

# THE GLASS

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NUMBER 21

SPRING 2009

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Published by the Christian Literary Studies Group, a Professional Group in association with the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship. Editorial and subscriptions: *The Glass*, 10 Dene Road, Northwood, Middlesex HA6 2AA.

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ISSN 0269-770X

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## Editorial

Biographers persuade us that lives may, by way of warning, example or otherwise, convey more than a bare story. Their works may mediate telling aspects of a society, a generation or a culture, and take over the role of historiography. Group biographies (Suetonius on the Twelve Caesars, Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, Anthony Wood's *Athenae Oxonienses*) seek to establish a pedigree, define an élite, or construct a canon. As biographers shape their stories they have not only their subject, but an audience in view.

Although they usually write about their subjects' actions, reflecting from time to time on their motives, it is evident that biographers have agenda of their own. Why did they select their subject, and why might their choice interest their readers? Readers expect some evaluation of the person and career described, but if biographers are to be allowed to criticise their subject – and why shouldn't they? – how far can their readers go along with their judgements?

In his *Life of Milton* Samuel Johnson records: 'Milton's republicanism was, I am afraid, founded in an envious hatred of greatness, and a sullen desire of independence.... He hated all whom he was required to obey. It is to be suspected that his predominant desire was to destroy rather than to establish, and that he felt not so much the love of liberty as repugnance to authority.'

Notwithstanding that Miltonic antagonism to greatness, Johnson commented that 'Before the greatness displayed in [*Paradise Lost*] all other greatness shrinks away.... The characteristic quality of his poem is sublimity. He sometimes descends to the elegant, but his element is the great.' Nevertheless, 'the want of human interest is always felt.' Johnson's hope near the end of his own life was that he had written the *Lives of the Poets* 'in such a manner as may tend to the promotion of piety.'

The gospels, four biographies of Jesus, were composed for an explicit purpose. Luke wanted his patron Theophilus, and no doubt others, to have written, attested confirmation of what they had been told about Jesus. John the Evangelist says in a conclusion that his book was 'written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.' Spare though the gospel narratives often seem, they are freighted with numerous signs of the biographer's presence. In an aside Mark tells us that 'in saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean"' (7:14).

It is not uncommon for the subject of a biography to essay some manipulation or control of the product. T. S. Eliot made it clear that he would have no truck with biographers. Documents may be made available, or withheld. Alan Bennett has given all his papers to the Bodleian Library. We can find Jesus giving directions for the future telling of the gospel narrative when he explicates a parable, or corrects his disciples' misapprehension about the lavishing on him of ointment by a woman disciple shortly before his end. On what seemed a common sense reading, her action was wasteful and perhaps shameful, but Jesus gave it a different interpretation: 'She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. Wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told' (Mark 14:8). Reading or writing biographies we need to keep alert, and have, as it were, ears and discernment for a multiplicity of interpretations.

Roger Kojecký

## Hagiography versus Biography? A Century of Lives of Tolstoy

Philip Gorski

In 1912 the Russian director Iakov Protozanov produced a remarkable short silent film depicting the last days of Tolstoy, who had died two years previously. Called *The End of a Great Old Man* it concludes with the soul of the saintly, long-suffering figure ascending to heaven and being welcomed by Christ Himself, in a scene which was clearly designed to anger the Hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church. (They had – rather half-heartedly – recently excommunicated him). The film was only shown abroad, since it was banned in Russia – not by the Church, but by Tolstoy's wife Sonya, who understandably objected to the blatantly hostile portrayal of her as a peasant-hating harridan, with no sympathy for Tolstoy's most deeply held beliefs.

I mention this film not only because it gives us a rare and wonderful cinematic insight into the controversies surrounding Tolstoy's last days, but also because in its mixture of unashamed, exuberant partiality and fervent sincerity, it stands clearly in line with ancient hagiographical traditions. Iconic moments of Tolstoy's spiritual journey – Tolstoy speaking with peasants, making his own boots, signing away profits, working in the fields – are captured with economy and polemical confidence. There is a definite audience in view and a didactic lesson to be taught, regarding the virtues of Tolstoyan Christianity, virtues that are to be emulated. Indeed, as with most hagiography, the messy psychology of the subject is not its prior interest. Rather, it is the urgent moral and spiritual message, larger even than the ostensible subject, which achieves ascendancy. And in this one might say its hagiographic priorities are at odds with those of modern biography.

One year earlier, the first biography of Tolstoy had appeared, written by Pavel Biryukov.<sup>1</sup> A.N. Wilson includes Biryukov in the category of what he calls 'the many young men who hovered about Tolstoy and lapped up his opinions'.<sup>2</sup> Biryukov was indeed, unsurprisingly, a convinced Tolstoyan, and also an intelligent, sensitive and sincere figure who genuinely loved Tolstoy as a man. This love is understandable, not least because Tolstoy took care to spend time with these younger 'seekers after truth', ask them for their opinions and take them seriously as members of an upcoming generation. Biryukov's book might now be seen perhaps as naïve, idolising, and uninterested in Tolstoy's human failings, and consequently rather weak as a biography. Yet the book in fact *assumes* that Tolstoy was an imperfect creature, and concentrates rather on his life-long struggle to transcend those imperfections. It is primarily an account of Tolstoy's *spiritual* development, and owes much – however unconsciously – to the conventions of Russian Orthodox hagiography. Biryukov was a baptized Orthodox, brought up in the church, and a devout Christian. He had been an active member of a Christian philanthropic group, the 'Society for the Dissemination of Enlightenment in the Spirit of the Orthodox Church', had links with the Old Believers and other dissenting Russian religious groups, and he would have been familiar from an early age (as was Tolstoy himself) with the myriad lives of the saints and hagiographic folk tales of Russian and Byzantine Christianity. One senses the lingering presence

<sup>1</sup> *The Life of Tolstoy*, London, Cassell and Co, 1911.

<sup>2</sup> *Tolstoy*, Penguin, 1988, p. 383.

of saintly models from this literature in Biryukov's book. (There was, in fact, a remarkable parallel between Tolstoy's own life and the life of the eleventh century St Theodosius of the Kiev Caves Monastery, a widely revered saint, renowned for rejecting his privileged background, for insisting upon working with, and dressing like the peasants, and for repeatedly running away to join the pilgrims. Theodosius was also engaged in a fraught relationship with a female relative who tenaciously sought to temper his spiritual zeal – although in this case it was a mother, rather than a wife. Tolstoy himself was not unaware of the parallel.) Biryukov's book aims not only at the biographical recounting of the external 'facts' of Tolstoy's life, but at the representation of an inner, spiritual *podvig*, or great ascetic endeavor, undertaken for the Glory of God. The *podvig* is a widespread and fundamental concept in Russian orthodox Christianity and, as one reads Biryukov's account, one becomes aware of his sense of this type of dynamic, a trajectory or heroic spiritual purpose to Tolstoy's life and work that is of inestimably greater interest to him than the daily squabbles and 'missings of the mark' that might concern a contemporary biographer. It is not so much that Biryukov is engaged in self-censorship, or incapable of noticing Tolstoy's character defects, or that the book is the product of an unhealthy, obsequious following around Tolstoy, it is simply that Biryukov's priorities are different, that he *sees* Tolstoy differently, and his sight has an urgency and moral purpose. One might describe his approach as close to the soteriological method of hagiography, written for its salvific effect upon the readership. For although Tolstoyan theology had no place for judgement and hell, it still viewed modern man as being in need of salvation from himself and from a materialistic and corrupting world.

It is also worth noting that Biryukov's readership would have differed considerably from the modern readership of a biography, since Biryukov's would have shared his perspective and had a sympathetic interest in Tolstoy's spiritual evolution. And although Biryukov's book might be said to have in common with hagiography an unapologetic tendency to appropriate the saint for an institution, or for a cause (the Tolstoyan movement), it is also the case that Biryukov's relationship with his readership was not shaped by any market pressure to sell copies in order to climb the best seller list through the revelatory, alluring, but often mundane exposure of his subject's shortcomings.

Aylmer Maude's short biography, contained in 'Tolstoy and His problems', and written while Tolstoy was still alive, and his two volume biography, are primarily intellectual biographies.<sup>3</sup> For Maude, the priority is the dissemination of Tolstoy's ideas, and as with Biryukov, a discussion of Tolstoy's weaknesses of character and domestic problems is not seen as necessary to the biographer's task. It is rather the 'accursed questions' of life and death, questions Tolstoy sought to answer, with which Maude is concerned. Maude was no acolyte, and does not pretend that Tolstoy was not flawed, or that he did not struggle with the everyday moral paradoxes that all of us struggle with. As he remarks, 'Tolstoy was no faultless and infallible prophet whose works should be swallowed whole as bibliolators swallow the Bible'.<sup>4</sup> For Maude, as for the hagiographer, daily sinfulness can be assumed, and it is axiomatic that 'no man is without sin except Christ'. There is no need to labour the point and catalogue the saints daily falling short of their ideals. Instead, the emphasis is upon the attempt to repent and rise above those 'given' sins. Thus Maude's urgent and earnest focus is upon what he calls Tolstoy's 'extraordinary sincerity' and upon 'the work to which Tolstoy has

<sup>3</sup> *Tolstoy And His Problems*, Constable, 1905.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

striven for more than twenty years ... the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, that is, of Truth and Goodness'.<sup>5</sup>

Valentin Bulgakov's work, *The Last year of Leo Tolstoy* is, in contrast, an authorised daily journal, and carbon paper copies of each entry were to be sent to Vladimir Chertkov, perhaps the most zealous of Tolstoy's followers.<sup>6</sup> Bulgakov was a young aristocrat, cultured and perceptive, who had been chosen to record Tolstoy's utterances whilst he was in close proximity to him at his estate at Yasnaya Polyana. Because of this, it is perhaps inevitably a record of what George Steiner, in his introduction, calls the 'frequent dogmatic banality, the imperious flatness of the old prophet's beliefs'.<sup>7</sup> Admittedly there is a certain unintended bathos in the remorseless recording of so much everyday talk. Bulgakov's book possesses a soteriological motive similar to that of Biryukov and Maude. In fact, the evident intention is closer to the compilation of a type of Tolstoyan *apothegmata* with Bulgakov as the amanuensis, and the approach brings to mind the collections of sayings by the early desert ascetics that were widely circulated in the Orthodox world at this time. Most notably, as Steiner admits, Biryukov's book is a further testimony to the simple love that Tolstoy could inspire.

From Maude we move into the era of biography proper. Firstly, with Ernest Simmons' major work, and then, perhaps the high point of Tolstoy biography, the study by Henri Troyat.<sup>8</sup> Both are works of great erudition and scholarship, although their tendency is increasingly what one might call secularised. There is a growing curiosity regarding Tolstoy's foibles, and a lessening of interest in what Tolstoy regarded as the main work of his life, that is, his religious and social thought. Simmons' 1949 biography is in fact prefaced with a quotation from Tolstoy himself, which alerts the reader to what is in store:

I clearly realised that my biography, if it suppressed all the nastiness and criminality of my life – as they customarily write biographies – would be a lie, and that if one is going to write my biography, one must write the whole truth.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, Simmons intends not to shrink from the nastiness and criminalities of Tolstoy's life, as – it is implied – earlier biographers have done. A reviewer of the time, Alexander Nazaroff, noted that the '*profusion of facts of daily life... somewhat dilute the highlights of Tolstoy's ceaseless inner evolution, or revolution*'. Also that if 'condensed' these highlights might stand out in bolder relief and gain in intensity'.<sup>10</sup> But what Nazaroff is perhaps regretting is the relentless and perhaps inevitable drive of modern biography away from what one might call an 'iconographic' representation of an individual's life and towards the accumulation of empirical facts. Troyat's landmark work, although masterfully written by a fellow novelist and Slav, is of the same tendency, in many ways justifying its publication by the greater amount of domestic detail unearthed. Indeed it is interesting to compare Troyat's biography with that of the famous literary theorist and fellow Russian Victor Shklovsky, written in the Soviet Union in 1963. In a revealing phrase, Shklovsky remarks that it is 'embarrassing and difficult to write

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> Valentin Bulgakov, *The Last Year of Leo Tolstoy*, Hamish Hamilton, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

<sup>8</sup> Ernest J Simmons, *Leo Tolstoy*, Lehmann, 1949. Henri Troyat, *Tolstoy*, Penguin, 1967.

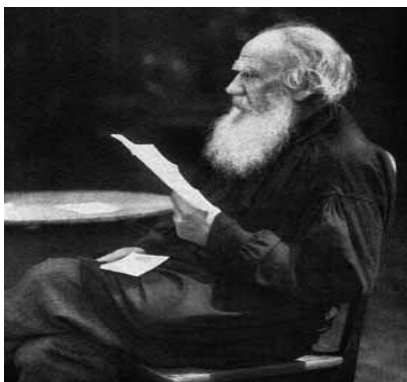
<sup>9</sup> Alexander J Nazaroff, review of Ernest J Simmons, *Leo Tolstoy*, in *The Russian Review*, Vol 6, No 2, Spring 1947, pp. 93-95.

<sup>10</sup> Simmons, *Leo Tolstoy*, p. 5.

about Tolstoy's family troubles', and he exhibits a limited interest in doing so.<sup>11</sup> Not out of prudishness, but rather out of a high regard for what he sees as the transcendent spiritual and philosophical significance of Tolstoy's life. Although written in an ostensibly atheistic society, Shklovsky's book is a product of the deeply religious values and dynamic underlying Marxist Russia, and thus stands apart from the Western tradition I am discussing.

Whilst their work provided invaluable literary and historical resources during the post-war period, the attitude of biographers towards Tolstoy's spiritual struggle is one of gradually increasing scepticism. The emphasis falls upon the inconsistencies, contradictions or hypocrisies of Tolstoy's life and thought, and is in line with the general trajectory of much modern biography. It is now assumed that all relationships, including that between husband and wife, are certainly *not* opaque to the outsider, and are a fit area for the biographer's presence.

At the culmination of this process comes A.N. Wilson's 1988 biography.<sup>12</sup>



Leo Tolstoy  
Courtesy of Holger Terp / Danish Peace Academy

Wilson readily describes his book as an exercise in 'window smashing'. (Although by then one might argue that there were few of Tolstoy's windows left to be smashed. Derision of Tolstoy began when he came into prominence as a religious thinker. One might quote here Lenin's mockery in 1908 that Tolstoy was merely a 'country squire playing the holy fool'.)<sup>13</sup> Wilson is fond of casually describing Tolstoy as 'crazy', and Tolstoyan ideas are swiftly dismissed. In Wilson's ironic and urbane hands, Tolstoy cuts a generally lovable but rather absurd figure. In a chapter dealing with the direction Tolstoy's life took after his spiritual crisis, one finds the following representative portrayal:

There was the daily spectacle of St Lev or the Old monster (varying between the two from hour to hour) laid on for the edification of the children and close intimates. There was Lyovochka the village idiot or holy fool, muttering his holy thoughts, mowing (very badly) in the fields or attracting the derision of simpletons and sophisticates alike by his hamfisted attempts to make his own boots. There was the bearded prophet, doling out wise saws and advice to pilgrims with the portentous self confidence of the *staretz*.<sup>14</sup>

Even in his more thoughtful foreword, Wilson cannot resist producing a short, parodic list of what he calls Tolstoy's 'solutions': 'pacifism, vegetarianism, reading the gospels and knitting your own clothes'. It is thus a very modern, or postmodern work, sceptical of any idea of saintliness, and rigorously avoiding

<sup>11</sup> Victor Shklovsky, *Leo Tolstoy*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1978, p. 597.

<sup>12</sup> *Tolstoy*, Penguin, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Tolstoy as a Mirror of the Russian Revolution*, in *Collected Works*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1973, Volume 15 p. 202. (Russian text: *Proletary*, No. 35, September 11 (24) 1908.)

<sup>14</sup> A.N. Wilson, *Tolstoy*, p. 305.

the kind of moral sincerity encountered in the earlier semi-hagiographical works. Thinking itself iconoclastic, it is in fact often merely condescending. Any idea of Tolstoy as a genuinely *holy* man is deconstructed, and we are given instead a study in the folly of taking Christianity too seriously. It offers a Tolstoy who has been shrunk down to fit contemporary, disenchanting conceptions of what a person may realistically say or do in this life.

### Reading Hagiography Today

It is possible, then, to chart a gradual evolution – in the case of Tolstoy – from semi-hagiography to modern secular, revelatory biography. It is also possible to argue that a casualty of the desire for empirical realism, combined with the pressure to satisfy what is perceived as the spiritually more modest ideals of a secular readership, has been the loss, or certainly the dissipation, of a sense of the spiritual impetus of Tolstoy's life. If this is so, then what are the consequences for a reading of modern biography? One consequence might be that a reader of biography may have something to gain from the reading of its early ancestor, that half-forgotten genre of hagiography.

Here, in this half-forgotten genre, the reader breathes a different atmosphere. The events of a saint's life are in one sense timeless, not anchored in the seemingly exact realism so beloved of much biography, and so they deal with the existential realities of love of God and man, repentance and death. Temptation and sin, of course, are also addressed, but with a more disciplined appreciation of what is germane to the salvific task. In this 'primal' sense, the *vitae* of the saints have much in common with another defining achievement of Byzantine Christianity – iconography. (In the original Greek usage, *hagiographia* were visual images of the saints.) Iconography is not concerned with the kind of realism we associate with later Western religious art, nor is it a means to express the individuality of the artist. It is the product of a sacred and ascetic tradition. Hagiography, also – although in a more fluid manner – duly employs tropes and conventions from a variety of sacred models. Indeed, much scholarly study of hagiography is concerned with the identification and attributing of these recurrent tropes. This is not to say that the personality of the hagiographer is not present. The margins of these texts enact the author's piety and, in dedications, prologues, epilogues, the act of narration is itself a pious performance. Nevertheless, hagiography by comparison with biography is less an expression of the narrator's personality, and retains a fixed, yet not ossified, iconic quality that transcends the geographical and the temporal.

The very act, however, of returning to hagiography goes against a lengthy historical trend. Despite an increase in scholarly interest over the past century, the ecclesiastical tendency has been towards the pruning of, even shying away from, the miraculous element in hagiography. The influential compilations by Butler in the eighteenth century, and Baring Gould at the beginning of the twentieth, witness to this; and many popular dictionaries of saints, up to the present, have followed their example. This tendency can be seen to reflect the influence of Protestantism, and of post-reformation Roman Catholicism. Indeed, the Roman Church's attitude towards the saints has undergone a centuries-long transformation in which the process of canonisation in particular has been subjected to an increasingly complex, juridical process from the eleventh and twelfth centuries onwards. David Hugh Farmer, in his introduction to the *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, remarks that 'little by little the decision to canonise or not to canonize...became reserved to the papacy', and he compares this to the earlier, more informal system based more immediately on local popular veneration, a system which he remarks, 'still obtains

in the Eastern Church today'.<sup>15</sup>

Academic hagiology, by contrast, as I have indicated, has been an increasingly thriving area, with the *vitae* of the saints analysed from every possible textual, historical and sociological angle. One recent sociological approach called for the categorisation of the mass of reported miracles to be divided into *real* miracles, *constructed* miracles based on real miracles, and *entirely constructed* miracles. A project which, by the authors' own admission, would be a formidable task, since it would require the examination of the vast number of miracles considered by the Papal Congregation of Rites, involving at least a hundred thousand testimonies.<sup>16</sup>

I suggest a simpler approach, one which involves a way of reading that is akin to that practised by the original readers of these texts, so often regarded, condescendingly, as unscientific and naïve. And in this it has been very helpful to turn to the insights of the Jewish thinker, Martin Buber.

