
POPULARIZATION AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY TOWARDS AN ACCESSIBLE THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

As research in natural sciences and humanities becomes ever more specialized and technical, and the sword of Damocles – publish or perish – hangs over the head of every scholar, academic publishing proliferates but at the cost of its public relevance. Theology is no exception here, but the consequences are potentially much more disastrous. One need not understand anything about quantum mechanics for PET scan to work, but when nobody outside of academia understands contemporary theology, it is hard to imagine how “faith seeking understanding” makes any sense in the absence of such understanding amongst the believers. In order for a work of theology to make sense, it should be accessible for a wider public and it has to be existentially relevant. The present essay offers a few suggestions how theologians might go about meeting these criteria.

Key words

Theological Method, Science, Popularization, John Caputo, Jacques Derrida

How to speak theology today? This is the guiding question of my essay, motivated by growing uneasiness about what is going on in contemporary academia. While I was preparing this manuscript for submission, I stumbled upon two posts that were quite critical about what has become of science.¹ I had not searched for them, they just cropped up. By the time I got the text back for revision, I had seen three more.² One need not agree with everything they say to appreciate the

¹ Cf. <http://crypto.junod.info/2013/09/09/an-aspiring-scientists-frustration-with-modern-day-academia-a-resignation/> and <http://alexandreaonso.wordpress.com/2013/11/21/how-academia-resembles-a-drug-gang/> Both accessed on November 30, 2015.

² Cf. 1) <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/dec/06/peter-higgs-boson-academic-system> and 2) <https://chroniclevitae.com/news/291-what-s-the-point-of-academic-publishing> and 3) http://www.slate.com/articles/life/culturebox/2013/04/there_are

significance of such ideas spreading through the blogosphere. Indifference is no longer an option, so I would like to bring these issues to the attention of theologians and to suggest how we might go about avoiding the threat of public irrelevance.

“Although the Universe is under no obligation to make sense, students in pursuit of the PhD are,” declaimed Robert Kirshner during a public lecture at the University of Durham.⁵ When I first read this remark, I was struggling with my own dissertation, and the respected Harvard astrophysicist made me think about what it means for a work of theology to make sense. There are, I believe, two complementary answers: The work should be *understandable* and it should be *existentially relevant*. Let us consider each of them in turn.

I

The inaccessibility of scientific work to wider public is an old story. With respect to technical sciences, Theodore Porter points out how already “the nineteenth-century savants were painfully conscious of growing specialization and a consequent loss of comprehensibility”.⁴ Speaking on behalf of philosophers, John Dewey worried in the mid 1920s that “philosophic writing is often so specialized and technical that even educated readers, unless professionally trained, are repelled rather than attracted”.⁵ While specialized training has always been necessary to become a scholar, Porter says the problem is that “for most of its history inaccessibility was taken neither as fundamental to science nor as desirable”.⁶

Nowadays, natural sciences reach wider public through popularization. I imagine this strategy could be of interest to theology as well,

[_no_academic_jobs_and_getting_a_ph_d_will_make_you_into_a_horrible.html](#). All accessed on 9 February 2014.

⁵ Robert P Kirshner. Exploding Stars and the Expanding Universe (The 1990 Grubb Parsons Lecture). *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 32, 3 (1991): pp. 233–244, 240.

⁴ Theodore M. Porter. How Science Became Technical. *Isis* 100 (2009): pp. 292–309, 300.

⁵ John Dewey. Foreword to Will Durant. *The Story of Philosophy*. New York: Simon and Schuster 1926. Cited in George Cotkin. Middle-Ground Pragmatists: The Popularization of Philosophy in American Culture. *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55, 2 (1994): pp. 285–302, 288.

⁶ Porter. How Science Became Technical, p. 293.

but before we get there let us spend a moment longer considering how humanities became “academicized”.

