; holding her close and looking into her eyes. In this frame the renunciation of intimacy, and particularly the prolonged separation from/desertion of Tamar which enables Day to undertake her kenotic witness take on a very different appearance. Wolfeich does not present a conventional picture of the melodious qualities of the spiritual journey. While all the maternal narratives she narrates contain ambivalence Day's is marked by particularly deep suffering, conflicts and trauma. Her life writing speaks in the 'double voice' of a person unable to find an easy reconciliation between her sense of spiritual calling and her maternal love. There is an 'unresolvment' here that cannot be smoothed away into the familiar contours of the spiritual journey. For Wolfeich Day represents in some ways the Biblical figure of Rachel inconsolable for her children. Daringly Wolfeich

suggests that the unspoken, uneasy, unknown experience of maternal trauma might be understood as apophatic – in the sense that it is both unspeakable and an epistemology of affect. Wolfeich carefully attends to this particular quality in the life narratives she studies and gives theological voice. Her work calls us to move beyond the saccharine simplicity that still characterizes theological understandings of motherhood and build an understanding of mothering that is mature and complex. This project pushes ambiguity and pain to the heart of our theological imaginings and spiritual understanding.

### *Learning from Other Lives*

In the examples above I have explored how life writing can take theological reflection in differing ways. Both McFague and Wolfeich are creative and committed Christian theologians whose political and spiritual concerns resonate with the vision that this journal has boldly championed for many years. However, McFague is using life writing to enrich and support theological thinking that whilst certainly progressive is deeply established within the social teaching and spiritual traditions of the Church. To do so she attempts to smooth out the lives she narrates. There is no attempt to disguise the conflicts and personal suffering experienced as part of the spiritual journey. However, as her intention is moral pedagogy her exemplars are made to display a growing coherence and certainty in their vocations. The melody moves steadfastly towards resolution by employing the familiar tropes of the Augustinian quest.

In contrast Wolfeich is fully aware of the unstable resource that life writing represents and for her this quality represents its most lively theological contribution. The material obstinacy of human life defies confinement within closed theological systems and the genius of life writing is that it prompts us to revisit received assumptions and encounter new, and sometimes disruptive, theological insights.

Clearly these contrasting approaches illustrate the differing ways of positioning theo-poetics that I outlined at the beginning of this article; it can be used either to enrich and support or to critically challenge theology. It is probably apparent that my own passion and energies are most usually devoted to the second task. I see my theological calling as being to ferment (and drink!) new wine. There are theologians enough patching up the wineskins. Indeed I would like us to become even more radical in the kind of lives we consider as spiritual resources and the manner we engage with life writing.

In his recent book *Divine Generosity and Human Creativity* (2017) the celebrated British theologian of the imagination, David Brown, argues that theology needs to reach beyond the witness of 'holy lives' if it is to be attuned to the disturbing revelatory power of God. He takes as an example the work of the artist Francis Bacon, a none-believing gay man whose personal relationships were conflicted and frequently abusive. He describes two significant creations in particular. Bacon's 'Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion' is a work of artistic imagination that draws upon Bacon's own turmoils to portray the agony and suffering of that scene in a manner that far exceeds the reach of most

religious art. However, another set of three images which show the suicide of Bacon's lover, George Dyer, in the bathroom of a Parisian Hotel touches the deepest levels of loss and tenderness. Brown writes that Bacon's desperate efforts to express what he knows of love calls our attention to the fact that even in flawed or promiscuous relationships people still embody in their imperfections something of its divine qualities. Indeed, when loving is undertaken at great personal cost beyond safe boundaries its radiance can be particularly startling.

This essay in no way seeks to minimise the many theological dilemmas we encounter in engaging with those challenging issues of embodiment and desire which have been the focus of so much debate in the last half century. The Church continues to struggle with the ethical challenges of the way we live now. However, whatever our ethical convictions, there is no doubt that the life writing that emerges from contexts of intense suffering and desire does provoke us to new insights into the groaning of creation in travail and the travail of our Creator in this process.

In my own work on motherhood I have gained so much from reading of lives on the boundaries; of experiences marginalised and occluded in mainstream discourse. For example in Julia Leigh's recent book on her IVF journey, *Avalanche* (2016). I found descriptions of the longing of a woman for a child that are unparalleled in Christian literature and which inspire heartfelt theological reflection. I was also deeply moved and challenged by the books ending:

What I try to hold onto – now that the treatment has failed – is a commitment to love widely and intensely. *Tenderly*. In ways I would not have previously expected. *I to You; I to We; I to This*. To unshackled my love from the great love I wanted to give my own child. (2012, Kindle: 1125).

Similarly, Sonja Boon's evocative essay 'Autobiography by Numbers: or, Embodying Maternal Grief' (2012) tells of how she developed irrevocable health problems as the result of pregnancy. She cannot now ever disassociate grieving from her experience of giving birth - yet finds this ambivalence almost impossible to voice:

This body speaks... My body is restless. Rooting. Wandering. Searching. Buried in my flesh, a clinging desperation. A haunted body that seeks an audience. That wants to speak. A story that resists its telling even as it yearns for an audience. (2012: 197)

Once again I am moved by the grace contained in this painful narrative of maternal anger and woundedness. Boon somehow discovers, amidst her grief, courage that can still declare, 'My grief, an open wound. My wound, the site of possibility, potential, wonder' (2012: 195).

I am finishing this article at my kitchen table - of course. As I come towards a conclusion I find myself challenged by the work of Leigh and Boon to be more self reflexive concerning the distinctions I have made between a theopoetics of life writing that supports the theological enterprise and one which challenges and critiques it. If I am honest the distinction cannot really hold. Even the theologian committed to present faithful lives as pedagogical examples get's caught up in the quirky, creative individuality they encounter – the wild qualities



that make them holy. And, as I have argued, those narratives that appear to deny coherence, that are deeply attentive to pain and desire and even those that appear far removed from any Christian pattern, are often also attuned to wonder; to glory; and to a fragile beauty at the heart of things. There is refreshment and renewal to be found within them that will sustain theological thinking even as it engages more fully with the way we live now. I should have been more truthful and less polemical. I know well, in my heart and in my life, that in our faithful creativity we can be both barren and blessed.

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