Buber, in his remarkable work, *Tales of the Hasidim*, compiled a great number of accounts of the words and deeds of Zaddikim, spiritual leaders of the eighteenth to twentieth century ecstatic movement of the Hasidim in Eastern Europe, especially Ukraine, beginning with Israel ben Eliezer, who became known as the Master of the Good Name. These written and oral accounts, collected and edited by Buber, are a form of Jewish hagiography, but pose many similar problems for the modern reader, and even for much modern rigorous and erudite textual scholarship – as does *Christian* hagiography, especially in its miraculous or superhuman content. Yet Buber has something significant to say concerning this. For Buber, a possible key to the reading of such texts is awareness of what he calls *Tradition*, and of *Fervour*. As he writes:

These accounts are not authentic in the sense that a chronicle is authentic. They go back to fervent human beings who set down their recollections of what they saw or thought they had seen in their fervor, and this means that they included many things which took place, but were apparent only to the gaze of fervor, and others which cannot have happened in the way they are told, but which the elated perceived as reality, and therefore, related as such. That is why I must call it reality...something happened to rouse the soul, and it had such and such an effect; by communicating the effect, tradition reveals its cause; the contact between those who quicken and those who are quickened.<sup>17</sup>

It seems to me that Buber is advocating here a reading within a tradition, a tradition which grants space, and respect, to religious fervour. What fervour sees and experiences is 'not only a fact in the psychological sense but a fact of life as well'. This brings to mind Quiller-Couch's remark that 'a legend, however exaggerated upon fact, is its own fact, witnessing belief'.<sup>18</sup> Tradition sustains and shelters these vulnerable facts, and bequeaths them to a new generation of readers, who must also strive to read within that tradition, and aspire to that fervour.

It is significant here that Buber, when dealing with miracle tales, tales in which he says 'the unreal aspects of reality' are to the fore, notifies the reader that he will preface them with the words '*it is told*'.<sup>19</sup> A parallel can be drawn with a

<sup>15</sup> David Hugh Farmer, Introduction, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, OUP, 1992, pp. xi-xii.

<sup>16</sup> See Pierre Delooze, 'Towards a Sociological Study of Canonized Saints' in *Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and Religion*, ed. Stephen Wilson, C.U.P., 1983.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, New York, Schocken Books, 1991.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Donald Attwater (ed.), *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints*, London, Penguin 1986, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> *Tales of the Hasidim*, p. 1.

recent calendar, or Synaxarion, of lives of British Saints, by Father Benedict Haigh and Deacon Ian Thompson.<sup>20</sup> Here, any miraculous or supernatural events, rather than being effaced, are calmly and unapologetically included, and often prefaced with the words, '*It is said*', or more frequently '*Tradition states*'. For instance, of the eighth century St Adrian, founder of a college at Canterbury they write: '*it is said* that after his death he appeared to many of his students and helped them with their studies'. Or, in the entry upon a saint local to Oxford, St Frideswide, they write that she built a cell at Thornbury Wood, Binsey, '*where, tradition states*, a holy well sprang forth'. As with Buber, by the use of such signalling, the reader is alerted to the claims of tradition and fervor, and invited to engage, and assent. Or not, as the case may be.

Textual scholarship has restored the hagiographical to the level of serious history, literary genre, sociological evidence, and a provider of intriguing insights into the political appropriations of competing institutions. But, an engagement with 'what is told' by sacred tradition, with the soteriological potential of the events transmitted by these traditions, and a recognition of the reality of ecstatic fervor, might also make accessible those 'unreal realities', freeing them from the realm of the merely legendary and making them accessible to a sceptical postmodern readership. That distant, elusive, relation between cause and effect, between those who quicken – the saint – and those who are quickened – those who do the telling – thus survives also for us.

There is an obvious danger in any encounter with hagiography that we run the risk of uncritically accepting as inspired a good deal of material invented entirely for worldly reasons of prestige and even material gain. (The hagiographer, as well as the biographer, maintains a presence). But the zealous desire for an entirely reasonable or rational reading of sacred history has also introduced its own problems. For instance Tolstoy's rationalistic reading of the gospels in the *Synthesis of the Four Gospels* which resulted in the expurgation of any event which Tolstoy himself could not conceive as logically possible, or which he concluded to have been a superstition foisted upon an ignorant and credulous people. There is of course, also, an even greater irony in Protozanov's portrayal of Tolstoy the Iconoclast – for whom Christ was simply a man – shown being received, after death, into the arms of the Risen Christ wearing a crown of thorns. Tolstoy would have regarded such an apotheosis as sentimental, even a superstition, but when we see with the fervour of this filmic hagiographer's gaze, do we think Protozanov entirely mistaken?

Perhaps the final word on hagiography might be left to Luther, a scourge of the cult of saints who nevertheless returned to Wittenburg as an older man to restrain his followers from the smashing of images. Although speaking here of images and relics, one might also apply his words to the hagiographic, another at times abused form of devotion. 'Of course', he said, 'there are abuses. But are they eliminated by destroying the objects abused? Men can go wrong with wine and with women. Shall we therefore prohibit wine and abolish women?'<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Benedict Haigh and Ian Thompson, *A Calendar of British Saints* (Orthodox Synaxation), Huddersfield, 1999.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Hugh Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, p. xvii.

## Epiphanies

### Through Years

The same word is written  
– unfathomable –  
like a child's cry.

### Return

My old people's home:  
an eye growing dim  
in the ground.

### Anastasis

Mother's voice  
in the house  
again.

### Loneliness

Before I fall asleep,  
I roll the thread  
on my curled up soul.

### Pregnancy

A mortal  
apprehension  
is growing in my flesh.

### Obsession

Beyond the tent – an old dog in chains.  
In the abyss of our wounds –  
a barefoot child.

### Arcadia

Under the flock of goats  
the chorus of stones  
aspiring to stillness.

### Epilogue

Take this cup away from me  
and turn it upside down!  
So that no stranger should drink.

*Corina Anghel Crisu*

## 'A Good Example to Women': The Biographer's Presence in mid-Seventeenth-Century Women's Conversion Narratives

### Rachel Adcock

When excited believers formed new nonconformist churches in the mid-seventeenth century, or applied to join such congregations, they were expected to analyse and report on the growth and origins of their faith. Such information is crucial to the study of women's religious identity and participation in congregations, but it must also be considered as part of a public text, meant as a constructed example to others. These conversion narratives John Rogers described as accounts of how the believer came to find God 'when they came to be taken off of sin, selfe, world, lusts, or the like'.<sup>1</sup> His collection of experiences, *Ohel or Bethshemesh: A Tabernacle for the Sun*, which appeared in 1653, sought to publish the great variety of different conversions and how the Lord had persuaded them by 'afflictions, crosses, losses, dangers, frights, terrors of Hell', or 'love, cherries, promises, [or] warme tenders of the blood of Christ' (p. 261). Rogers explains that these testimonies, given by individuals on entering the congregation, were beneficial since the 'saints', as they called themselves, could 'instruct one another, and [...] strive together, to excel in exhorting, comforting, and teaching to the edifying of one another' (p. 2). All the saints' voices together would be like 'the voice of many waters, and mighty thunders' (p. 201), and Rogers continues by citing an episode in his Dublin congregation's history, where a member of his church whom he refers to as 'Captain Johnson's wife' was in a most painful labour. She was perceived to be near death by those around her, until her husband hurried to ask the congregation for prayers for her safe delivery. She and her child recovered at the moment their prayers were sent up, leading Rogers and his gathered church to be 'abundantly confirmed in [the congregation's] faith, for future' (p. 369).

Such group activities allowed believers to share their experiences, helping each other to build up their spiritual identity as part of a collective group, and many were published to encourage other dissenters to live godly lives and join the exchange of ideas. However, these congregations struggled when women participated in this exchange and sought to contribute to doctrinal debates within the congregation, and to the discourse in printed works. I would like to discuss the appropriation of women's experiences by male biographers in their attempts to reinforce nonconformist ideals of godliness. I will begin by looking at the accounts of female testimonies that John Rogers compiled from notes he had taken, and then move on to consider Anne Venn's testimony, published by her step-father minister after her death. Finally I would like to explore the implications for women writing biographies of others, concentrating on Theodosia Alleine's biography of her husband, and its later inclusion in Samuel Clarke's *Lives of Sundry Eminent Persons* (1683) without any acknowledgment.

The mid-seventeenth century saw an unprecedented rise in the number of new gathered congregations, which held the belief that God spoke to each

<sup>1</sup> John Rogers, *Ohel or Beth-shemesh: A Tabernacle for the Sun*, 1653, p. 261. Subsequent references will be to this printing and are placed in parentheses immediately following the reference.

individual member, without the need for the intervention of numerous bishops and priests. Such narratives contributed to a shared history to compete with the history of other denominations. Owen Watkins, in his seminal study of Puritan accounts of experiences, writes that 'these life histories were [...] the answer to the Papist challenge, Where are your saints to testify to the truth of your religion? And they refuted the impudent lies which the devil and slanderous tongues circulated of the best men the moment they were dead, and often before'.<sup>2</sup> These narratives had to attest to evidences of God's work, as Rogers wrote 'to bear witness to the world of the workings of God's spirit in these dayes' in order to 'present to the Saints in other places' (p. 417). Such works were vindications of faith, but were also advertisements for others to join and feel similar effects of God on their hearts. It is significant that collectors of testimonies commented that they were published as approachable, imitable godly examples, which were easy for the little-educated man or woman to understand. Richard Baxter writes, in his introduction to the collection of biographies of Joseph Alleine, to which Joseph's wife Theodosia is a contributor, that even children were able to understand and imitate these accounts. He wrote 'before they can Read much of Theological Treatises with understanding or delight, Nature inclineth them to a pleasure in History'.<sup>3</sup> John Rogers also believed that the lives of ordinary, contemporary men and women would be of more use than scriptural figures, since readers could immediately identify with situations they recognised. Introducing the accounts of members of his church he wrote,

That Astrologer, sayes one, was sufficiently laughed at, that looking so intensely upon the Stars, and staring with so much amazement at their twinkling, tumbled (unawares) over head and eares into the water; whereas, had it pleased him to have looked lower in the water, he might have seen them lively represented in that Christal glasse; so many doe but undo themselves, and are over head and ears, that look so high at first (p. 360).

Anne Venn, who looked to scriptural examples for all she did and recorded them in her spiritual diary and commonplace book, testified to feeling disheartened when reading of Biblical figures. She recounted, 'when I read of the patience of Job, I am discouraged, because I am so peevish; when I read of the holiness of David, who prayed seven times a day, and many times in the night rising to prayer, this discourageth me'.<sup>4</sup> Venn, like many believers who joined gathered churches, found solace in finding like-minded friends who shared their experiences with one another, for the benefit of the whole.

<sup>2</sup> Owen Watkins, *The Puritan Experience: Studies in Spiritual Autobiography*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972, p. 24. For more work on the growth of conversion narratives see D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England*, OUP, 2005; Patrica Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression*, CUP, 1983. For works specifically on women's spiritual autobiography see for example Helen Wilcox, 'Private Writing and Public Function: Autobiographical Texts by Renaissance Englishwomen', in *Gloriana's Face: Women, Public and Private, in the English Renaissance*, ed. S. P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992, pp. 47-62; Elspeth Graham et al, *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen*, Routledge, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Theodosia Alleine et al, *The Life and Death of [...] Mr Joseph Alleine*, 1671, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Venn, *A Wise Virgins Lamp Burning [...] Being the Experiences of Mrs. Anne Venn*, 1658, p. 98.

### 'Let your women keep silence in the churches'

Applicants to join gathered churches were asked to declare before the whole congregation the workings of God upon their hearts, showing particular times in their lives when they had felt his presence. John Rogers describes this process: 'everyone to be admitted, gives out some Experimental Evidences of the work of Grace upon his soul (for the Church to judge of) whereby he (or she) is convinced that he is regenerate, and received of God' (p. 354). The fitness of the candidate for admission was judged by the whole congregation, who voted after the testimony was given. As Rogers observes from scripture, '[John the] Baptist neither admitted of scandalous persons, nor must wee into Christs-Church, till there appears a repentance, and reformation' (p. 56). This testimony was considered to be, by most gathered churches, the only time a woman could speak within the church as any sister speaking went against the Pauline scripture 'Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak' (1 Cor. 14:34). From the information that has survived, Rogers was unusual in publishing his stance on this practice, devoting a chapter of his work to it, allowing women to speak out loud not only in giving testimonies, but speaking in general. In answer to critics he writes that 'women are forbid to speak by way of Teaching, or Ruling in the Church, but they are not forbid to speak, when it is in obedience, and subjection to the Church' (p. 294). He later instructs women to 'be not too forward, and yet not too backward, but hold fast your liberty', but next to it in the margin he reminds them 'be not too full of words' (p. 476). There are well-documented examples of women not being able to express themselves eloquently in front of congregations, which sometimes led to them being dismissed from the meeting.<sup>5</sup> However, Rogers allowed those who were 'very unable to speake in publicke [...]', as some Maids and others that are bashful' to give 'in private the account of faith' to someone the church appointed. Even if the congregation received 'such broken and imperfect answers as they give; [...] they be but words dropping sweetness, and savoring of grace, yet put together, may make weight, and will signifie something well-spelled' (p. 291). By 'putting together' the notes he had taken at various admissions, Rogers constructed the testimonies 'as well as I can collect them out of the Notes which I took of them from their own mouths' (p. 391). He includes the most 'extraordinary ones' for his reader's perusal. He annotated the testimonies so that they would be printed with directions in the margin, showing the reader where and why the conversion happened, and particular matters they should take note of. In his account of the testimony of Elizabeth Chambers, Rogers writes that her words were: 'I took the Bible, and looked for Christ there; and looked out and turned to the proofs that Master Rogers mentioned, and examined them; and then I examined my own heart, and searched' (p. 407). Next to this he writes 'a good example to women', encouraging others to read scripture more closely. I have already mentioned how such accounts were published for promoting, recruiting, and exemplifying the godly ideal, and it is clear from an intervention like this that Rogers edited his notes, selecting the best material he could find to fulfil these aims.

Women undertaking these sorts of activities, encouraged by their congregations, provoked open hostility in their non-Puritan opponents. Elizabeth

<sup>5</sup> For discussions of women's position within gathered congregations see Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England 1500-1720*, Routledge, 1993; Anne Laurence, 'A Priesthood of She-Believers: Women and Congregations in Mid-Seventeenth-Century England', *Women in the Church: Papers read at the 1989 Summer Meeting and the 1990 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood, Blackwell, 1990, pp. 345-63.

Avery's testimony was accounted by Rogers 'out of her own mouth' and she expressed 'a great desire to be one with [the company]' (p. 402). She spoke of the loss of her three children, after which she was inconsolable, and then how the Lord appeared to her one morning after she prayed for His help. Within three years she received assurance. These experiences were recorded for the benefit of others: 'then I writ down what God had done for me, and writ about to my friends' (p. 406). Some of these letters she later published as *Scripture-Prophecies Opened* in 1647.<sup>6</sup> In this radical work she uses the image of the fall of Babylon to talk not only about the fall of the Church of Rome, but also the established Church of England, criticising their practices as not being scripturally based. Although her work supported the beliefs of Rogers's congregation, her brother, a Presbyterian minister, not surprisingly disagreed with her writing. He published his reply chastising her:

Your affectation and writing of Assurance did not formerly so well savor, and your printing of a Book, beyond the custom of your sex, doth rankly smell; but the exaltation of your self in the way of your Opinions, is above all: God will never tolerate pride.<sup>7</sup>

Parker shows that she was but 'a weak woman, and ignorant of the wiles of Satan' (p. 15) and asks her to 'redeem your name and credit amongst Saints, which not is lost, by protesting against that horrid Book [which he admits he had not even read (p. 10)], and by humbling your self for an attempt above your gifts and Sex' (p. 17). Derogatory comments were often directed at women who not only practised a doctrine different from the writer's, but had taken it upon themselves to publish their work. Avery was applauded and held up as an example by her pastor, Rogers, but mocked and derided by her religious opponent, Parker, for attempting to interpret her experience of God. As Joan Scott has written, in her article 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', 'conscious ideas of masculine and feminine are not fixed, since they vary according to contextual usage'.<sup>8</sup> At this time of radical religious debate, the feminine ideal was distorted to support wider political struggles.

I have considered women's conversion narratives as written and compiled by a male biographer as part of a collection meant to be exemplary to others. However, these testimonies were not always published in a collection, and I would like now to discuss the experiences of Anne Venn, in *A Wise Virgin's Lamp Burning*, in 1658. Venn's account was published by her step-father, Thomas Weld, with the information on the title-page that they were 'written by her own hand, and found in her closet after her death'.<sup>9</sup> Isaac Knight, Venn's minister at the gathered church she attended at Fulham, described how Venn composed the narrative to which he then added a preface. He wrote:

She contracted all she heard in the publike Ministry into a method, & in a book in Folio hath fairly transcribed some part of that work which would have contained

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Avery, *Scripture-Prophecies Opened, Which are to be accomplished in these last times*, 1647.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Parker, *The Copy of a Letter Written by Mr. Thomas Parker, [...] to His Sister, Mrs Elizabeth Avery*, 1649/50, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Joan Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), 1053-75: 1057.

<sup>9</sup> Venn, *A Wise Virgins Lamp Burning*, 1658, title-page. Subsequent references will be to this printing and placed in parentheses immediately following the reference.

the substance of all the labours of the Ministers of Christ, whose Ministry she was partaker of: And in another had written all the attributes of God and Christ that she could finde in Scripture for the strengthening of the faith of believers (sig. A7v).

Both men explain that they have published her narrative as an example to others, 'that we may tread in her steps, and be followers of her as she followed Christ', and sought to excuse the publication of a woman's writing. Weld hoped that 'it may be useful in these declining times to convince some Christians of their slackness and awaken others, and shew them how to make more heart-work by the example of one of the weak Sex' (sig. A5). His preface is especially preoccupied with emphasizing Venn's bodily weakness, both as a woman, and also her recurrent illnesses towards the end of her life. He writes:

so much of her strength, spirit, affections, and time she spend in Closet-meetings with God in reading, praying, meditation, self-examination &c. that it was a wonder her poor weak body was able to subsist [...]. I marveled (I confess) to see so many of her writings found in her Closet as I did (sig. A4).

He drew attention to how she partook of Ordinances, walking many miles, though her body was weak. Weld also testified that 'she dared not wear such Jewels & apparel as she had by her, for fear her heart should be drawn from God thereby' (sig. A4v). This is comparable to the experiences recounted in many women's narratives, where they berate themselves for their love of material wealth, placing too much value on things of the earth, and not on living their lives according to the word of God.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Venn accounts that the death of her father a regicide, an active parliamentarian, on the night of 28 June 1650 caused her to analyse God's intentions, and she decided that 'the Lord had done this merely in just judgment to manifest his displeasure against me' (p. 26). She saw that the Lord had dealt with her because she 'had not given him due praise for such mercy as I had in so long enjoying [my father]' (pp. 26-7).

Another important consideration in studying the presence of a biographer, compiler, or editor is what kind of audience would have bought these examples of godly behaviour, and for what reasons. Venn's narrative is unusual in that it bears the signatures of the family that owned the book, and, because they are well known, it is possible to speculate how and why it came into their possession. The signatures of Anne Dunch and her family can be viewed on the last page of the copy of *A Wise Virgin's Lamp Burning* owned by the British Library. Anne's name appears first with the date 1658, showing that she acquired it in its year of publication. Her husband John's name appears second in a different script, revealing that Anne signed her own name, followed by their two daughters' names, Anne and Dulcabella, signed in their father's handwriting. Below this appears the name of Major Dunch, the oldest son and heir, signed presumably by himself, and then Samuel, again in the style of his father. This mark of family ownership reveals the importance of the narrative to Anne and her family, leading us to wonder if it was used in family devotion, and as an example of how to scrutinize their relationship with God. Many published conversion narratives depict scenes of children learning from godly parents. In Vavasor Powell's collection, *Spirituell Experiences*, a believer, M. K., reveals that her mother 'tooke great delight to instruct me, to

<sup>10</sup> See Vavasor Powell, *Spirituell Experiences, of sundry Beleevors*, 1651/2. Similar thoughts are recorded by a female testifier, D. M., where she writes 'The Lord discovered to me, that I had too much loved my Husband in a fleshly love, making an idoll of him [...], and so a hindrance to me in coming to Christ' (pp. 33-43).



heare me read, and aske her questions' and allotted her a portion of scripture and a 'part of Erasmus Rotterdamus upon the foure Evangelists, wherein we both took great delight'.<sup>11</sup> There is another reason the Dunch family might have owned a copy of Venn's experiences. Anne was the sister-in-law of Richard Cromwell, who had married her sister Dorothy nine years before, and the daughter and wife of two illustrious MPs, Richard Major and John Dunch. It is perhaps no coincidence that Venn's narrative was published by Weld in the year of Cromwell's death, to lend support to the parliamentary and Puritan cause, and that it came into Anne Dunch's hands. It is quite probable that the Major family were supporters of the gathered churches in some way, since Timothy Venning records that in 1645 he 'opposed those who sought to prevent a group meeting for spiritual exercises at Newport'.<sup>12</sup> Such an example shows the importance of the constant circulation of conversion narratives, whether handwritten or printed, in the development of English Puritanism.