In his particularly sobering work, Russell Jacoby argues that the 1950s intellectuals raised “in city streets and cafes before the age of massive universities” were the last ones who wrote for the educated reader: “They have been supplanted by high-tech intellectuals, consultants and professors – anonymous souls, who may be competent, and more than competent, but who do not enrich public life.”⁷ In contrast, present-day

younger intellectuals, whose lives have unfolded almost entirely on campuses, direct themselves to professional colleagues but are inaccessible and unknown to others. This is the danger and the threat; the public culture relies on a dwindling band of older intellectuals who command the vernacular that is slipping out of reach of their successors.⁸

Considering myself fairly young, this “danger and the threat” troubles me like a specter of a lonely life, and it gets worse, because the popular stereotype of a mad scientist may have already long been our reality. To illustrate, back in 1968 Lewis Mumford came across a new scholarly edition of his favorite writer Ralph Waldo Emerson published by Harvard University Press. He could not believe how the text was interrupted everywhere by diacritical marks “that spit, and sputter at the reader”. Alas, lamented Mumford, the professors made a writer of genius unreadable.⁹

Intrigued by Mumford’s critique, Edmund Wilson also did a bit of research and he found “a vast scholarly libido channeled into textual annotations mangling America’s authors”.¹⁰ The response from the insulted Modern Language Association was swift and ferocious. Wilson represents “obsolete amateurism in the age of high-performance professionals,”¹¹ the authors argued, but “similar animus has shown

⁷ Russel Jacoby. *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*. Second edition with a new introduction by the author. New York, NY: Basic Books 2000, p. x.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Jacoby. *The Last Intellectuals*, p. 192–193.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 195. The response of the MLA was published as Gordon N. Ray (ed.) *Professional Standards and American Editions: A Response to Edmund Wilson*. New York: Modern Language Association 1969.

itself and been discredited in field after field from botany to folklore. In the long run professional standards always prevail”.¹²

All we are entitled to do today, complained more recently Elisabeth Roudinesco, “is to take stock and draw up assessments, as though the distance that every intellectual enterprise requires amounted to no more than a vast ledger full of entries for things and people – or rather people who have become things”.¹³ For Roudinesco, this is “the absolute nadir of contemporary interrogation”, the result of what I call a cold, disinterested analysis. Hence the “gap between the academicism that is returning in force to official schooling and the massive demand for ‘living’ teaching outside the universities”.¹⁴ If we struggle to meet this demand (our mission, in case of theology), maybe we have accepted a little too uncritically the game imposed on us by academia.

II

It is rarely a good idea to make general statements like this, but I believe theology has some conscience checking to do. Some years ago, John Caputo, whose work was the topic of my dissertation, began his lecture at KU Leuven with the words: “There is a good reason that nobody trusts theology. Nobody outside the confessional religions trusts theology and with good reason.”¹⁵ I remember how the lecture hall fell silent; you could hear a pin drop: What? Did we just hear him say that nobody trusts what we are doing? Why would a celebrated philosopher of religion and theologian think such disturbing thoughts?

Caputo pointed the finger at theology itself, blaming it for its unwillingness to “present itself and understand itself except as sovereign theology, imperial theology”.¹⁶ If nobody outside religions – and, in fact, not too many people inside religions either – trust theology today, it is because, we were told by Caputo, “a good many theologians adopt

¹² *Professional Standards and American Editions*, p. i. Cited in Jacoby. *The Last Intellectuals*, p. 195.

¹³ Elisabeth Roudinesco. *Philosophy in Turbulent Times: Canguilhem, Sartre, Foucault, Althusser, Deleuze, Derrida*, trans. William McCuaig. New York: Columbia University Press 2008, p. ix.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. x.

¹⁵ John D Caputo. *The Sense of God: A Theology of the Event with Special Reference to Christianity*. In: Lieven Boeve - Christophe Brabant (ed.). *Between Philosophy and Theology: Contemporary Interpretations of Christianity*, Lecture given at KU Leuven on March 19, 2008. Farnham: Ashgate 2010, p. 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

the same high handed, unilateral and imperial tones as sovereign states, which reserve the right to make an exemption of themselves”.¹⁷

The details of Caputo’s diagnosis are beyond the scope of this paper, but I wish to suggest that the “high handed, unilateral and imperial attitude” of theology is as closely related to *how we write* as it is to the “exemptions we make of ourselves”. Maybe very few people trust theology because only very few actually understand it. Academic theology has gone a long way in exempting itself from the need to be understood. Only very occasionally do theologians gain a wider audience, Caputo said, “and when they do, how they did it and what was going on there repays careful study”.¹⁸ However, to the extent that academic theology shares this problem with natural sciences, their solution is also worth our attention.