### A wife's care excised from the record

I would like now to move to my last example which is a rare instance of a woman, Theodosia Alleine, writing the biography of her husband, Joseph. Joseph Alleine's biography, *The Life and Death of that Excellent Minister of Christ Mr Joseph Alleine* (1671), was made up of several narratives from friends and relatives (including Richard Baxter), but the most interesting and revealing is that by his wife. Theodosia charts the events from his deprivation under the Act of Uniformity in 1662, to his death in 1666, and she describes how she accompanied him in his incarceration at Ilchester prison for nonconformity and preaching in conventicles. The couple were active in keeping alive the nonconformist cause and in particular she 'for divers Years kept a Boarding School', causing his income to be 'considerably enlarged'.<sup>13</sup> Theodosia's narrative is remarkable in its description of her activities, teaching and managing her husband's school when he was out instructing the families of his parishioners. She then followed him out of Taunton when the Five Mile Act<sup>14</sup> was passed, and lived with friends around the area until his increasingly painful illness made them move to Dorchester to seek a physician's advice. According to the contents page, Theodosia did not imagine the account would be presented in her own words, but the worthy divine, likely to have been Richard Baxter, 'saw no reason to alter it' (sig. A4).

Long extracts from *The Life and Death of [...] Mr. Joseph Alleine* can also be found in Samuel Clarke's *Lives of Sundry Eminent Persons*, which uses as its source many ministers' theological treatises and conversion narratives which were intended as godly examples.<sup>15</sup> Only the names of two male biographers, Richard Alleine and George Newton, are included, and Clarke seems to make special efforts to leave out any record of Theodosia Alleine's writing at all. Her name is erased from the place of authorship, and every time her narrative mentions that she wrote her

<sup>11</sup> Powell, *Spiritual Experiences*, pp. 161-62.

<sup>12</sup> Timothy Venning, 'Richard Major', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, [www.oxforddnb.co.uk](http://www.oxforddnb.co.uk).

<sup>13</sup> Alleine, *The Life and Death*, p. 31. Further references are to this edition and will be placed in parentheses immediately after the reference preceded by *Life and Death*.

<sup>14</sup> It forbade clergymen from living within five miles of a parish from which they had been banned, unless they swore an oath never to resist the king.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Clarke, *The Lives of Sundry Eminent Persons in this Later Age. In Two Parts*, 1683. Further references are to this edition and will be placed in parentheses immediately after the reference preceded by *Lives*.

husband's letters and sermons for him, when he lost the use of his arms, this is simply left out. Clarke admits that Joseph 'could neither put on or off his clothes, nor write any thing' (*Lives*, p. 149), but declines to mention, as Theodosia does, that he could not 'often write either his Notes, or any Letters, but as I wrote for him, as he dictated to me' (*Life and Death*, p. 63). Clarke cannot seem to credit a woman with writing, even if it is dictation, and her authorship is completely erased.

Many small intimate details which make Theodosia's text so interesting have been removed. She observes changes in her husband's countenance in more detail, and nearing his death she wrote that 'he [was] appearing to be more Spiritual, and Heavenly, and affectionate then before, to all that heard him, or conversed with him' (*Life and Death*, p. 54). Lacking a wife's knowledge of her husband, Clarke cuts many such episodes down in both passion and length. The extraordinary care that Theodosia gave her husband in his illness, and the kindness of a minister's widow, Mrs. Bartlett, is also removed by Clarke. Strangers in Dorchester, where they were to be seen by Dr. Lose 'a very Worthy and Reverend Physitian' (*Life and Death*, p.76), they tried to find a private house in which to stay. Most rooms were being used or expected to be used by families in the smallpox outbreak, but Mrs. Bartlett invited them to lodge at her house. Here Joseph received care from 'four young Women who lived under the same rooffe, and so were ready night and day to help me (I having no Servant, nor Friend near me;) we being so unsettled I kept none, but always tended him my self to that time' (*Life and Death*, p. 77). She also charts how every night she slept beside him to turn him sometimes more than forty times, and

though his tender affections were such, as to have had me sometimes lain in another Room, yet mine were such to him, that I could not bear it, the thoughts of it being worse to me then the trouble or disturbance he accounted I had with him, for I feared none would do any thing about him with such ease, neither would he suffer any one all the day to touch him but me (*Life and Death*, p. 78).

All of this tenderness is condensed by Clarke into one sentence simply describing that 'there were also fourteen young women that took their turns to watch with him' (*Lives*, p. 152). The very personal events that led up to her husband's death are also barely summarised by Clarke that

After they had dined he was in more than an ordinary manner transported with Affections to his Wife, whom he thanked for all her care and pains about him, putting up most affectionate Petitions to God for her; and the like also he did after supper (*Lives*, p. 155).

She accounts his last words as 'my dear heart, my companion in all my Tribulations and Afflictions; I thank thee for all thy pains and Labours for me, at home and abroad, in Prison, and Liberty, in Health and Sickness' (*Life and Death*, p.88). Her grief in his final hours is also removed: 'This was most grievous to me that I saw him so like to depart, and that I should hear him speak no more to me; fearing it would harden the wicked to see him removed by such a stroak: For his fits were most terrible to behold' (*Life and Death*, p. 89). She is here remarking God's cruelty to have taken her husband in such painful fits, which even she finds difficult to interpret as a deserved end for her husband's godly life.

Theodosia often made requests to her husband that he be at home more often because of his illness, but these are not included anywhere in Clarke's narrative. The only time a request from her is noted is near the end when he writes 'his

wife would have moderated him in these expenses' (*Lives*, p. 158) which included relieving other godly ministers who fell upon hard times. Alleine's narrative shows how

after the Times grew Dead for Trade, many of our Godly Men decaying, he would give much beyond his ability to recover them: [...]. He kept several children at School at his own Cost; bought many Books and Catechisms, and had many Thousands of Prayers Printed, and distributed among them: And after his Brethren were turned out, he gave Four Pounds a Year himself to a Publick Stock for them (*Life and Death*, p. 96).

Whereas Clarke's narrative implies that she wanted the money for herself, Theodosia writes that although she questioned her husband's offerings to the needy, she was also worried that they would also need the money after her husband lost his living. Looking back at the time of writing her biography, she writes instead:

I must confess I did often see so much of GOD in his dealings with us, according to his promises, that I have bin convinc'd and silenc't; God having often so strangely and unexpectedly provided for us: And not withstanding all he had done, he had at last somewhat to dispose of to his Relations, and to his Brethren, besides comfortable Provision for me (*Life and Death*, p. 96).

In writing her husband's biography, Theodosia manages to record the times in which she was in doubt. Throughout her sufferings which she experienced with her husband, she discovered that God always gave them some provision to help them on their journey, giving an indication that they were on a righteous path and on their way to eternal life. Clarke's narrative was not interested in showing her interpretation of providence.

Unfortunately, one of the only other references to Theodosia apart from her own words is in Anthony à Wood's epic biographical work *Athenae Oxonienses* where he describes the work as a 'ridiculous discourse' and Theodosia a 'prating gossip and a meer Zantippe'.<sup>16</sup>

Not long after was published his life written by Mr. *Rich. Baxter* (who wrote also the introduction) *Rich. Alleine*, *Rich. Faireclough*, *George Newton*, his Widow *Theodosia Alleine*, and two conforming Ministers, who conceal their names. From which Sermon and canting farce or life, especially that ridiculous discourse of *Theodosia*, the reader may easily understand what a grand zealot for the cause this our author *Jos. Alleine* was, and how his life was spent in actions busie, forward, (if not pragmatical) and meddling without intermission. The said *Theodosia* a prating Gossip and a meer *Zantippe* finding *Jos. Alleine* to be a meer Scholar and totally ignorant of Womens tricks, did flatter, sooth him up and woe, and soon after married, and brought, him to her Luer. After she had buried him, and being not able to continue long without a consort, she freely courted a lusty Chaundler of *Taunton*, alienated his affections by false reports, from a young Damsel that he was enamoured with, and by three days courting, they were the fourth day married, as I have been credibly informed by several persons of *Taunton*, and so obtained him meerly to supply her salacious humour.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Biographical tradition branded Aristotle's wife Xanthippe as shrewish, or worse.

<sup>17</sup> Anthony à Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, 1691-2, 2:301.

Here again we have a biographer attempting to rewrite a woman's experiences for his own ends. Theodosia did not in fact marry a 'lustly Chaundler of Taunton', but a constable named Robert Taylor who was also a nonconformist, but little else is known of her after the marriage.

To conclude then, from the examples I have referred to, it would seem that women's voices are in many ways both made available and yet also limited by the genre of the conversion narrative. As Catie Gill writes in her exploration of community writing *Women in the Seventeenth-Century Quaker Community*, 'women's voices are [...] contained by the narrative structure that seems, at first glance, to give them a voice. The question 'who speaks' is an important one to attend to from a narratorial point of view, just as speaking was a major issue for seventeenth-century women'.<sup>18</sup> Women's conversion narratives are part of the writing of a community, and, even if they were published exactly how a woman had written them, they would still be heavily influenced by that community's expectations of how they should behave and write. I have considered how John Rogers rewrote and compiled accounts on both their 'godly' and 'extraordinary' qualities. When Elizabeth Avery published her work interpreting scripture, the writing of which Rogers encouraged, she was chastised by her brother for the very act of interpreting scripture. Anne Venn's account was framed by her step-father minister, published as a godly example, and most probably for parliamentarian aims. When Theodosia Alleine's biography of her husband was published, even amongst others' accounts, it was mocked by Anthony à Wood as being a 'ridiculous discourse', and it was then adopted by Samuel Clarke with all traces of her authorship erased. Male responses to female interpretations of scripture, providence, and of others' experiences that went against their prescribed doctrine led to their being derided in print, and mocked as 'meer Zanthippes'. Nonetheless, in part through the efforts of their biographers and editors (as well as despite them) these accounts survive, and they provide much fascinating evidence about women's position in nonconformist churches.

<sup>18</sup> Catie Gill, *Women in the Seventeenth-Century Quaker Community*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005, p. 53.

# Transatlantic Forms of 'Lived Religion' in Anthony Bukoski's *Polonaise*

Corina Anghel Crisu

People make choices, selectively engage scripts and practices, reflect upon themselves as meaning-making creatures. In this process biography and faith traditions interact to produce discursive strategies toward religion.... Without recognition of these 'lived' – or spiritual – qualities of religion, we risk losing perspective on the diversity and texture of religious life and of its deep personal groundings within an individual's experience.<sup>1</sup>

## The Idea of 'Lived Religion'

The above quotation brings together two key terms – both relevant for the theme of this issue of *The Glass* and the focus of this paper – 'biography' and 'faith traditions', whose interaction is evidenced in an individualised understanding of religion. In contemporary multicultural America, each person's background gives shape to multiple facets of religion, which is no longer defined as a doctrine, but as a 'lived' cultural practice situated 'in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life'.<sup>2</sup> This idea is elaborated upon in a collection of essays edited by David Hall and appropriately entitled *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, which points to a new understanding of religion as an unstable and negotiable notion, created via individual responses to inherited codes of meaning.<sup>3</sup> In an increasingly secularised world, these essays argue, emphasis is placed on how 'religion is lived by the faithful', in order to 'produce the systems of meaning that they need' (p. 22, 27).

Drawing on the idea of 'lived religion' and linking it with the domain of literary studies, Lawrence Buell observes that in the late twentieth century 'literary studies by and large has moved decisively away from religiocentric explanations of the dynamics of cultural history'.<sup>4</sup> As Buell affirms, both religious studies and literary studies have been influenced by the secularisation hypothesis, i.e. the view that the dynamics of religious movements are to be explained on non-religious grounds, having roots in the post-Enlightenment conviction that 'religion will tend to disappear with progressive modernization'.<sup>5</sup> Influenced by Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical models of social practice, scholars of both religion and literature have turned their attention towards what they call 'lived religion' or religious 'practice', laying stress not on the unchanging aspects of fixed doctrines, but on their flexible adaptations to everyday situations.

<sup>1</sup> Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Orsi, 'Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion', in David Hall (ed.), *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, Princeton University Press, 1997, pp. 3-21, (p.7).

<sup>3</sup> David Hall (ed.), *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, Princeton University Press, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Buell, 'Religion on the American Mind', in *American Literary Studies*, 19.1 (2007), 32-55: 32.

<sup>5</sup> Jose Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World*, University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 7, (quoted in Buell, p. 33).

If there is a changing sense of *habitus*,<sup>6</sup> then, it is accompanied by the transformation of 'faith' as understood in a traditional way. In this sense, Robert Wuthnow detects a 'profound change in our spiritual practices' that becomes evident in the abandonment of 'a traditional spirituality of inhabiting sacred places' and in the adoption of a 'new spirituality of seeking'.<sup>7</sup> As in the collection edited by Hall, Wuthnow points to the disappearance of a once fixed value system, in favour of a more flexible view on religion, in which the sacred and the profane are no longer contrastive terms. Indeed, as Wade Clark Roof cogently notices, 'a shift in consciousness' has lately become visible in people's discovery of religion via 'personal quest' so that 'the languages of "journey" and "walk" and "growth" are commonplace' (p. 46). Roof's research is specifically directed to the so called 'Vietnam Generation', to those born between 1946 and 1955; growing up 'in a period of intense cultural turmoil, they quickened the pace of social and religious change' and became 'carriers of cultural and religious values that would permeate "upward" to older generations and "downward" to those born after them' (pp. 50-51).

## The (Auto)biographer of a Polish American *Weltanschauung*

The idea of 'lived religion' – broadly defined and disseminated by the collection edited by David Hall and later adopted by a number of historians and sociologists – provides a theoretical framework for discussing the work of the contemporary Polish American writer Anthony Bukoski.<sup>8</sup> Both a writer and a creative writing professor at the University of Wisconsin-Superior, Bukoski has published several collections of stories, including *Twelve Below Zero* (New Rivers, 1986), *Children of Strangers* (Southern Methodist, 1993), *Polonaise* (Southern Methodist, 1999), *Time between Trains* (Southern Methodist, 2003), and *North of the Port* (Southern Methodist, 2008). His texts draw on autobiographical material, reflecting the multiple nuances of his Polish American descent, the diversity of jobs he has undertaken, and the traumatic experience of serving as a marine in DaNang, South Vietnam.

As a third generation American of Polish descent, Bukoski consciously depicts in his work the ethnic landscape to which he is so intimately connected. Challenging us to think beyond the confines of a nation state, his stories spin narratives of the New World, anchoring them in memories of the Old World. These are second/third hand memories of parents and grandparents, recollected from the perspectives of their children and grandchildren. As powerful ethnic markers, these memories have the role of preserving significant traditions, revealing the subtle ways in which cultural and religious practices can be transplanted from one country into another.

Relevantly, the idea of 'lived religion' – in a transatlantic context – inflects Bukoski's work. As Thomas Gladsky underlines, Catholicism represents 'the mysterious center of [Bukoski's] ethnic world': 'for Bukoski, parish, priest, church, and faith are a sanctuary for ethnicity, a haven from cultural interference and social disorder; to be Polish, as most in Poland and many in the United States would say, is to be Catholic, and Bukoski's fiction makes it clear that if ever the two were one,

<sup>6</sup> In Bourdieu's coinage, the *habitus* is the coherent amalgam of practices linking *habitus* with 'inhabitation'.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*, University of California Press, 1998, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> In Anthony Bukoski, *Polonaise*, Texas, Southern Methodist University Press, 1999.

then surely they [are]'.<sup>9</sup> In an interview with Michael Longrie, Bukoski identifies religion as one of the three symbolic coordinates that define his fictional universe: the value of place, the Catholic tradition, and the Polish heritage.<sup>10</sup> A homage to a passing way of life, Bukoski's work deplores the disappearance of a community, bound by its common belief in Catholicism, at a time when Polish churches are being razed all over the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Bukoski grasps the ineffable of what is lost, illuminating the significance of past religious traditions, their transformation, and camouflaged survival. He takes seriously his role as an (auto)biographer of a Polish American *Weltanschauung* whose spiritual geography is preserved in his stories – reservoirs for containing the living memory of a past that should not be erased by oblivion. He makes visible the destinies of the marginalized Polish Americans, of those as invisible as Ralph Ellison's African Americans. Bukoski thus becomes the biographer of 'minor players', of individuals whose destinies are forgotten, whose dreams have vanished, whose lives are constrained in a circumscribed world. 'Here we are all minor players, minor pieces', confesses one of his characters, alluding to those left behind in Wisconsin, who never had the opportunity of making a future for themselves (p. 178). The writer himself builds on this idea:

A community that was bound, in large part, by its spiritual belief in Catholicism was in some ways destroyed. And this has happened all over the United States – in Detroit, Buffalo, and elsewhere where the Polish churches are being razed. So I'm trying to recall those sometimes noble, if largely unschooled, inelegant people. I'm trying to recall them in these fictions so that their voices and the memory of them, at least in this area about which I write, are not lost (in Longrie, pp. 29-30).

One should notice from the very beginning that Bukoski's world seems frozen in time, that the prevalent season of his stories is winter – the severe winters of Wisconsin when temperatures can drop far below zero – as suggested in his first collection of stories, *Twelve Below Zero*. In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said quotes Wallace Stevens poetic idea that exile 'is a mind of winter', observing that the calendar of exile is different from the others.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in Bukoski's stories, winter suggests the blankness of deserted cityscapes, the bleakness of empty homes, and the inner void of immigrants with circumscribed lives.<sup>13</sup> These characters have

<sup>9</sup> Thomas S. Gladsky, *Princes, Peasants and Other Polish Selves*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1992, pp. 225-26.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Longrie, 'Replaying the Past: An Interview with Anthony Bukoski', *Wisconsin Academy Review*, 42.1 (Winter 1995-96), 29-32, p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> Jay P. Dolan documents the changes in the Catholic community after the 1960s, noticing 'a decline in the number of clergy, women religious, parochial schools, and Catholic colleges', which is however accompanied by 'a massive increase in the number of Catholics living on the margin of the church'. He remarks that 'there is no simple explanation for such contrasting developments. Change has taken place to be sure, but decline has not set in. Rather, a restructuring of religion has taken place, ushering in a new era in the history of American Catholicism. It is an era of fewer priests and more lay ministers, fewer Mass and sacraments, as well as more dynamic parish communities, widespread dissent on issues of doctrine along with intense commitment to religion. The reasons behind such restructuring can be located both in society and in the church' (see Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension*, OUP, 2003, p. 196).

<sup>12</sup> Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, Granta, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Bukoski himself expresses this idea in the interview with Michael Longrie: 'I've always

'minds of winter', their sense of isolation and solitary introspection reminding us of Edward Hopper's or Raphael Soyer's paintings, haunted by characters wrapped up in themselves, who do not communicate with each other.

Written with disarming sincerity, Bukoski's stories cannot be simplistically read: one discovers beyond the main theme of religious faith several sub-plots centred on the discreet observation of private lives – biographies whose tragic undertones are presented through introspective moods. As revealed in 'A Concert of Minor Pieces', the stories replay the music of the past in a minor scale, which implies a solemn, sad, and meditative disposition.<sup>14</sup> The minor scale sets the tone of confession, of self-reflexion in a digressively-associated narrative, where an apparently anodyne present situation always evokes a deeper, more troubled past event. At one level, the minor scale connotes a lament for a disappearing world – a Polish America – an ethnic enclave with imaginary characters, yet with roots in reality (it can be pinpointed on the map: the East End neighbourhood of Superior, Wisconsin). At another level, this hauntingly nostalgic tone is a memento of the Poland left behind by immigrants, a 'Poland of the mind', (re)constructed in memory and (re)assembled in Bukoski's literary 'pieces'.

Bukoski's textual trick is therefore to shape two worlds simultaneously. To construct the New World, he uncovers in his fiction the tracks of another signifying system that used to constitute the Old World. To put it metaphorically, he *conjugates the present in the past*, providing a binary temporal and spatial framework for the narrated events.

In several stories, the two parts of this dichotomic world are held together by a recurrent religious event – usually related to the most important Christian traditions of Christmas and Easter – having the function of creating tension in the narrative by recreating the atmosphere in the Old Country.<sup>15</sup> Bukoski's stories reveal in this way how the religious forms of a culture can change when they are transplanted. For instance, the breaking of the *oplatek* (wafer) on Christmas Eve – an old custom in Poland, when the family members share the sacred white wafers, remembering those who are no longer alive – takes a different form in one of Bukoski's stories. Here, in contemporary America, where family ties are severed, the breaking of the *oplatek* becomes a casual act hastily done during an occasional visit. Another sacred tradition – tucking the palm leaves behind the portraits of dead family members on the Sunday before Easter, Palm Sunday – becomes a mere recollection of the past in the new country.

thought of Superior as a kind of outpost, a geographical outpost, because we are so far north, backed up against Lake Superior, the largest fresh-water lake in the world. We're surrounded by a range of hills in Duluth... We are stuck, as it were, here in the lowlands, or were at least in my childhood (I was born in 1945) until, say, the late 1950s. Even now we have only a two-lane highway coming up from Spooner almost to Superior, which isolates us. Add to this the oftentimes severe weather, and I'd like to think of us as kind of an outpost. Isolated this way, I think we're psychologically and emotionally circumscribed. I lived in a largely Polish-American neighborhood. Our church was founded by Polish immigrants – our church being St. Adalbert's. These were the people I had most commerce with' (p. 29).

<sup>14</sup> The idea of replaying the past is also present in Bukoski's title, *Polonaise*, which does not only define an ethnic space – the American Polonia – but also explicitly refers to the slow dance of Polish origin (in Polish *polonez, chodzony*), and to Chopin's and Oginski's polonaises.

<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the invisible link with the Old Country is strengthened by the religious objects brought to America. Icons, rosaries, scapulars, prayer books, and albums of Polish hymns are visible tokens of a past inheritance passed down through generations.

Spatially, the relationship with the Old Country is established by the Parish Church of St. Adalbert's (or the Church of St. Wojciech), a small-scale replica of the Polish churches. It is the *axis mundi* of the Polish American microcosm, the place where major events animate the spiritual life of the community, where private revelations change the tracks of individual destinies. Both the Church of St. Adalbert's and Skola Wojciecha, the parochial school run by nuns, become 'cultural repositories, identity markers, and indicators of national character', while 'they are also the sure signs of a petrified culture, frozen in time' (Gladsky, p. 265). In this self-contained space in which new immigrants never arrive – in which the older generation is almost extinguished and the younger generation is quickly assimilated into the normative host – both the church and the school have to close their gates. Not only is the church demolished, but the ground where it used to stand is deconsecrated by the bishop. However, churches do not disappear completely. As we are told in 'Dry Spell', different saints belonging to demolished churches are collected in an ex-deacon's garden, now refashioned as a surrogate place of worship:



*St. Adalbert's as it was*

I got the saints at different places. I bought the confessional when they tore down St. Clem's.... It's a loss of faith in the world. Churches all gone everywhere. Nobody has faith, Simmy. As a kid I went to confession all-a time. There's nothing for me to confess now if you don't believe in anything. Even in Poland, a Roman Catholic country, people are losing the faith (p. 31).

As the above character laments, this is a society that is departing if not from religion itself, then certainly from traditional forms of religion. In Mircea Eliade's terms, this is a (post)modern world, where the so-called notions of 'sacred time' and 'sacred space' are losing their meaning. On the one hand, the perception of time has changed. Living in synchrony, not in diachrony, people have acquired a unidimensional perspective on time, seen as linear progression, and not as a cyclical recurrence of sacred events. On the other hand, the perception of space is different. Space has come to be considered uniformly neutral, homogeneous, and spiritually levelled, without the vertical dimension of a sacred centre.<sup>16</sup> Traditional forms of religion – as Eliade puts it – still survive in a camouflaged ways. Traces of religious thought can appear in everyday life situations, the (post)modern world still retaining 'a large stock of camouflaged myths and degenerated rituals' (p. 205).

In this light, Bukoski's stories unveil the possibility of unexpected revelations beyond the monotonous flow of daily events. His stories always introduce to the reader a more or less openly avowed quester, who experiences an epiphanic moment, a manifestation of the sacred. While referring to the desacralisation of contemporary America and the loss of traditional forms of faith, these stories simultaneously propose another way of perceiving religion. To quote Robert Wuthnow again, they offer a 'new spirituality of seeking' (p. 3). While crying with one eye for the disappearing traditional beliefs, Bukoski smiles with the other,

<sup>16</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Harper Torchbooks, 1961.

envisaging a more dynamic future for new types of religious identity.<sup>17</sup>

To put things in a comparative perspective, the point of view in Bukoski's stories does not belong to the first generation of Polish immigrants, but to the second/third generations, who represent the carriers of meaning, the mirrors through which the values of the ancestors are reflected. Traditional forms of religion are (re)experienced, questioned, or twisted, in the mind of the young generation, since 'primacy is placed not on reason or inherited faith, but on experience, or anticipation of experience, engaging the whole person and activating, or reactivating, individual as well as collective energies' (Roof, p. 46).

As members of the tormented Vietnam Generation, these (anti)heroes return from war with maimed bodies and amputated souls, carrying the burden of a consciousness trapped outside the comforts of the familiar.<sup>18</sup> Prodigal Sons, they come back to their former 'homes' only to find them inhabited by strangers; they search for the old churches only to find them torn down, deconsecrated by the bishop. They accordingly experience an ambivalent sense of belonging to and estrangement from a cultural and religious space, striving to find a thread in the past that would give a direction to their future. In 'The Wood of Such Trees', the narrator comes back as a visitor to the neighbourhood where he spent his youth, remembering 'a different life in a different country when churches were still open' (p. 147). After forty years, he has to remap in his mind a Polish American neighbourhood, recollecting a whole world of characters and their idiosyncratic stories:

We lived in a country of woods. I used to draw maps of the woods all the time, putting in the swamp, the Left-Handed River, the birch trees that stood at the edge of a blue forest. I'd also put on the map the coal yard, Federicka Flour, the packing plant, the Isolation Hospital.... On this other map – not of places but of the people and events of those times – would have been our priest Father Nowak, Sister Benitia, the school kids, the sick lady Hedda Borski who never left her house, the twins Freda and Greta Zielinski, the Table of Movable Feasts, Dziadus in uniform, and many other things. This map wasn't written down anywhere – it was a prayer doubling as a map (p. 145).

On the narrator's mental map, the reader can trace the flashing destinies of a constellation of Polish American characters: the priest, the nuns, the furnace cleaner, the housewife, the vet, the immigration officer, and the seaman. In this closed world, some parts of their lives become more visible than others, so one can follow the dreams of a monastic life of a bachelor/furnace cleaner, the quiet desperation of a widower after the death of his wife, the psychological problems of traumatised soldiers returning from Vietnam, and the lamentation of an ex-deacon/junk collector. Narrating their stories, Bukoski chooses to focus on those

<sup>17</sup> Gladski also comments on Bukoski's hopeful perspective: 'Even as Bukoski despairs for the past, for lost traditions, for a cultural identity that can never be replaced, for old values and old ways, he points toward a redefined sense of ethnicity, an awareness by the young that something out there must be preserved, and toward a new dialogue, a new expression of ethnicity.... A new understanding occurs in the minds of these young, mostly third-generation characters who had come to associate ethnicity only with their parents and grandparents. Consequently, even as these stories document the end of ethnicity, ethnicity is reconstituted, rediscovered as the past takes on new meanings in a world forever changed' (pp. 266-67).

<sup>18</sup> Like Private Tomaszewski in the short story with the same name, they define war as a way of annihilating all forms of individual expression.

crucial instances when revelations take place; instances called by the Romanian philosopher Andrei Plesu 'moments of fracture...of syncope...of sufferance', which represent the 'real epiphanies of the destiny, defining our hidden structure'.<sup>19</sup> The imminence of illness and death, the separation from the beloved ones, the loss of the sexual appetite, the avatars of (self-)deception, the unbearable burden of loneliness, and the destructive effects of war become pretexts for rethinking the meaning of personal faith.

Significantly, in many stories, the interaction between these characters from different generations leads to various forms of conflict. The younger generation always questions the ideas of the older one, measuring the course of events according to a personal scale, as well as to an ancestor's model. The actions of the older generation thus become templates for the thoughts of the younger generation, i.e. the norm which they follow, but from which they deviate, too.

Dislocated from their natural environment, first generation immigrants tend to preserve a Catholic set of ideas that are absorbed almost without change in the new American setting. Walking on the *terra firma* of the past, they maintain the traditional thinking to which Eliade refers, never losing sight of the 'sacred time' and 'sacred space'. In the new land, they continue to speak and think with their own accent; they cling to old principles, attending Mass every Sunday, celebrating Christmas/Easter, praying to icons, and being charitable. They can be defined in David Hollinger's view as 'pluralists', individuals who want to remain within the boundaries of their ethnic group by keeping their own values.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, second/third generation immigrants possess inquisitive minds that seem to doubt and test everything. They are the 'cosmopolitanists', who strive to explore the two sides of their hyphenated identity, as Americans looking back at their Polish descent, and as Poles trying to capture voluntarily their American experience (Hollinger, p. 129).

In a decentred postmodern world, in which one can easily get disoriented, the younger generation starts questioning the older generation's traditional understanding of religion. Parents start seeing themselves through the critical lens of their children, while children define themselves against the standards of their parents. As Stephen Fender observes, 'novels based on the immigrant experience express the crisis of uprooting and resettlement in the imagery of adolescence, distributing the opposing values of Old World and New between generations of immigrant parents and children'.<sup>21</sup> This is also the case in other fictional works focused on Eastern European immigrants, such as Aleksandar Hemon's *Nowhere Man* or Paul Toutonghi's *Red Weather*, where the intergenerational conflict is epitomised by the tension between father and son.

The idea of intergenerational conflict is exemplarily developed in 'The Korporal's Polonaise', conceived in the maieutic fashion of a dialogue between the main protagonist Kazimierz and a priest: 'I will tell the priest why I left the Old Country. He will tell me his own fears for the *new* country' (p. 51). The story maps the moral and religious status of a peasant family onto the social geography of Poland during World War II, while simultaneously evoking present time America. Unravelling the mechanisms of the traumatic experience triggered by father's

<sup>19</sup> Andrei Plesu, *Minima Moralia*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2006, p. 112.

<sup>20</sup> David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America, Beyond Multiculturalism*, New York, Basic Books, 1995.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Fender, 'Introduction' to *Sea Changes: British Emigration and American Literature*, in *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader*, eds. Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor, Edinburgh UP, 2007, pp. 298-302, p. 300.

departure, the narrator associates the loss of the father figure with the loss of home and the loss of faith.<sup>22</sup> His question – 'is he buying a widow a loaf of Russian bread?' – casts a shadow of doubt over his father's moral integrity. Even after his father's return, the conflict is still perpetuated, the questions still remain open, the pattern of denial and acceptance is still perpetuated in an ambivalent love/hatred relationship. The son's immigration to the new country does not solve the problematic issue of loss of faith or the intergenerational conflict. Finally, there is no return to Poland, now seen as 'the Land of Graves and Crosses' (p. 52).

At the end of the book, however, 'the Land of Graves and Crosses' becomes America. It is the place where several generations of Polish Americans are buried – their names inscribed forever in the foreign land – the place where the beloved dead ones appear in an epiphanic vision, revealing the deep significance of one's calling:

Mr. Polaski heard voices echoing prayer, echoes from the Old Country. 'Awake', they said to him. Then Mr. Polaski prayed the way he used to and said he was grateful for his life. 'Boze! w obliczu którego zadna.' Then the ground was cold, and he saw everyone he'd ever known in the neighborhood – but from a distance. And it looked as though they were preparing to welcome him and in the forest where the light had come from he heard the wind and from far away voices saying a simple word, 'Bóg', that means 'God' in Polish (pp. 179-80).

Bukoski's stories therefore take the form of self-narration and (auto)biographic confession, proposing ways of solving ethical and psychological tensions, which are however left unsolved in open-ended texts with more than one version. Even if the author himself refrains from passing any kind of judgement, his characters allude to attitudes of scepticism, uneasiness, and existential anxiety, at the same time acknowledging the crucial importance of 'the sacred' in their lives. They embody the paradigmatic *Homo Religiosus*, but also the *Homo Duplex*, the American of Polish descent, who does not belong to a place, and does not belong to him/her-self. Subjects of dis/re-location, they get engaged in a cyclical quest where the point of departure is never the same as the point of return. Drifters, flaneurs, failed destinies deprived of a profession, faith, or love, they are nonetheless *insider outsiders* – reshaping Polish geographies in their American minds.

<sup>22</sup> Bukoski's comments on Shirley Ann Grau's stories become relevant here for his own story: 'In Shirley Ann Grau's fiction, houses provide loci for the psychological and emotional lives of families. Her fictional houses alienate, however, when they become representative of the failure of the family to provide direction to its members....For characters not so enthralled by the home place, houses become symbols of isolation and alienation where domestic problems are exacerbated to the degree that characters as "inhabitants" have no alternative but to "disinhabit" their houses. Such walls project for the exile his or her loss of the emotional, even spiritual life, of the family (in Anthony Bukoski, 'The Burden of Home: Shirley Ann Grau's Fiction', *Critique*, Vol. 28 (1987), 181-94: 181-82).

## Early Church Biography in New England: The Case of Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*

Ann-Stephane Schäfer

**T**estor – Christianum de Christiano vera proferre<sup>1</sup> ('I bear witness that a Christian here relates the truth about another Christian'), that is one of the three title page mottos of the third volume of the Puritan minister Cotton Mather's New England church history *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702). The third of seven books, this part of the *Magnalia* comprises almost 400 pages and contains a compilation of, to use the title page formulation, 'The Lives of Many Reverend, Learned, and Holy Divines Arriving Such from Europe to America' (III, p. 231). What follows is a collection of over forty portraits of eminent Puritan divines which may well be called a 'Hall of Fame' of the Puritan community in the New England colonies. The Latin motto of book three stems from St. Jerome's letter to his female follower St. Eustochium, in which the church father tries to console the young woman for the loss of her mother, St. Paula.<sup>2</sup> A biography in disguise rather than a letter, Jerome's work contains an extended biographical portrait of the latter saint, which serves the church father to demonstrate what it means to lead an exemplary (monastic) life. In the third book of his *Magnalia*, Mather basically sets out to do the same, urging his audience in the introduction to imitate the model lives he presents: 'Reader, behold these examples; admire and follow what thou dost behold exemplary in them.' And he continues: 'They are offered unto the publick, with the intention sometimes mentioned by Gregory [i.e., the sixth century Latin father Gregory the Great]: "Ut qui Praeceptis non accendimur, saltem Exemplis incitemur; atque ac Appetitu Rectitudinis nil sibi mens nostra difficile aestimet, quod perfectè peragi ab aliis videt...."' (III, p. 233)<sup>3</sup>. By citing both Gregory the Great, who focuses on role of the Christian *martyr's* life, and Jerome, who in his letter depicts a model *monastic* life, Mather takes up the two central themes of early Christian life-writing.<sup>4</sup> However, until this very day,

<sup>1</sup> Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana; Or, The Ecclesiastical History of New-England; from Its First Planting, in the Year 1620, unto the Year of Our Lord 1698*, Thomas Robbins (ed.), 2 vols., New York, Russell & Russell, 1967 (repr. of the Andrus edn., Hartford, 1853), vol. 2, p. 231. In the following, the work is referred to as *Magnalia*. References to books three to seven are taken from the Robbins edition, those to Mather's 'General Introduction' and to the first and second book are from Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana; Or, The Ecclesiastical History of New-England; from Its First Planting, in the Year 1620, unto the Year of Our Lord 1698*, Kenneth B. Murdock, Cambridge, MA, Harvard UP, 1977. References first identify the book in Roman numerals (I-VII), followed by the page number of the source in the respective edition.

Mather's citation of Jerome's quote (III, p. 231) reappears in his biography of Nataniel Collins (VI, p. 141) and allusions can be found elsewhere, too (e.g. III, p. 354).

<sup>2</sup> Jerome, ep. 107.

<sup>3</sup> The original source is Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob*, 59 and reads: 'In order that we, who are not enlightened by precepts, should at least be encouraged by way of example; and that in longing for righteousness, our mind may account nothing to be difficult that it sees is perfectly done by others.'

<sup>4</sup> Compare Andrew Louth, 'Hagiography', in Frances M. Young, Lewis Ayres and Andrew Louth (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, CUP, 2004, pp. 358-61.

scholars investigating the *Magnalia's* numerous biographical portraits and Cotton Mather's biographical technique tend to focus on the author's fascination with classical antiquity and the biographical method set forth in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*; this is why, time and again, Mather has been, most prominently by Gustaaf van Cromphout, depicted as a so-called 'Plutarchan biographer'<sup>5</sup>. With this scholar, we might in fact wonder why so much has been written on 'the significance to Mather of Protestant hagiography, Puritan biography, spiritual autobiography, the New Testament account of Jesus, St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Biblical typology, and the examples of Samuel Clark and Thomas Fuller'<sup>6</sup>, and why so far no scholar seems to have concerned himself with the question of why Mather uses so many patristic sources.

Why does the Puritan biographer take Jerome's 'Testor – Christianum de Christiano vera proferre' for a maxim of his biographical treatment of New England ministers? Why does he cite Gregory the Great? How can we account for the fact that patristic references flourish – and are even predominant – in the biographical books of the *Magnalia* which acquaint the reader with the lives of the colonies' spiritual leaders? And, last but not least, for what reason does Mather entitle the third volume of his ecclesiastical history *De Viris Illustribus*, which instantly evokes Jerome's famous collection of Christian writers to the inner eye of the reader? I will in this paper argue that the impact of patristic biography and the model role of the church fathers has so far undeservedly been overlooked. Mather's biographical concept, I think, owes much, if not more to early Church biography than we would expect, especially given the fact that classical (pagan) antiquity informs so much of the non-biographical books of the *Magnalia*. However, before we explore Mather's use of patristic life writing, it is necessary first to give some context to Mather as a person and scholar and to his ecclesiastical history, as well as this work's basic design and purpose, because this will prove indispensable if we want to assess how and for which ends the Puritan employs early Church biographies in the *Magnalia*.

Published in 1702, the *Magnalia* is the first encompassing historiography of the New England colonies, and it is, as scholars have not tired to emphasise, and Mather himself proudly acknowledges in the 'General Introduction'<sup>7</sup> to his work, replete with references to many different literary sources. Ranging from the Old Testament and the book of Genesis, whose author Mather characterises as 'that First-born of all Historians, the great Moses' (GI, p. 94), to classical Greek and Latin antiquity (e.g., Herodotus, Livy, Suetonius or Tacitus), from the New Testament to the church fathers (e.g., Eusebius of Caesarea's and Theodore's ecclesiastical histories), and from them to the works of more contemporary authors such as Thomas Fuller<sup>8</sup>, the *Magnalia* employs a cornucopia of sources. Also, it is important to keep in mind that Mather, to use Peter Gay's formulation, 'dissolves history into biography'<sup>9</sup>. This perspective is only logical for a Puritan, who reads both the

<sup>5</sup> Gustaaf van Cromphout, 'Cotton Mather as Plutarchan Biographer', *American Literature*, 46 (1974/75), 465-481. Much in the same vein are for instance the following works: Mason I. Lowance, 'Biography and Autobiography'; R.E. Watters, 'Biographical Technique in Cotton Mather's *Magnalia*', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 2:2 (1945), 154-163; Everett Emerson, 'History and Chronicle', in Emory Elliott (ed.), *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, New York, Columbia UP, 1988, p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> Van Cromphout, p. 466.

<sup>7</sup> GI in my text.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Fuller (1608-1661) was an Anglican cleric, historian and author of the highly influential *The History of the Worthies in England* (1662).

<sup>9</sup> Peter Gay, *A Loss of Mastery: Puritan Historians in Colonial America*, University of California

individual's life and world history from a soteriological perspective. That Mather's concept of history is primarily biographical explains why most of his church history consists of biographical accounts, which range from short biographical sketches to extended biographies of over 30,000 words. Overall, the *Magnalia* consists of seven books: I. *Antiquities*, with a focus on the founding myth that is depicted in terms of Virgil's *Aeneid*; II. *Ecclesiarum Clypei* (i.e., 'The Shields of the Church'), which contains the lives of colonial governors and magistrates; III. *De Viris Illustribus*, covering the lives of the ministers; IV. *Sal Gentium* (i.e. 'Salt of the Earth'), an account of Harvard College and, especially, the lives of its graduates; V. *Acts and Monuments*, which is concerned with the church synods and New England church polity; VI. *Thaumaturgus* (i.e. 'The Wonderworker'), relating cases of divine providence; and VII. *Ecclesiarum Praelia* (i.e., 'The Battles of the Churches'), which deals with the ongoing struggles of the Puritan community, for instance respecting the wars with the Indians.

Cotton Mather (1663-1728), a minister at Boston's orthodox Second Church, and an inquisitive scholar and untiring writer of numerous scientific, historical and exegetical works, was an extremely ambitious individual. He had access to the best private as well as public library on the continent, was deeply committed to the study of the classics and other canonical texts, and, as many contemporaries as well as modern scholars claim, prone to a certain 'display of learning'<sup>10</sup>. What is especially important to understand is that Mather grew up as a member of the third generation of a New England dynasty of colonial leaders and theologians. He was the son of Increase Mather – arguably the most influential theologian in New England at the time, long-time president of Harvard College and, like his son, pastor at Boston's Second Church. Cotton Mather was also the grandson of two first-generation New England settlers, the much revered Richard Mather and especially John Cotton, from whom he got his first name.



It is only against this background that we can fully understand that to write the colonies' history and to portray, as Mather puts it, the 'Actors, that have, in a more exemplary manner served those Colonies' (GI, p. 89) means that Mather writes, in a double sense, *the history of the fathers*. And it is, as the author of the *Magnalia* repeatedly intimates, in fact only a small step from Mather's pedigree and the fathers of New England to the fathers of the Christian church, especially since the underlying basic principle of Puritan thinking in general and of the *Magnalia* in particular, is typological. Several studies have shown that typology – the hermeneutical rule that calls for interpreting a given person or event as a fulfilment, or antitype, of an earlier prefiguration, or type – informs much of the *Magnalia*, from the depiction of the Puritan translation 'from the Depravations of Europe to the American Strand' (GI, p. 89) as a latter-day *Aeneid*<sup>11</sup> to Mather's biographical technique of portraying colonists as modern incarnations of classical or Biblical prototypes<sup>12</sup>. Scholars such as David S. Shields have thus rightly

Press, 1966, p. 62.

<sup>10</sup> Josephine K. Piercy, *Studies in Literary Types in Seventeenth Century America: 1607-1710*, Hamden, CT, Archon Books, 1969, p. 288.

<sup>11</sup> Thus, for example, Sacvan Bercovitch, who maintains that 'the founding of Rome prefigures that of New England and Vergil's poem finds its antitype in his [i.e. Mather's] Church History' (compare Sacvan Bercovitch, 'New England Epic: Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*', *English Literary History*, 33.3 (1966), 337-350, p. 340.

<sup>12</sup> For example Jane Donahue Eberwein, 'Indistinct Lustre: Biographical Miniatures in the

claimed that like no other literary work in the colonies, the *Magnalia* capitalises on the concepts of *translatio imperii* and *translatio cultus*, suggesting that Mather basically intends to present New England as the rightful heir and culminating point of the Roman-Christian civilization.<sup>13</sup> We now proceed to see that with respect to Mather's biographies, this reading requires revision: rather than as heirs to classical pagan antiquity, Mather perceives of New England Puritan saints as counterparts of what he understands to be the 'purer' early Church of the church fathers. It is thus in their struggles, and their accounts of exemplary Christian lives, that Mather finds the patterns after which he is to model his own biographies.

As we have seen, the *Magnalia* contains three books in which Cotton Mather consecutively presents the lives of distinguished civil leaders (Book II), ecclesiastical officials (Book III) and Harvard College graduates (Book IV). Even though references to patristic literature can be found throughout Mather's church history, there is a remarkable, sudden increase in the use of early Church documents in the third and fourth volume of the *Magnalia*, those volumes that are to acquaint the reader with the lives of New England's spiritual leaders. Here, Mather calls in the memory of a particular early Church figure – for instance a martyr or a church father – as related by another church father and preserved through patristic biography numerous times. It should be noted that the move towards the Christian origins goes along with a simultaneous shift away from the formerly dominant classical antiquity. Now the church fathers eclipse the references to classical antiquity, although these inform much of the political biographies and clearly dominate the non-biographical volumes of the *Magnalia*.

Among the sources Mather uses there are primarily the *Acts of the Martyrs*,<sup>14</sup> as well as other literary documents that preserve the memory of those early Christians who suffered persecution, were executed on the grounds of their faith and from that point on were considered *testes veritates* by their fellow Christians. Mather draws on the martyrdom of various early Christians, most notably Polycarp, Justin and Ignatius, but he also refers to, for example, Apollonius, Apollonia and Cyprian. Though of course texts pertaining to this hagiographical genre lay a particular stress on the death of the martyr and are in no sense fully-rounded biographies like the *Lives* that were to be written in the following centuries, there are close links between the two genres: according to Louth, the ascetic saint perceived his lifelong deprivations and temptations as a continuation of the martyrs' struggles.<sup>15</sup> That the author of the *Magnalia* should feel particularly attracted to relations of the martyrs' struggles and deaths is thus little surprise as, first, Puritans take a particular interest in the *ordo salutis* and tend to read the circumstances of a person's death as token of their spiritual state. Second, the persecution suffered by generations of Puritans in their motherland England is ingrained in the collective memory of the New England Puritan community. Last but not least, Puritans interpret their translation into the American 'desert' or 'wilderness' in terms of a continuation of their former martyrdom. In fact, in his biography of the minister Jonathan Burr, Mather explicitly makes this connection, claiming that '[t]hough he had not *persecution* to try him in this wilderness, yet he was not without his

*Magnalia Christi Americana*', *Biography* 4:3 (1981), 195-207, p. 201. Also, Emory Elliott, p. 54.

<sup>13</sup> David S. Shields, *The American Aeneas: Classical Origins of the American Self*, University of Tennessee Press, 2001, p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> Collection of the suffering and death of early Christian martyrs, extant either in the form of trial records, *passiones*, panegyrics and eye-witness accounts, as found for example in letters.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Louth, 'Hagiography', p. 358f.



trials.' He then continues by citing pseudo-Cyprian: '*Si deest Tyrannus, si Tortor, si Spoliator, non deerit concupiscentia, Martyrii Materiam quotidianam nobis exhibens*'<sup>16</sup> (III, p. 372). Suffering and martyrdom becomes a central attribute of the model Christian believer.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Mather for instance asserts that the persecution by the Church of England faced by the founding father John Cotton was 'to him a thing little short of martyrdom' (III, p. 264) and draws a parallel between his grandfather pondering emigration and the Greek father and later martyr Cyprian, who had justified his first flight from persecution under the reign of Decian by claiming it was the best way to serve the Christian faith (III, p. 263). Another good example for the association of martyrdom and the early Church is one of Mather's remarks on his grandfather John Cotton, in which he praises him on the grounds that, even though he had received a classical education, 'he chose to follow the methods of that excellent Ramus, who, like Justin of old, was not only a philosopher, but a Christian, and a martyr also' (III, p. 274). By far outnumbering references to the Protestant sixteenth century martyrbook classics by Jean Crespin and John Foxe, Mather primarily draws on the early Church martyrs to establish basic parallels between them and his own protagonists. For example, concerning the Puritan minister John Eliot's death, Mather very explicitly puts forward his typological reading of the early Church:

Thus, as the aged Polycarp could say, 'These eighty-six years have I served my Lord Jesus Christ; and he has been such a good master to me all this while, that I will not forsake him.' Such a Polycarp was our Eliot; he had been so many years engaged in the sweet service of the Lord Jesus Christ, that he could not now give it over: it was his ambition and his privilege 'to bring forth fruit in old age'; and what veneration the church of Smyrna paid unto that angel of theirs, we were upon the like accounts willing to give unto this 'man of God'<sup>18</sup> (III, p. 577).

The second single source that keeps reappearing in Mather's biographies is the Greek church father Athanasius' *Life of St. Antony*. In his portrait of John Sherman, for example, Mather extracts a sentence to characterize and dignify the subject of his biography: 'He was a great reader, and as Athanasius reports of his Antonius, [...] *He read with such intention, as to lose nothing, but keep every thing, of all that he read, and his mind became a library*: even such was the felicity of our Sherman'<sup>19</sup> (III, p. 513). And in the portrait of Harvard College graduate John Brock, the *Magnalia* characterises him by asserting: 'If one had asked Mr. John Brock that question in Antonius, [...] "Of what art hast thou proceeded master?" he might have truly answered, [...] "My art is to be good"' (IV, p. 35). Yet with respect to this early Christian source, Mather goes beyond merely drawing a parallel to Athanasius monastic protagonist: For example, in the first twelve lines of the biography of

<sup>16</sup> The Latin reads: 'If there be no tyrant, no torturer, no robber, there will still be evil passions, furnishing daily occasions for martyrdom.'

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed analysis of this aspect, see Karen Halttunen, 'Cotton Mather and the Meaning of Suffering in the *Magnalia Christi Americana*', *American Studies*, 12:3 (1978), 311-329, p. 315.

<sup>18</sup> Compare Mather's original source: 'But Polycarp answered: "For eighty-six years I have been his servant and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme against my king and saviour?"' ('On Polycarp', *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Herbert Musurillo (ed.), OUP, 1972, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Mather's original source is Athanasius, *Life of St. Antony*, in *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, Philip Schaff (ed.), A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Ser. 2, Edinburgh, Clark, 1978, p. 196.

Thomas Thacher he provides a list of twelve character traits which Antony himself, the model monk, noted in other men and reputedly deemed worthy of imitation – namely 'good carriage', 'prayerfulness', 'lenity', 'humanity', 'watchfulness', 'loving of learning', 'patience', 'fastings and [enduring of] hardships', 'mansuetude', 'longanimity', 'piety' and 'charity'. Immediately afterwards, Mather asserts that he designed his biographies to exemplify these virtues and that Thacher actually embodied many of them (III, p. 488).

As much as it is clear that Mather's biographies are inspired by his reading of, for instance, the *Life of St. Antony*, it is also true that Mather's use of his sources is, in general, eclectic rather than systematic. Thus, the 'Life of Mr. John Sherman' starts out with Mather claiming that he wants to present his subject as a modern Athanasius – 'I shall proceed then with the endeavor of my pen, to immortalize his memory, that the signification of the name Athanasius may belong unto him, as much as the grace for which that great man was exemplary' (III, p. 511) – before further down in the text he depicts him as an antitype of St. Antony. To those familiar with the practice of keeping commonplace books, there can be little doubt that Mather, once he had set his mind on Athanasius, felt drawn to use all of the material he could possibly muster on the wider subject and that would underline his typological reading of the early Church and the New England Puritan community. It would thus make relatively little difference whether he switched focus from Athanasius' character to Antony, the character of his biography. Besides, what is true for Mather's appropriation of his sources in general also applies to how he employs patristic biography: He basically uses literary sources for inspiration, tailors everything to his needs, and is sometimes even given to mere namedropping. Overall, however, these strategies help him to set the tone and raise certain expectations about the text.

This holds especially true for Mather's third, and most prominently employed literary source, the Latin father Jerome and his (and Gennadius') *On Illustrious Men* (392/393 and, respectively, 430 or 492-495). Also occasionally drawing on Jerome's other biographical writings such as *The Life of St. Hilarion* and *The Life of Paulus the Hermit*, Mather entitles the volume that contains the lives of New England theologians 'De Viris Illustribus'. Even a cursory glance at what Mather himself says concerning the purpose of his biographical writing in the introduction to this volume leaves no doubt that he is in fact consciously drawing on Jerome's protopatrolgy rather than tracing Jerome's classical predecessor Suetonius' collection of the same name:

What was it that obliged Jerom to write his book De Viris Illustribus? It was the common reproach of old cast upon the Christians, 'That they were all poor, weak, unlearned men.' The sort of men sometime called Puritans, in the English nation have been reproached with the same character; (...) This is one thing that has laid me under obligation here to write a book, De Viris Illustribus. (III, p. 233)<sup>20</sup>

Here, Mather explicitly claims that his 'catalogue' of New England worthies – this frequently used term already evokes before the inner eye of the reader Jerome's work – primarily serves apologetic purposes. Mather wants to defend Puritans against their alleged intellectual inferiority, and to make his argument more forceful, he draws a parallel between the early Church's and the Puritans' efforts to refute discriminatory allegations spread by anti-Christian polemicists. Denouncing both attempts to judge the 'Puritan Christians in our days' on the

<sup>20</sup> Mather refers to Jerome, 'Introduction', *On Illustrious Men*, Thomas Patrick Halton (ed.), The Fathers of the Church 100, Washington, DC, Catholic University of America Press, 2000, vii.

basis of 'what the tory-pens of the sons of Bolsecus have given' and efforts to judge 'the primitive Christians ... [on the basis of] the monstrous accusations of their adversaries' as 'absurd' (III, p. 233), Mather draws attention to the fact that both groups' persecution was unjustified. By implication, it is also clear that the Puritan cause will ultimately prevail. Another source that Mather produces at the beginning of volume three to underline the apologetic character of the *Magnalia* is Arnobius, whose *Adversus Nationes* (303-305) sought to refute slanders raised during Diocletian's persecution. Very much in the same direction is Tertullian's remark that '*Credunt de nobis quae non probantur, et nolunt inquiri, ne probentur non esse, quae malunt credidisse*'<sup>21</sup> (III, p. 235), which is the motto preceding Mather's comments on the structure and content of the third book. Given the fact that he apparently sees himself as a latter-day Jerome, it is little wonder that the same motif also reappears in Book Four. There, as a maxim preceding the biographical accounts of the college graduates, Mather cites from Jerome's introduction to *On Illustrious Men*: '*Discant ergo rabidi adversus Christum canes, discant eorum sectatores, qui putant ecclesiam nullos philosophos et eloquentes, nullos habuisse doctores, quanti et quales viri eam extruxerint et ornaverint, et desinant fidem nostram rusticarum tantum simplicitatis arguere suamque potius imperitiam agnoscant*'<sup>22</sup> (IV, p. 34).

It can be argued that Mather's appropriation of Jerome's work remains somehow superficial. Mather does in fact use an elaborate and 'baroque' style rather than restricting himself to providing scarce biographical data and to listing the respective individuals' works, as Jerome does: in the *Magnalia*, the average biography contains over 2,000 words, and most biographies go far beyond the scope of a mere catalogue. Besides, the *Magnalia*'s division into three biographical books, each of which focuses on a separate profession or group of colonists (politicians, theologians, and college graduates) still reminds one of the classical pagan biographies of for instance Suetonius, even if Mather, very much like Jerome, proceeds in chronological order. It is thus not the rather plain, factual style and shortness of Jerome's bio-bibliographical entries, but rather the basic design and apologetic purpose that the Puritan imitates. Mather of course is well aware of the literary tradition whose heir he wants to present himself as being, and so would everybody else have been. In fact, in an address to the reader that precedes Mather's account of the life of his grandfather John Cotton and four other most eminent first-generation ministers, his father Increase Mather calls in the long line of his son's literary predecessors:

There are many who have (and some to good purpose) endeavoured to collect the memorable passages that have occurred in the lives of eminent men, by means whereof posterity has had the knowledge of them. Hierom of old, wrote *De Viris Illustribus*: the like has been done by Gennadius, Epiphanius, Isidore, Prochorus, and other ancient authors. [...] Here the reader has presented to him five of them who were amongst the chief of the fathers in the churches of New England (III, p. 246).

<sup>21</sup> The Latin reads: 'They [i.e. the people of Rome] believe of us [i.e. Christians] things that are not proved, and the truth of which they are reluctant to test, lest they should find that to be false which they love to believe.' The original is Tertullian, *Apology*, I,1,19.

<sup>22</sup> Jerome, 'Introduction', *On Illustrious Men*, vii. The Latin reads: 'Let then these rabid dogs, who rave against Christ, and let those who follow the pack, all seeming to suppose that the Church has embraced no philosophers, orators and scholars, understand how great and how many are the men who have reared and adorned her, and let them cease to call our faith nothing better than rude simplicity, and let them rather acknowledge their own despicable ignorance.'

In these lines, Increase Mather puts it in a nutshell: what his son sets out to do is to write a proto-patrology in the vein of Jerome. And like his early Christian predecessor, he not only asserts New England's independence but claims its superiority on the grounds of New England's closeness to the origins of the Christian church. While it is thus true that many of the *Magnalia*'s parallels call in classical precedents, it is also true that Mather ultimately denounces classical antiquity as a model, as Shields has shown.<sup>23</sup> It is once more basic primitivism and the urge towards the Christian origins that motivates many of Mather's biographical strategies.

To conclude, it can be said that it may have become a commonplace that the *Magnalia* is written to vindicate the New England way, and that its underlying concept is that of the *translatio imperii* or *translatio cultus*; yet so far, scholars have overlooked the significance of the church fathers and Church biography in Mather's work. That the impact of, for instance, the *Acts of the Martyrs*, Athanasius' *Life of St. Antony* and Jerome's *On Illustrious Men* on Mather's seminal church history has so far been neglected is all the more surprising since its author claims that with respect to history, 'the *Palm* is to be given unto *Church History*' (GI, p. 94). With respect to the biography, this means that we should take a closer look at the lives of New England's spiritual rather than its political leaders – something many scholars may not have done due to the fact that only the first two books of the *Magnalia* have been edited so far. In the lives of the colonies' ministers and college graduates, however, we find many more patristic than classical pagan sources. And even if Mather's use of source material is eclectic – which of course applies to his use of classical antiquity as well – his appropriation of early Church biography follows the logic of typology and a strong primitivistic urge towards the purer origins of the church. This is the reason why Mather, in trying to bring across the exceptional charity of Thomas Shepard II during a smallpox epidemic in New England, immediately thinks of how the self-sacrificing early Christians in Alexandria tended the sick, and he praises the Puritan on the grounds that 'he had in him that spirit of the primitive Christians' (IV, p. 119). The same thinking pattern also takes effect respecting New England church synods, which are mentioned together with the ecumenical councils of the early Church (III, p. 266), and respecting the Puritan's foundation of Harvard College, which is likened to early Christians' embrace of learning (IV, p. 8). Likewise, John Cotton's struggles during the Antinomian crisis<sup>24</sup> are compared to the controversies taking place between the church fathers Chrysostom and Epiphanius and Jerome and Rufinus (III, p. 267), and the classical scholar Urian Oakes is portrayed as 'the Jerom of our Bethlehem' (IV, p. 116).

However, as the self-confident appropriation of Jerome's patrology indicates, Mather goes one step further when he himself as a biographer of first- and second-generation New England divines identifies himself with early Church writers. We have already seen that he promotes his biographical portraits with the words of Jerome: 'Testor – Christianum de Christiano vera proferre' ('I bear witness that a Christian here relates the truth about another Christian'). In the same vein and anticipating future criticism of the *Magnalia*, Mather glorifies his work by referring to the contentions endured by early Church martyrs: 'And must all the Teeth [i.e.,

<sup>23</sup> David S. Shields, p. 58.

<sup>24</sup> During the Antinomian Crisis (1636-38), which had been a reaction to Anne Hutchinson's challenge of traditional church authority and resulted in the reassertion of the authority of New England church leaders, her mentor John Cotton had narrowly escaped being too closely associated with her positions.

those of the Alexandrian martyr Apollonia] be fastned on thee, *O my Book?* It may be so! And yet the *Book*, when ground between these *Teeth*, will prove like *Ignatius* in the *Teeth* of the furious Tygers, *The whiter Manchet for the Churches of God'* (GI, p. 108). Once again, the source for this comment is Jerome's *On Illustrious Men*, and, more specifically, the Latin father's entry on the bishop and later martyr Ignatius. Another of Mather's predilections is that he likes to refer to the relationships between individual church fathers. It is natural that since most of the biographical information on particular church fathers stems from patristic sources, Mather should use this topos to reflect on his tasks as a writer of biographies and lend dignity to his work. In fact, Mather's identification with the writers of the early Church goes so far that he extends the parallel to depict his own efforts to write the biographies of the first- and second-generation New England divines. It is against this background that we must understand statements such as the one on Thomas Shepard's family background: 'It might be said of them as Nazianzen [i.e. Gregory of Nazianzen], I remember, speaks about the family of a Basil...' (IV, p. 142).<sup>25</sup> In fact, the theme surfaces again in the author's biography of his brother Nathaniel, where Mather claims with respect to his *father* Increase Mather that '[W]hat Gregory Nazianzen judged not improper to be said about his yet surviving father, in his funeral oration upon his deceased *brother*, I may without any culpable adulation on this occasion, say of him, "He is another Aaron or Moses in the house of his God"' (IV, p. 157).<sup>26</sup> And two decades later, Mather still uses the same motif to justify both his writing a biography of his father and his use of the term '[P]atriarch', asserting that nobody 'that I know of, blame[s] Nazianzen, for his Panegyric upon his Father'.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, Increase Mather also seems to have shared this kind of typological understanding of Puritan and patristic life-writing, because in his biography of his own father he emphasizes that Richard Mather, like the church fathers Gregory of Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea and Hilary of Pointiers and others, had been blessed with sons who also became ministers.<sup>28</sup> Against this background and under the assumption that, as Mather states, New England churches resemble those of the early Church (GI, p. 93), it is only logical that the next step should be to include the reader into this concept – which is actually what Mather does in his biography of his brother Nathaniel, where he exhorts us, his readers: 'I am not without hope, that some of you will now resolve, as Jerom did when he had read the life of Hilarion, shutting up the book, and saying 'Well, here shall be the champion whom I will follow!' (IV, p. 156)<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> The reference here is to Gregor of Nazianz' funeral oration on his friend Basil of Caesarea (Gregory of Nazianz, *Orationes* XLIII,9).

<sup>26</sup> Here, Mather refers to Gregory of Nazianz' panegyric on his brother Caesarius, in which the Greek father also compares his and his brother's father to both Old Testament figures (Gregory of Nazians, *Orationes* VII, 2 and 3).

<sup>27</sup> Cotton Mather, *Parentator: Memoirs of Remarkables in the LIFE and the DEATH of the Ever-Memorable Dr. Increase Mather. Who Expired, August 23.1723*, in William J. Scheik (ed.), *Two Mather Biographies: Life and Death and Parentor*, Bethlehem, Lehigh University Press, 1989, p. 85.

<sup>28</sup> Increase Mather, *The Life and Death of That Reverend Man of God, Mr. Richard Mather, Teacher of the Church in Dorchester in New-England*, in: William J. Scheik (ed.), *Two Mather Biographies: Life and Death and Parentor*, Bethlehem, Lehigh UP, 1989, p. 59.

<sup>29</sup> Increase Mather uses the same quote in the dedication to his son's biography of Jonathan Mitchel (IV, p. 78).

## The Christian Tradition in Literature

### Walter Nash

I note with interest that in the year 2007 the Faculty of English at the University of Cambridge still offers, in Part II of the Tripos, an optional paper on *The English Moralists*. The moralists in question are not all Englishmen. Some of them are Greeks. In my Cambridge day – sixty years ago – the joke on the street was that the first of the English moralists listed for study in that option was St. Paul. This amused me, a Nothingarian oaf lately back from barracks, and it was not until some years later that I began to understand how a Judaic-Hellenic morality had invaded our northern wilderness and grown among us, and nurtured traditions of thought and discourse and behaviour. Our literature bears witness, over the centuries, to the stability of Christian belief (which includes the constancy of Christian doubt). Just now, possibly, we are rattled. The air is dense with schismatic cloud, each one hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation, and not all things are done unto edifying. Christianity, once a curricular staple, has become a special option.

This book<sup>1</sup> might then be seen as a rescue mission. Its editors do not claim as much, though in their Preface they state sufficiently comprehensive intentions:

This book has been written for today's students, teachers, and readers. It aims at giving a sense of the importance and continuity of the Christian tradition in English literature; a sense of a coherent belief-system being expressed in very different ways; a sense of the validity and power of the Christian worldview over the centuries. It has been written in the belief that this is not only worthwhile from a pedagogical point of view, but that it will aid enjoyment of literature.

No one should be held to account for prefatory formulations in compact summary; but I think this might be promising more – except in the sense of 'a sense' – than the editors and contributors can reasonably be expected to give. As one of the day-before-yesterday's students, teachers and readers, I furrow a wary brow at 'sense of a coherent belief system' and 'validity and power of the Christian worldview', but I agree that the enterprise is pedagogically worthwhile, and confirm with pleasure that it 'aids enjoyment of literature.'

Paul Cavill, Heather Ward et al. – ET AL being the small group of associates named on the title-page – present a commentary on Christian literature through the last 1,300 years, beginning with the seventh century poet Caedmon, as described by Bede, and travelling in the direction of the twentieth century poet Patrick Kavanagh, on the way calling at Beowulf, Sir Gawain, John Donne, Samuel Johnson, Robert Browning, T.S. Eliot – and many more, more indeed than a critic might shake a well-informed stick at. The book is a *vademecum* to a sustained course of reading: in Medieval Literature; in the writings of the Renaissance, Reformation, and Commonwealth; the Restoration and Eighteenth Century; the Romantics and Victorians; the Twentieth Century. Its concluding section, called *The Christian Tradition*, is an Appendix, or Supplement, and an important one, on Theology, Scriptural Narrative, and Doctrinal Language, matters in which today's English

<sup>1</sup> Paul Cavill and Heather Ward, with Matthew Baynham and Andrew Swinford, with contributions from John Flood and Roger Pooley, *The Christian Tradition in English Literature: Poetry, Plays, and Shorter Prose*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2007, 512pp., £14.99 pb. 978 0 31025 515 4

students, I have to fear, are not over-informed, and possibly, I have to guess, not over-interested, although, I have to say, they need to be, if they are to come to comfortable grips with much that is in this text.

In their 'Introduction: How to Use This Book', the editors issue 'one dogmatic instruction...read the author or the text first'. 'However useful the critical introduction might be,' they say, 'it is always best to read, understand, and react to the literature first.' Samuel Johnson would have applauded this advice, which recalls his counsel to the reader, towards the end of *The Preface to Shakespeare*: 'Let him read on through brightness and obscurity...let him preserve his comprehension of the dialogue and his interest in the fable. And when the pleasures of novelty have ceased, let him attempt exactness; and read the commentaries.'

After this primary monition the pedagogic / tutorial system of the book is outlined. Having first studied – or perhaps one should say *responded freely* to – literary texts in recommended collections or anthologies, the reader will turn to the essays by various hands, on the Christian character of authors or texts at successive historical periods, as listed above. Each literary period, or movement in the case of Romantics and Victorians, is introduced by an Overview, describing in general the literature of the time, and, as necessary, the cultural/intellectual background. Overviews and essays are followed by tutorial questions, which serve various functions, e.g., to stimulate discussion and further thought, to suggest topics for investigation, to furnish essay-subjects, and quite often to check if the student's initial, undirected responses to the literature have been adjusted by the views put to him in the commentaries; e.g., 'To what extent have you previously understood the Victorian period as a period of doubt and the waning of Christianity?', the implication of which might be 'You know better now, don't you?', though I think it is simply intended to encourage independent critical thinking.

The overviews and essayists are careful of their doctrinal ground, and hold it discreetly; the ground being that the Christian faith persists through centuries, unslackening, unarrested, in presentations that change in form and emphasis and cultural perspective, but are never less than confident of an informing truth. Such confidence is justified throughout most of the book, from the very long section on the Middle Ages (which should perhaps have been conventionally divided, separating Anglo-Saxon literature from Middle English, early and late), all the way through to the close of the eighteenth century – from Cædmon to the beginnings of Romanticism, for a rough guide. In all that time, it can be said, Literature complements and implements Faith, expresses it, challenges it only to rebut its own challenges, or, differently put, challenges Faith in ways that Faith dictates. In the relatively brief span of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Literature (the collective of writers, dramatists and poets) appears less firmly pledged to the Christian command, questions more, ignores more, looks for other directives, fluctuates and recedes among visions and uncertainties. I sense that the editors *et al.* are a little reluctant to concede this, needing, at the end, to be able to say all is not what it has been, much is uncertain, but still, all is well. Their overview of the twentieth century concludes: 'The Christian tradition is diminished in influence by the turn of the century, but is still a force to be reckoned with.'

There is one uncertainty they encounter in the course of the book, and repeatedly have to work around. It can be defined in a test question: does a Christian's poem (or story or play) qualify as a Christian text? The uncertainty is voiced in, for example, the study-question they ask about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: 'How important is Christianity in the poem: is it only a part of the background to a basically secular story, or does it have a more significant role?' Or again, of Congreve's *The Way of the World*: 'To what extent do you agree that this

is a Christian play'? (The argument of the preceding essay concludes that *The Way of the World* is essentially a type of morality play, in which 'a Christian worldview, ideals and Biblical lessons can be embodied'). Or of Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (a poem on the 'forbidden fruit' of sensual pleasure): 'To what extent do you think this poem can be seen as a primarily moral tale? The possibility of valid alternative (or co-ordinate) readings is implied in these questions. They do not, however, propose anything like the win-either-way of the publisher's chiasmic blurb on the back cover: 'How Christianity shaped English literature over the centuries – and how English literature shaped Christianity'. I cannot think that the book's writers would want seriously to assent to the second of these propositions.

In ages when writers subscribe, automatically or presumptively, to Christian faith, Christianity may be said to 'shape' literature. John Bunyan's faith drives him to write *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a novel in the form of a quest, or journey, on which all Christians are set. When there is less and less authority to be taken for granted, literature is less a vehicle, more a sophisticated animal, a privileged beast omnivorous of hints and ideas from any source, poaching on Christianity (or other belief systems) for material in poetics or plot-making. This is apparent in much writing of the twentieth century. Graham Greene's 'Catholic' novels, for example, exploit the notion that God suffers, that the Creator is in pain with his Creation. The protagonist of *The Heart of the Matter*, Scobie, a police officer, a decent man burdened with a mistress, a wife and a Roman Catholic conscience, chooses to damn himself by committing suicide, out of compassion for the sufferings of his wife and mistress, and in pity for the agony God endures through the perversity of His creatures. This is a fable from stark staring Greeneland, not exactly a Christian tale. Orthodox theology regards as heretical the view that the 'impassible' Creator can suffer human pain. The heresy is called Theopastichism; one of the contributors to a book recently reviewed in this journal remarks that 'it's a belief very widely held among theologians today', and adds that 'so widespread has this belief become over the course of the last hundred years or so that it has become the new orthodoxy'. In doing so it has also become an idea that a skilled plotmaker could borrow, to seal the doom of a tragically faulted hero.

The continuities of literary Christianity are demonstrated in two ways, one 'diachronic', the other 'iconic'. 'Diachronic' are those passages of the book that show the development of a subject, a genre, a typical theme over generations of writing. The process is summarised in Chapter 15, 'Allegory in the Morality Play and its Literary Legacy'. There, the writer briefly traces the theme of the allegorical journey in, for example, *Everyman* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Also the motif of the house or castle, as in the *Ancrene Riwe*, in *The Castle of Perseverance*, or Browning's *Child Roland to the Dark Tower Came*. Then follows an interesting note on the ongoing development of the morality figure of the Vice, the shape-changer who bids fair and bodes ill; a character present in the *personae* of the Shakespearean drama – e.g. Falstaff, Iago – or in the Restoration drama, or in the novels of Dickens. Or, indeed in the rogues gallery of any modern blockbuster worthy of the name; from an originally homiletic device a literary convention has developed.

'Iconic' are those sections of the narrative that select authors and works as being powerfully representative of the Christian temper of their age. Beowulf is an icon of Anglo-Saxon Christianity; Samuel Johnson of the age of Christian reason; Alfred Tennyson is iconic of the Victorian age of 'honest doubt'; while the modern mirrors, icons of decent despair, are Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad. I occasionally wonder why, at whose suggestion, or on what basis of choice, these representative figures were chosen – i.e. was this an editorial dictate? Were contributors invited to make their own choices? Was there discussion among

the partners before choices were finally settled? I ask, not because I question any inclusions, but because I am puzzled by some omissions – for example, was not Dryden a great poet (or if you dispute that, at least great in his own time), and indisputably a Christian poet? At least as great a poet and Christian as Aemelia Lanyer? She, I think, did not begin to figure in the general canon until the 1990s, when the theme of ‘women’s writing’ was increasingly established among curricular options; here she is the gender vein in the masculine corpus, in part feminist icon, in part a spirit, prefiguring the company of *das Ewigweibliche* – Aphra Behn, Emily Bronte, Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, all honoured with perceptive essays and informed comment.

Indeed the essays in general are perceptive and informed, and it would be graceless to argue otherwise. To quote again from the editors’ Preface, ‘We have felt delight and relief ourselves, and often experienced it in others when some puzzling passage or allusion has been explained’. We have indeed, and there are many places in the book where an adroit or pointed exegesis exacts from this examiner a smile of recognition, with a large approving tick in an imaginary margin. Still better, there are passages which give the reader an almost physical sense of the Christian presence in this era or that, shifts of religious colouring, like the broken light from a prism or the changing hues of shot silk. Best of all are the introductions to writers not well known to me; in particular, George Macdonald, whom I knew only as a name; now I am better instructed.

Given the length and range of the book it would be remarkable if nothing were said that did not prompt a few large question marks in the margin. These, if and when they occur, can be allowed to the democracy of commentary or the latitude of error. I can think of only one instance where the commentary, jumping unprompted to desired conclusions, seems to me plain wrong. It concerns the reading of the opening of *Piers Plowman*, the first three lines of the Prologue:

In a somer sesoun, whan softe was the sonne,  
I shoop me in-to shrowdes, as I a schep were,  
In habite as an heremite, unholy of werkes  
Wente wyde in this worlde, wundres for to here

I might translate this: ‘One summertime when the sun was mild, I got into workman’s clothes, like a shepherd’s; and in the guise of a hermit who has quit his religious cell, went roaming abroad, to hear the marvels of the world’. The reading *schep* = ‘shepherd’ is Skeat’s, in his edition of the B text, and also in his and R.L. Mayhew’s *Concise Dictionary of Middle English*. Skeat/Mayhew supplies a reading for *shrowdes*, as ‘rough outdoor clothes’. The phrase *unholy of werkes* indicates that the prayerful solitude of a Hermit, as prescribed in the first chapter of the Benedictine rule, is not for this narrator, who happily chooses the footloose way of a *Gyrovagus*, a vagabond, a category despised and condemned by Benedict. J.F. Goodridge’s translation in the Penguin Classics edition of the poem (1959) renders *I schop me in-to shrowdes* as ‘I rigged myself out in shaggy woollen clothes’ and *an heremite unholy of werkes*, as ‘an easy-living hermit’. These are terms in which the Narrator introduces himself. It is not until the ninth line that he falls asleep, ‘by the bank of a brook’, and so enters into allegory and the role of the Dreamer.

The reading suggested in the Overview of *Piers Plowman* is very different. It translates words differently and invites rather different implications.

... the dreamer dresses himself like a sheep in wolf’s clothing, ‘in the habit of a hermit unholy of works’, and instantly raises in the Christian’s mind phrases from

the gospels about that other wolf in sheep’s clothing as well as warnings about the ‘hireling’ shepherd and the danger for his sheep (John 10: 1-15). The dreamer is a sheep, someone needing a shepherd and a guide, but, in his abandoned state, dressed to move among the wicked as one of them.

There is a Thomist principle, that the first business of an exegete is to establish what the text actually says; after, to interpret a meaning, at potential levels, e.g. of the literal, the allegorical, the tropological (figurative) and the anagogical (mystic/spiritual). This strongly suggests taking the first four lines of Langland’s great poem at straightforwardly literal level – ‘Here I am, your story-teller’. Allegory and tropology will follow soon enough. What is proposed instead is an exordium in evangelical vein, the method being to pick up on gospel texts (as raised in ‘the Christian’s mind’) and work them into a homily. Fortunately, after a page or less, the essay slips into something more comfortable.

The book’s penultimate entry, Section 6, ‘The Christian Tradition’, keeps the reader well informed about things Christians have actually said and thought and practised. It begins, characteristically, with the Bible as narrative, in ‘The Story line of the Bible’, and ‘The Relationship of the Old and New Testament’. The first of these is necessary to follow, if one is to understand how the Bible has been put to use by generations of poets and story tellers; the second is an advisable study for any who question the Christian necessity of the Old Testament (there have been such in the past – e.g. the heretic Marcion – and there are such today). There follows a chapter on Christian History and Theology, first in the patristic era, with the evolution of the Eastern Orthodox Church, whose legacy Roman Catholic and Anglican communities acknowledge wherever the Nicene Creed is said. The next topic is Theology in the Reformation, a hard subject for Roman Catholics to consider with patience or Protestants to handle with tact, but the essay-writer is able to be objective and diplomatic, about profound cultural changes, affecting, among so many other things, the literary language of English. The final chapter of Section 6 is on hymnody. The focus of this is indicated by the questions following the essay: ‘What do you think is the principal appeal of hymns: words, music, or something else?’ and ‘Are hymns literature now in a way that they were not when they were written?’ The essay-writer observes that it is hard to assess the literary merit of hymns, other than when they happen to be a poem set to music, as with George Herbert’s ‘King of Glory, King of Peace’, or – my favourite – Samuel Crossman’s ‘My Song is Love Unknown’, a beautiful poem beautifully set by John Ireland. Requirements other than aesthetic generally determine the popularity and doctrinal use of a hymn; this leads the essayist to conclude that ‘it is probably best...to think of hymn-writing as a separate literary craft, with its own distinctive criteria for successful composition.’

An aspect of hymnody that might have been additionally considered is the propensity of editors or churchmen to make surreptitious changes in the text of hymns to bring them into line with present-day preaching. For example, the change made in the fifth stanza of ‘Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken’, from ‘Saviour, if of Zion’s city / I through grace a member am’ (John Newton was a Calvinist) to ‘Saviour, since of Zion’s city...’, now the unquestioningly received version. I recently pointed out this change to an Anglo-Catholic priest, who exclaimed, indignantly, ‘What’s the difference?’ It appears that poems are to be scrupulously respected, but to meddle with the text of a hymn is always permissible.

The book’s Section 7 is a Glossary of Bible Narratives, Christian Themes, and Christian Terms. This is a treat for an incorrigible looker-up and rambler-round, such as the present reviewer, whose memory needs constant reminders

of things casually forgotten. The Bible narratives include the parables of Christ, here presented *in précis*, hard sayings with literary analogues: the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan. The Workers in the Vineyard, 'Kingdom' parables, have become matter for socio-political narrative; Lady Thatcher's evaluation of the Good Samaritan as a text on the Virtue of Wealth (the Samaritan was good because he had it) is an example that may be remembered still, though better forgotten. The Christian Themes include 'Angels', benevolent middle class servants of imaginative literature, and very popular with children. Angels are messengers and recorders – e.g. the angel in Leigh Hunt's *Abou Ben Adhem*, sitting in the moonlight 'like a lily in bloom', recording the names of those who love God, and dispiriting Ben Adhem by telling him that his is not among them. But, 'write me as one that loves his fellow men,' he is told, and next night the angel revisits Ben Adhem with the news that his name stands higher than all the rest in the tally of those who love the Lord. 'Love', then, is another theme to which the rambler may turn, to find in definition 'a power, a principle which maintains the order of the world, or restores it', which in turn steers him to 'Wisdom', in the Old Testament 'active in the creating and sustaining of the world'. So a browser may read at random and read himself into a sense of direction, with literary associations for good measure. This mode of study is useful and pleasing, in good classical tradition.

The final sub-section, 'Christian Terms' offers more matter for self-informing and self-guidance. Whereas, however, the preceding pages on Biblical narratives and Christian themes repeatedly make note of literary associations and examples, this part of the Glossary is mostly plain definition of terms ecumenically noted (though as to that, it is occasionally possible to scent a Catholic, or 'smell a Loller in the wind'). It is felicitous that the book should end with a definition of virtue: 'Virtue means literally a strength or power. Virtues are habits which strengthen the soul in terms of its capacity to choose the good and put it into action.' That this is a strong book, I will attest, that it makes choice of what is good I will confirm, and that it makes for habits of mind that strengthen the soul, I will readily believe. I congratulate editors *et al.* on their missionary zeal; I thank them for helping me in ways they cannot know, and am beginning to think that, rattled though we undoubtedly are, we are not yet quite defeated. Thanks be to God.

## Book Reviews

**Andrew Tate, *Contemporary Fiction and Christianity*, Continuum, 2008, vi + 161pp., £60, 9 780826 489074**

The present book is Andrew Tate's reflections on what he calls in his introduction 're-enchanted fictions', contemporary writings which, though written within broadly materialist parameters, nevertheless approach the life of Jesus or miracle or similar topics in a way that is at least ambiguously open to the reality of the spiritual. It is difficult, in a sentence like that above, not to put most of the significant words in inverted commas: it is to Tate's credit that he neither does that, nor leaves the reader with any sense that the ideas are ironised or confused. Tate's writing here is clear, thoughtful and engaging.

The first chapter after the introduction deals with Jim Crace's *Quarantine* and its interaction with ideas of incarnation, idolatry and transfiguration. The next chapter treats John Updike's novels and the ideas of heresy and grace. 'Miracles and the mundane: signs, wonders and the novel' embraces a range of novels, including among others Nick Hornby's *How to be Good*, Don de Lillo's *Underworld* and Rhidian Brook's *The Testimony of Taliesin Jones*, and explores faith and miracle, but also conversion. A chapter on John Irving explores topics such as repentance and resurrection. The final substantial chapter is on Douglas Coupland (a writer whose work is more fully explored in a new book by Tate) and deals particularly with the interpretation of time, including the end of the world. A brief conclusion, 27 pages of notes and bibliography, and a useful index complete the book.

The focus of the book is on how fiction is taking as its matter what was traditionally in the realm of theology: 'the novel, even in its most determinedly secular forms, now articulates religious questions more forcefully than has been widely recognized'. Tate is not performing a Christian critique of contemporary fiction, but is exploring how it treats theological issues. His readings are subtle and invariably interesting, and while the book comes to no startlingly new or radical conclusions, the reader is drawn engagingly into the exploration.

Two particular matters struck the present reviewer as worthy of further comment: the notion of 'religious reading' discussed in the introduction, and the use of religious language more generally. Two pages of the introduction raise all sorts of questions. A section starts:

One serious objection to a Christian interpretation of the novel (indeed of any text) is that the reader's prior creedal commitment will necessarily reduce the complexity of personal experience and public narration on which fiction depends – including the representation of trauma and joy – to fit the contours of another privileged story.

Tate goes on, 'In traditional religious experience, the worshiper needs an unwavering faith in the object of worship, whereas in the act of reading, the reader...is...free to exercise disbelief.' (Other writers are quoted and discussed, voicing the same kind of views. On first reading this struck me as odd, and maybe I have not yet fully understood what a 'religious reader' or 'reading' is today, but I think this reader is likely to be notional, an imagined 'fundamentalist' tut-tutting through a novel and measuring its orthodoxy, a parody rather than a reality. For myself, 'creedal commitment' if anything increases the complexity of the business of reading, and 'unwavering faith' is too much of an oxymoron for comfort. John Updike, in his speech at the award of the Campion Medal to him by the Catholic

Book Club in 1997, also referred to those who seek 'glimpses of mollifying holiness' in literary fiction, surely another parody of the 'religious reader'. But the religious readers of the Catholic Book Club wouldn't be reading his books or awarding him the Champion Medal if they were generally of that sort. Tate has no need of this 'religious reader' parody, and indeed he very clearly exemplifies the subtlety, complexity and openness of theological – hence, in a sense, 'religious' – reading.

The second matter is that of language. Tate is aware of the issues here: 'From a ...conservative position, the God-talk of contemporary culture risks undermining the specifics of religious belief'. Earlier he writes, 'Liz Dunn's loneliness [in *Eleanor Rigby*] is redeemed only when she gains a transfigured sense of both space and time'. The whole chapter is about Douglas Coupland's play with *kairos* and *chronos*, so the interaction of views of time, and transformation of linear, ordinary time into the meaning-laden, significant *kairos* may legitimately be a transfiguration; so indeed may the emergence of something valuable and life-enriching from loneliness be called redemption. But the language sails perilously close to the 'God-talk' wind.

These matters aside, Tate's book is an enjoyable and stimulating read, never aggressive or obscure. He avoids value judgements, taking as read the reader's interest in the books. He treats the novels with grace and perceptiveness, introducing this reader to some books and writers not yet sampled, and is a thoroughly agreeable companion. His book ends with reference to Jon McGregor's *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*, and Tate has, as much as the novel, borne witness to 'remarkable things'.

Paul Cavill

**John Schad, *Someone Called Derrida: An Oxford Mystery*, Sussex Academic Press, 2007, 211 pp., £16.95 pb., (hb. £47.50) 978 1 84519 031 6**

John Schad has written a moving memoir of his father's life, taking as his starting point the last traumatic years (1992-96) marked by panicked and perplexing utterances prompted by the onset of Alzheimer's, transcribed by Schad's mother. Are these despairing fragments memories, or mere snippets of sixty years of living and sermonizing? Schad has threaded through this intimate portrait of a dying father an elaborate engagement with the philosophy of deconstruction, and with a history of Oxford from the 1930s to the present. Creative writing, life writing and literary theory are brought together in this challenging text.

Schad does three things. He tells his father's story from schoolboy to Oxford undergraduate to Methodist turned Presbyterian minister to final dramatic demise. He interlaces his father's life with the work of Jacques Derrida, drawing extensively on one of Derrida's many experiments with the confessional mode, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1987), a puzzling book, part novel, part philosophical treatise, loaded with diary fragments and postcards from the edge that are richly suggestive and resonant in relation to Schad's father's life, the witnessing of some awful event in childhood providing one web of connections. As Schad recalls, 'there had been no prologue to the dramatic monologue of his final years'. Between these two father figures, Derrida and John Richard Schad (or Shad, as he preferred to be called), Schad lays out a latticework of links involving the Second World War, anti-Semitism, blackmail, betrayal, horror, guilt, history, martyrdom, memory (false and faithful), resurrection and secrecy. (Derrida and Schad senior were both born in 1930, one of many coincidences that Schad exploits.) The whole thing is framed by a piece of archival detective-work in the Bodleian to solve an Oxford mystery that would have Inspector Morse scratching his head. Major figures of the period like Gilbert Ryle, C. S. Lewis, and Hugh Trevor-Roper put in appearances in a work full of fascinating vignettes of

academic in-fighting and high-table gossip. Schad shows the extent to which faith and reason are intertwined in the lives of his father and the philosopher who has shaped his son's thinking, while bringing to vivid life a whole post-war intellectual milieu.

Schad is editor of the Critical Inventions series in which this work appears, and it would be tempting to see in it an in-house exercise in vanity, or at least an attempt by a dutiful son to bring his father's life to light in the context he knows best. Schad could have reached a wider readership had he published this story as a novel along the lines of Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1995), but if Schad had to edit his own series in order to find a home for this unexpectedly intimate enterprise then it was worth it. The series is devoted to experiments in criticism and Schad's attempt to shed light on the shadow cast by his father's past and last days, while following the nimble footsteps of a philosopher renowned for his work on mourning and his critical crossings of the border between life and death, is a perfect illustration of how scholarship and storytelling can dovetail beautifully. Schad wants us to see the critic as 'autobiographer, novelist, mourner, poet, parodist, detective, dreamer, diarist, flaneur, surrealist, priest, montagist, gambler, traveller, beggar, anarchist...or even amateur'. He has led here by example.

Several writers and texts came into my mind while I was reading *Someone Called Derrida*, including the novels of Muriel Spark, particularly *Memento Mori* (1959) and *Hothouse by the East River* (1973), which deal with death and haunting in ways that Schad would recognise and relish. I was also reminded of *The Star Factory* (1997), by the Irish poet Ciaran Carson, a memoir of his father and of the city, Belfast, where he grew up. Like Carson, Schad takes the idea of a family archive and opens it up to a larger lifeworld. The last words of the book tell the reader that 'He is not here', referring to Schad's dad, and also to Derrida, but both are here between the covers of this critical invention.

There are lines that could come straight from Terry Eagleton, such as when Parisian philosophers visiting Oxford in the 1960s are 'suspected of being more interested in sedition than sherry'. But such glibness is rare. The chief notes are elegiac and inquisitive: confession, cross-examination and the slow sifting of evidence. Schad has replaced one question – 'What did you do in the war, Daddy?' – with another – 'What – if anything – happened to you in your youth that came back to haunt you in your final years?' A key question for Schad revolves around the mystery of what it means to minister, the consequences of being a listening post for confessions and disclosures. Schad's father 'had spent thirty years listening to folk who would tell the saddest of stories.... These were the circles in which my father moved, and was moved'. As he raved against the dying of the light, Schad's father wrestled with the after-effects of trauma, though whether his own or others' remains unknown.

One of the saddest lines for me comes in response to his father saying 'I am tiny'. Schad says 'if anyone could say "I am tiny" in a nonchalant manner, it was my father, a man who never needed or wanted to be big'. One wonders what 'Shad' would have thought of his larger than life reincarnation in the pages of his son's academic experiment. Schad cites Freud to the effect that 'History is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas'. In its evocation of death and suffering, *Someone Called Derrida* is at once an intensely personal story and a tale of trauma that touches on larger issues of history and identity. It was Nietzsche who said, 'When one hasn't had a good father, it is necessary to invent one'. Schad had two good fathers, but that, happily, has not prevented him from being inventive.

Willy Maley

Jonathan Roberts, *William Blake's Poetry: A Reader's Guide*, Continuum, 2007, xii + 124 pp., £11.99, pb., (\$16.95), 9 78 08264 8860 2

On reading Blake's poetry, and particularly his long poems, with their bold and curiously inventive mythologies, their mystifying pantheon of characters that includes, among others, Tharmas, Los, Luvah, and Orc, their outrageous and ambagious plots, and their dizzying philosophical digressions, the newcomer can be pardoned for feeling overwhelmed and disoriented. Jonathan Roberts's introduction to the poetry of William Blake, the latest addition to the series of Continuum Reader's Guides, is to be commended for its readability, the lucidity and concision of its argument and, above all, for the light that it sheds upon one of the most enigmatic and challenging of our Western poets. Particularly refreshing is Roberts's decision to draw generously upon Blake's poetic corpus throughout his book. Where, typically, one might expect a critic introducing a major poet as gigantic as Blake to offer, very cautiously, safe, reader-friendly citations from *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Roberts additionally tenders and explicates excerpts from major poems such as *Milton* and *The Book of Urizen*, and even from lesser known epigrams, propositions, and satirical matter from the *Notebooks*.

The first chapter, which is entitled 'Contexts,' gives a linear account of Blake's life that is continuously illuminated by vital background information on the key political, social, intellectual, and religious movements of Blake's age. Given, on the one hand, the inevitable constraints of space for a foundational study of this kind and, on the other, the complexity and magnitude of the events of Blake's time that need to be covered in any judicious portrait of the poet-seer of Lambeth, Roberts proves himself to be adept at compressing and condensing weighty ideological and conceptual material without having to sacrifice the clarity of his explanations. Discussions of non-conformism, the Enlightenment, the American and French Revolutions, deism, empiricism, and millenarianism are conducted with no sense of these subjects being given short shrift, but, rather, of their being integrated within the life of the poet of which they are so indispensable a part. What is more, Roberts packs his history with luminaries of the age so that Blake's life and thought jostle with, and are informed by, the likes of Thomas Paine, Emmanuel Swedenborg, and the mystic cobbler Jacob Boehme along with Bacon, Newton, and Locke. By the close of this first chapter the neophyte should be confident that Blake has been successfully situated within his intricate and turbulent eighteenth-century world and that the poet's affiliations and differences with the various groups and movements of his epoch have been comprehended.

'Language, Form and Style,' the second chapter, examines the aesthetic, artistic, and poetic movements that helped to shape Blake's imaginative vision. The chapter initially traces the textual influences upon Blake's uniquely illustrated books with their bright fusion of image and word. Blake's indebtedness to the chapbook, a genre of children's literature, is considered, as is the appropriateness of the pamphlet form as a medium for philosophical and religious statement. Subsections on pastoral, the sublime, the Gothic, and classicism not only unpack these various aesthetic attitudes and approaches, but also furnish nuanced discussions of ways in which Blake both abides by and diverges from the artistic tradition he inherited. Thus, for example, Blake's celebration of the sublimity of nature is not an unalloyed acceptance of a Wordsworthian idealization of Nature, but, instead, Blake 'is sceptical of the privileging of nature that this sort of outlook entails', so that Blake can judge, 'I see in Wordsworth the Natural Man rising up against the Spiritual Man Continually, & then he is No Poet but a

Heathen Philosopher at Enmity against all true Poetry or Inspiration.' Elsewhere Roberts offers a fruitful observation regarding the influence upon Blake of Bishop Robert Lowth's detection of a coherent prosody in the writings of the Hebrew prophets; Roberts argues that Lowth's innovative study accordingly encouraged Blake to fashion himself in the dual role of poet and prophet. Welcome, too, is Roberts's inclusion of Blake's darkly humorous, albeit choleric, response to Robert Thornton's fustian reworking of the Lord's Prayer. In riposte, a righteous Blake translated Lowth's translation back into an outrageously polemical, satirical, and despiritualized version of the Lord's Prayer that was denunciatory of tyranny, war, and gross, godless materialism: 'Give us day by day our Real, Taxed, Substantial, Money-bought Bread'.

Chapter Three, 'Reading Blake,' is the longest and most ambitious chapter and is very much the centrepiece of Roberts's study. The first part, 'Contraries,' demonstrates how Blake's rigorously dialectical thinking operates and, in so doing, instances a concrete example of the engagement between Urizen and Los in an episode deriving from *The First Book of Urizen*. Roberts argues for Blake's advocacy of 'the interdependence of opposites,' whereby Blake resists the splitting of contraries or the halving of any aspect of existence, for that way lies tyranny. The chapter shows how this formulation of a Blakean dialectic lends itself to Blake's subversive readings, both of *Paradise Lost*, where Milton is famously said to be of the devil's party, and of the Book of Job, where Satan signifies the function of the law or reason and God is a projection of Job's spurious self-image. Roberts cautions that Blake's dialectical approach to 'categorical moral thinking is not moral relativism, but a willingness to question whether we have necessarily always got it right,' and he provocatively goes on to apply Blake's fears concerning moral absolutism to the way we live now: 'For example, if a child is killed by a weapon, we may call this "evil", but if we pan right out and see this as "collateral damage" in a "war for freedom" then we may be able to superimpose the label "good". Your team is the good team, your country is the good country, you are committed to those thematic ways of thinking that require subordinating details to the principle.' Blake's distrust of impersonal abstractions that threaten to become negations of reality constitutes the principal theme of the chapter's second part, 'The Role of Narrative.' A sensitively handled comparison between Blake's 'Chimney Sweeper' poems, companion pieces from *Innocence* and *Experience*, illustrates how even the suffering and the innocent can be enthralled by hegemonic narratives so that 'the pursuit of abstract good leads to particular evils.' Having described Blake's false God, 'Nobodaddy' (or nobody's daddy) as a quasi-Feuerbachian projection of the self, Blake provides a corrective in part three, which bears the title 'Jesus.' The originality of Roberts's scholarship is most apparent here, where he restores a central pillar of Blake's theology that has been in great need of critical rehabilitation and reappraisal. Through Blake's understanding of Jesus, 'love is an act of imagination, whereby abstract or legalistic responses to individuals are humanized in the light of compassion.' Blake's Jesus forms the lens through which the individual and the community may be seen as interwoven and holy, and through what Roberts terms 'the Body of Christ' the individual is restored to eternity. Doctrinally speaking, all this may seem thoroughly Pauline, and Roberts insists that it is, although, rather than being the preserve of the Christian Church, 'it is open to all people, as Blake argues it is through love that the eternal relation of all things is seen.' Appreciated in this light, art, in Blake's view, amounts to 'a mechanism whereby this process of forgiveness, redemption and humanization can be brought about'. My brief summary of this chapter fails to do its contents justice; suffice to say, any reader or scholar with an interest in Blake's core theology



and poetics would be richly rewarded by a familiarity with the breadth and depth of this section of the book.

The fourth chapter commences with an extremely detailed analysis of Blake's method of writing, engraving, and printing his exquisitely crafted books, a process which was reportedly commended to the poet in a dream-vision by his late brother Robert. Roberts accounts for Blake's lack of commercial success as being, in part, the consequence of his social and professional status, but he also reproduces passages from the *Descriptive Catalogue* of Blake's only private exhibition, held in his brother James's shop, which show us the poet swimming against the mainstream and criticizing the likes of Titian and Correggio, passages that strongly indicate just how countercultural Blake could be. The remainder of the chapter offers a survey of the critical reception of Blake's work right up to the twenty-first century. As we might expect, opinion is extremely diverse, with Robert Hunt, brother of Leigh, excoriating Blake in the *Examiner* as 'an unfortunate lunatic', and Coleridge, in his own inimitable and wonderfully exhortatory style, expressing that Blake is 'a man of Genius... certainly, a mystic *emphatically*.' Chapter Five turns to the history of the adaptation, interpretation, and influence of Blake in Western culture to the present time. The chapter ranges across a broad spectrum of topics: in the visual arts, from the works of the graphic novelist Alan Moore, the creator of *V for Vendetta*, to Eduardo Paolozzi's bronze statue of *Newton*, which currently hulks over the British Library's piazza; in occultism and esotericism, from the Golden Dawn and Yeats's *A Vision* to Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*; in music, from the lyrics of Van Morrison to *The Doors*; in television and cinema, from Jack Shepherd's play *In Lambeth* to Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*; and, last and not least, in celebrity culture, with a slightly disturbing anecdote concerning the framed proverbs on the subject of excess from Blake's *Marriage* that adorn billionaire Donald Trump's New York penthouse suite. In the sixth and final chapter Roberts offers a selection of resources, both paper and electronic, for further research and inquiry into 'Blakeana'. It is very pleasing to see, among the trendy categories that couple Blake with the body, Empire, feminism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, a generous list of suggested reading matter under the subheading 'Blake and Religion/The Bible.'

Roberts's study presents one of the most accessible, helpful, and enjoyable introductions to Blake available hitherto, inviting and heartening initiates and scholars alike to come to grips with the full complexity of this difficult, but inspiring, poet. In short, *William Blake's Poetry* makes for a most edifying read.

Russell M. Hillier

**Kyle Keefer, *The New Testament as Literature: A Very Short Introduction*, OUP, 2008, 121pp., £7.99 (US\$ 11.95), pb. 978 0 19 530020 8**

'A stimulating way in to new subjects' says the publisher's strapline for this series, but the New Testament, its novelty relative to the Jewish scriptures, stopped being new long ago; one way to read this little book is for its take on what constitutes the literary now, in America. In the context of literary studies religious motifs and texts are increasingly receiving attention. The Bible, whose reading and interpretation was for long kept under ecclesiastical control, is now liberated for study not only by the pious individual but by practitioners of literary criticism, pious or not.

The series has very short introductions to the Old Testament, the Bible, Christianity, Christian art, Catholicism, Atheism, Indian philosophy, the Koran, and extends far beyond in two hundred titles to Prehistory, World Music, Quantum Theory, Autism, Fossils, Terrorism, and the Meaning of Life. Keefer, an assistant

professor of religion at Converse College in South Carolina, has previously published a monograph on the early reception of John's Gospel. His adopted perspective is that of the Western canon. 'The Gospel of Matthew, for example, does not favorably compare with *Moby Dick* with regard to linguistic complexities we often associate with literary works.' Dante makes use of Biblical characters, as well as of characters from classical texts, but Keefer's claim that Dante uses the New Testament 'to construct the tripartite otherworld of the *Commedia*' is dubious if he means that Dante's Heaven, Purgatory and Hell are derived from the New Testament. He finds abundant New Testament allusion in the Prologue to the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, particularly on the subjects of marriage, sexual activity and celibacy. The New Testament is 'intricately tied to the West, part of the cultural thesaurus.' The American critic Kenneth Burke (d. 1993) was right: literature is 'equipment for living'. But you can personally engage with the New Testament 'without necessarily feeling the need to learn a moral lesson'.

The gospels are like biographies, but none of the writers witnessed the events. The authors' names, Matthew, Mark etc, are convenient fictions. Later gospels copied earlier ones, and Mark was the first to be written. (Keefer finds no need to mention the Q hypothesis.) Mark, with its 'triple passion prediction', creates paradox. Matthew argues for the fulfilment of Judaism. The gospel writers 'do not pretend to get inside Jesus' head to explain his motivations' (p. 19), but Mark does comment, if 'rarely', on Jesus' thoughts (p. 24,) and then again 'the gospel writers occasionally peer into Jesus' mind to explain what he was thinking' (p. 57). While all four gospels give much attention to the passion, arguing its inevitability, none gives much explanation of why Jesus had to die. The crucifixion becomes 'one more parable'.

Keefer's close readings are designed to demonstrate how a literary approach can 'awaken us to the intricacies of the language' of the text. His literary reading of the Good Samaritan highlights 'layers', 'while not contradicting the received wisdom'. He sets out a schematic of the parable and its dramatic setting, adding a surprising twist:

LAWYER: I know I should love my neighbor, but who is my neighbor?

JESUS: Here's a story about a beaten man and a Samaritan. Now you tell me who the neighbor is.

LAWYER: The Samaritan.

JESUS: Then you should love that Samaritan, the outcast who comes to your aid.

'Furthermore,' adds Keefer with another dextrous literary twist, 'if the lawyer must love the Samaritan, the lawyer identifies *not* with the giver of mercy but with the recipient of it. In other words he must follow the example of the beaten man, who takes no action at all.'

Referring to another crux, where Jesus, questioned about a parable, tells his disciples that the audiences 'hear but do not understand', Keefer adopts a reading that is not at all intricate: 'everything sounds parabolic to outsiders *in order that* they will remain outside.' He fails to notice the allusion, subtle to modern ears, to Isaiah 6:10, which expresses God's longing, as it were in ironic exasperation, for the repentance of his people:

Make their ears dull

and close their eyes.

Otherwise they might see with their eyes,

hear with their ears,

understand with their hearts,  
and turn and be healed.

Paul's writings have become 'closely aligned with popular Christian theology'. It is usually his version of the Gospel that people refer to. But the literary reader has to view Paul not so much as a historical personage (though he was one) as a construct derived from his letters. Keefer says almost nothing about Paul as described by Luke in Acts, and he understandably finds no reason to discuss the hypothesis that he, rather than Jesus, was the founder of Christianity. The recipients of the letters, although some of them figure in detail in Acts, he considers 'remain hazy reconstructions'.

Paul's Gospel message derives, Keefer thinks, from a conviction that salvation for all human beings is possible, from which he moves (in the early chapters of Romans) to his 'insight into their universal predicament'. Or the other way round of course. The much discussed Romans 7 describes the Christian as, in Luther's phrase, *simul justus et peccator*, at once saved and a sinner. Paul does not anywhere mention eternal punishment, only that the unrighteous shall not inherit the Kingdom of God.

He does not argue explicitly for universal salvation, but given his cocksureness about the universal human plight, he might very well claim that God will eventually save everyone. Paul's understanding of salvation has at least an equal if not a greater focus on what salvation means in the earthly existence of his audience.

In the opening of Revelation Jesus appears to John the Divine as an awesome figure. In Chapter 5 there is the Lion of Judah and a lamb with seven horns, seven eyes and so on. It is as though slaughtered in sacrifice, and stands for Jesus. Keefer bridles at the gruesome imagery. 'So this creature would seem to have a gaping wound in its neck,' a disagreeable contrast with the first vision. Yet two pages later, considering the end of Revelation, he soars easily above the literal. 'Jesus the material being dissolves into speech. In fact, all material representations of divinity tend to fall away in the new heaven and new earth.' He does not appear to recognise that in Chapter 5 the images and symbols have a momentum of their own, rendering the literal imagination redundant.

Hebrews is 'the most intellectually and rhetorically dazzling book of the New Testament' because it shows that 'Jesus has become both the new high priest and the final sacrifice, thereby abrogating the entire sacrificial system of Judaism.' Nowhere else is Jesus described as the high priest. The New Testament has numerous voices, and not all of its narratives cohere, yet 'the unnamed organic creators of the biblical canon chose to canonize variety, just as Faulkner decided to embed it within [*As I Lay Dying*].'

Many of the matters Keefer discusses are moot. His book lists 33 books for further reading (not Melville or Faulkner though), and has six endnotes and an index (which includes Faulkner but neither Melville nor *Moby Dick*). It is disfigured here and there by unliturgical lapses of grammar and style. Two examples among many, the first being the concluding words of the chapter on the gospels:

With the four gospels linked together at the beginning of the New Testament, four Jesuses, all intriguing and distinct yet overlapping, literary readers of these texts find an abundance of material that piques their own creative impulses.

And from the opening sentences of the final chapter:

Some of the books do, of course, display a natural affinity with their neighbors – Paul's letters, Luke-Acts, and the Johannine letters in particular – but even these do not belie evidence that would necessarily welcome anthologizing.

Roger Kojecký

**Christine E. Joynes (ed.) *Perspectives on the Passion: Encountering the Bible through the Arts*, Continuum/T & T Clark, 2007, £70.00 978 0 567 03362 8**

This expensive volume is edited by Christine Joynes, the Associate Director of the Centre for Reception History of the Bible at Oxford University. Reception history (or effective history/history of effects; in German *Wirkungsgeschichte*) is an 'in subject' in the world of Biblical studies. Blackwell are currently publishing a series of Biblical commentaries which engage in this study of the 'afterlife' of Biblical texts and in which the strengths and weaknesses of the approach are already amply illustrated. Such a study of the Apocalypse or one of the gospels is likely to yield much greater interest than some other texts one might suggest. As Christine Joynes says in her introduction, such a study is bound to be interdisciplinary by nature. The impact of the Biblical text can be traced in music, art, film and theatre, and other literary forms, almost endlessly. The possibilities are endless, and consequently enriching to such an extent that Joynes comments in her introduction: 'How people have interpreted and been influenced by the Bible is often as interesting and historically important as what the text may have originally meant.' We may not wish to go quite that far but she has a point. For Evangelicals what the text meant must surely be primary, however difficult it may be to discern authorial intention.

To help her in the task of examining the Biblical Passion Narratives, Christine Joynes has assembled a stellar group of international contributors who take an aspect of those narratives and consider the various ways in which artists have been inspired by it. Interestingly, but perhaps disappointingly, only Jaime Lara, teaching at Yale but examining the effects of missionary encounter with Latin America, represents the developing world. First up is the Swiss professor Ulrich Luz, famous most recently for his gigantic three volume commentary on Matthew. Just to demonstrate that he is not merely an outstanding exegete with an obsession with the first gospel, Luz offers an extremely helpful study of what reception history should be all about. This is nuanced and wide-ranging, and brilliantly sets the parameters for the rest of the volume. Peter Hawkins from Boston University focuses upon the narrative of Gethsemane, and examines its afterlife in the novels, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Kazantzakis), *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (Saramago) and the poem 'The Olive Garden' (Rilke), demonstrating along the way how art seeks, and even succeeds, in maintaining the human/divine tension in Christ whilst orthodox faith struggles.

Tim Gorringe of Exeter University seeks to demonstrate that artistic interpretation has frequently been ideologically motivated. It has never operated in a vacuum and has frequently been at the beck and call of those who pay the piper. Robin Jenson's essay traces reasons for the rather late development of crucifixion imagery – offering a more theological reason, perhaps, than that proposed by Gorringe. The tension between theological scruple and other motivating forces makes for interesting reading.

Musical 'readings' are represented in the essays Emma Hornby (Bristol), William Flynn (Leeds) and J.R. Watson (Durham), though Watson is more concerned with the text of post-Reformation hymns. Each of these essays offers profound reflection upon the development of Christian liturgy over an extended

period of time showing how music has helped shape that process. Regina Schwartz (Northwestern University) compares the understanding of sacrifice in *Othello* with the Passion Narratives. This leads to reflections on how, in the post-Reformation period, the theatre has tended to replace some of the functions of the Church. And, finally, Sara Maitland closes the volume with an engaging fictional contribution.

This is an enormously worthwhile volume demonstrating how artists over the 2,000 years of Christian history have illuminated our understanding of Christ's Passion often in ways inaccessible to mere exegesis or exposition. Perhaps equally importantly, they demand a response to the events leading up to Christ's death through the imaginative impact of their interpretations. It also demonstrates the huge and continuing impact of the Passion Narrative upon Western culture. However by its very nature, reception history cannot help being highly selective and hence subjective, playing along with the relativistic nature of much contemporary Christian thought. Indeed reception history, as exemplified in this excellent volume is more descriptive than evaluative. Readers need, as ever, to maintain the customary level of critical distance when reading it.

*Robert Willoughby*

**Suzanne Bray, Adrienne E. Gavin and Peter Merchant eds., *Re-Embroidering the Robe: Faith, Myth and Literary Creation since 1850*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, 278pp. £35 1 84718 608 4**

This is a collection of conference papers first given at Lille Catholic University in May 2007. The book's subtitle reflects the original title of the conference, at which some 37 scholars from Europe and the U.S.A. gave papers. Those who chose to give their papers in English have had their papers reproduced here, together with one French-language offering by Daniel Warzecha who later translated it into English.

The three editors have taken one group of papers each, prefacing them with a short essay to give some cohesion to what could otherwise be, and often is in this sort of collection, a diverse and unsystematic assemblage. On the whole, they have done a good job. Suzanne Bray is Professor of English Studies at Lille, and is a C.S. Lewis expert. Adrienne Gavin, who leads off the first section on Children's Literature, is at Canterbury Christ Church University, as is Peter Merchant, who introduces the final section on reworkings of myth in modern literature.

Having attended a European conference on Children's Literature a couple of years ago, I was prepared for the interest in English Literature on the continent, and the high standards of English in the papers presented. Many of the continental interests are quite different from British ones, treating certain authors and sub-genres rather more seriously.

But also I found a consistent interest in Christian approaches and themes at my conference, and had a number of interesting conversations with speakers who had found faith in a very secular context. I found this same interest and concern in this collection of essays. It would seem that both myth and Christianity cannot be suppressed by modern secularism: both will shoot out again in some form or another.

Of the three sections, it was perhaps the middle section, *Myth and the Christian Author*, that was most central, both to the volume and to this expression of Christian scholarly concern. One of the essays that interested me most was by one of the few participants currently teaching in the U.K., Rod Rosenquist, who re-assessed C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien in terms of their positioning in respect of

Modernism. Usually, Lewis's and Tolkien's own claims to be pre-modernist, even pre-Enlightenment, are taken at face value. Rosenquist suggests that in fact they can be taken as offering an early form of postmodernist thinking in their subjective approach to reason and experience. For them, myth recombines the triad of beauty, truth and goodness, which had been split apart by modernism. It does so in the form of 'literary belief', which has its own legitimacy as a truth act.

Other writers also chose Tolkien and Lewis: Joanny Moulin writing on 'Eucatastrophe' in terms not dissimilar to Rosenquist's; and David Warzecha writing on Lewis's Nordic roots in the Sagas. Suzanne Bray, who wrote the lead essay for the middle section, wrote a very worthwhile survey of other British Christians writing between 1933 and 1945.

The first section, on Children's Literature, was a little disappointing. As I had been out of academic Children's Lit. circles for over ten years, I was hoping to see some advances in critical theory and analysis. But I found none at all. The efforts of the 1980's to push theoretical work on the fantasy mode into Children's Literature to give it a sound academic basis seemed largely abandoned as far as I could see. A political reading of *The Wizard of Oz* by Jackson Barlow I found unconvincing. Several lesser known writers, Margaret Mahy and Sara Maitland, were discussed, but in an introductory way only.

Rather better from a theoretical viewpoint was the final section which dealt with modern reworkings of myth. Elizabeth Muller's essay on the Dionysian/Appollonian tension in Yeats I found interesting, though she does not quite relate this fully enough to Yeats' antipathy to Christian belief and mythology. The collection concluded with an essay by David Waterman on Doris Lessing's Science Fiction.

The editors must be commended for producing such a collection, just as the conference organisers must be for putting such a conference on. British Christian literary scholars can be assured their concerns are shared by many others teaching and studying elsewhere.

*David Barratt*

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## Living Church

Tears drip on the altar's  
weathered oak, undressed by committee  
tea stains clipboarding the future  
into compromise.

From the respectable remains  
tears provoke a quest  
for worship given inside biography:  
the praising body haunted by God's  
reassurance techniques, intimate lifelines  
to men drowning in strife.

The prototype living church  
should refuse to settle,  
always stirred by the call to 'Come,  
and drink freely' that rescues  
routine from the dust;  
the dryness of Wesleyan souls  
warmed by the spirit's dancing generation  
whose joy is their emerging witness,  
a fortress for a sterile-ringing world.

*Martin Jack*

## Notes on Contributors

**Rachel Adcock** is working towards a PhD at Loughborough University, where she also teaches. She is interested in seventeenth-century women's writing, particularly conversion narratives by Baptists and separatists.

**David Barratt** was for many years Senior Lecturer at Chester College, now the University of Chester. He has also lectured in Pakistan and the USA, where he now lives for part of the year. In retirement (?) he has been writing Study Guides for 'A' level students, school textbooks, entries for the Salem Press, and keeping up with 'O' and 'A' level examining. When in the UK, he lives in Nottinghamshire.

**Dr Paul Cavill's** most recent book is *The Christian Tradition in English Literature*, Zondervan, 2006 (with Heather Ward). He teaches English language and medieval literature at the University of Nottingham, and is Research Fellow for the English Place-Name Society.

**Dr Corina Anghel Crisu** is a Lecturer at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Bucharest. She has published more than 30 articles in the field of American Studies and Comparative Literature, and is the author of *Rewriting: Polytopic Identities in the Postmodern African American Novel* (Bucharest: Paideia, 2006). Her past awards include a Soros-Chevening Fellowship at Oxford University and a Fulbright Fellowship at Oregon State University. She is a member of IASA (The International Association of American Studies) and ESSE (The European Society for the Study of English). She is also a poet and has contributed to literary journals and anthologies worldwide; her poems have been collected in a bilingual volume, *Triptych* (Bucharest: Paralela 45, 2004).

**Philip Gorski** is completing a PhD on the Holy Fool in Russian Literature at the University of Nottingham, Department of Theology. He has taught at the Universities of London and Loughborough, and also with the WEA. His next publication is a review of Rowan Williams' *Dostoyevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction*, for *Sobornost (Incorporating Eastern Churches Review)*, journal of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius.

**Dr Russell M. Hillier** recently completed his doctorate on the works of John Milton at Cambridge University. His previous and forthcoming articles may be found in journals that include *Modern Language Review*, *Milton Studies*, *Milton Quarterly*, and *Studies in English Literature*. He has also published on other literary figures such as John Bunyan and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He is currently working on a Milton manuscript.

**Martin Jack** completed an MA in American Literature at the University of Sussex in 2008 following an undergraduate degree at the University of Kent. He has been published by Sentinel Poetry and in *First Time*, *Great Works*, *Penumbra*, *Breakfast All Day*, and *Poetry Monthly*, by the Knoxville Guild of Writers in their Anthology of Journeys, and by Waterloo Press in their journal *Eratica* as well as in an introductory sampler of his work in 2004: *Waterloo Samplers No. 5*.

**Dr Roger Kojecký**, author of *T S Eliot's Social Criticism*, is among the contributors to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (IVP).

**Willy Maley** is Professor of Renaissance Studies at the University of Glasgow, and author, most recently, of *Nation, State and Empire in English Renaissance Literature: Shakespeare to Milton* (2003), and editor, with Alex Benichimol, of *Spheres of Influence: Intellectual and Cultural Publics from Shakespeare to Habermas* (2007).

**Walter Nash** is Emeritus Professor of Modern English Language at Nottingham University. He has authored several collections of poems, including *The Spirit Soars*, and *In Good Faith: Devotional Poems 1997-2007*. He has written numerous books and articles on language and rhetoric. More information and a bibliography (to 1998) will be found on <http://www.humboldt.edu/~des11/nash/nash.html>

**Ann-Stephane Schäfer** is a doctoral student of American Studies at Johannes-Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany, where she also teaches. Pursuing her special interest in early American literature, Puritanism and Western intellectual history, she is currently writing a dissertation entitled 'Auctoritas Patrum: The Literary Reception of the Church Fathers in Puritanism'.

**Robert Willoughby**, a modern languages graduate and member of the CLSG committee, teaches New Testament at the London School of Theology. He combines a commitment to Scripture with a love for all kinds of literature.

## News and Notes

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### **Keep in touch**

Members, and others who are interested, are invited to join the email list and receive occasional information about events and activities, on- and off-line, relating to Christianity and literature. The list can also be used to send news, e.g. of new publications. There is no charge for membership of the e-list. Email the editor if you would like to join. A leaflet 'Introducing the CLSG' is available.

### **Autumn conference 2009**

Attend, or offer to read a paper at the autumn conference at Oxford on 7 November. This year's conference will consider the Fall motif in works of literature. Offers of papers are invited by 30 April 2009. See the CLSG website [www.cls.org](http://www.cls.org) for fuller information.

### **Acknowledgement**

The Editor has to acknowledge that all editorial faults in this issue are entirely his own.