III

Simplified accounts of exciting developments in contemporary science are ubiquitous and popular these days. Before anyone begins to wonder, however, what Jiří Grygar of theology should look like, it is important to understand that popularization is far more than a good PR. As Baudouin Jurdant suggests in this regard:

popularization of science seems to have an epistemological role to play within science itself [...] The significance of such a role is that not only should popularization of science be regarded as part of science itself, but also that it is a necessary ingredient if scientists are to get rid of their suspicion that they themselves are dreaming as Descartes might have feared ...¹⁹

Popularization fulfills its role by creating what Jurdant calls a reality effect. It literally makes the results of the scientific research tangible, whether by hand or – such would be the case of theology – by the believing heart. As Jurdant further explains:

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Baudouin Jurdant. *Popularization of Science As the Autobiography of Science. Public Understanding of Science* 2 (1993), pp. 365–373, 371.

By multiplying the angles from which scientific results can be made knowable, popularizers convey the feeling that what they talk about is indeed “gone roundable”. Reality has this particular feature of being three-dimensional which makes it possible to circle it and, through that circling movement, to see it from various angles without inducing changes in its definition.²⁰

Jurdant’s theory about popularization as a necessary ingredient for science helps to explain why we have a problem: When this essential ingredient is missing – when, as Jacoby puts it, “intellectuals turn inward to fetishize their profundity” – everybody loses, especially intellectuals themselves, and the entire scholarly enterprise goes to rack and ruin. Without a reality check provided by the world outside of academia, the work of intellectuals “turns arid, their arguments thin, their souls parched. In the life of the mind, as in life itself,” argues Jacoby, “vitality requires resisting the lure of the familiar and the safe”.²¹

IV

With the pre-understanding of popularization as a scientific method, we can now return to our “Grygar” question. What should a popularization of theology look like? There are probably a handful of good answers, but I personally do not favor those involving presence in the spotlight. Instead, I am intrigued by Jurdant who searched for the literary genre comparable with the works of popular science and found it in autobiography.²²

Surprising as this idea may sound, it is not quite unprecedented. Already in the 18th century, Count Gian Artico di Porcia launched a *Proposal to the Scholars of Italy* in which he urged them to write their own autobiographies.²³ Giuseppe Mazzotta explains that the impulse behind Porcia’s initiative was educational: “Each autobiography, as he envisioned it, was to make intelligible a scholar’s scientific practice and achievement.”²⁴ *Confessions* of St. Augustine are also a good exam-

²⁰ Ibid., p. 370.

²¹ Jacoby. *The Last Intellectuals*, p. xxi.

²² Jurdant. *Popularization of Science As the Autobiography of Science*, p. 367.

²³ Giuseppe Mazzotta. *The New Map of the World: The Poetic Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1999, p. 16.

²⁴ Ibid.

ple, being relatively accessible, autobiographical, and still theology at its highest.

Now, must we all publish intellectual autobiographies in order to reach wider audience? Fortunately not. Probably far more effective strategy is to make our texts comprehensible by writing them autobiographically. This distinction is both crucial and subtle, and it helps to think about it etymologically: *Autos*, *bios*, and *graphein* together suggest that a work becomes autobiographical whenever it contains a text *written by life of that life itself*. Autobiography can also be a matter of pathos and therefore style.

Not that such reformulation makes things any easier. In academic texts, style has suffered together with accessibility. The problem, according to Jean Starobinski, is in large measure the result of conventional ideas about the nature and function of style, whereby style is seen only as a “form” added to a “content”.²⁵ Scholars tend to view form with suspicion, as if the elegance of style was a disguised attempt to cover up emptiness of the argument. And yet it is possible to think about style not merely as a form but as originality which singles the author out and speaks beyond what the content can say: “The redundancy of style is individualizing: it singles out.”²⁶ Conversely, by ignoring the style we can easily misunderstand the content. Caputo, for example, once said that when

the philosophers and theologians who read *Prayers and Tears* or *Against Ethics* read past the poetics – the style, the tone, the irony – in order to get to the standpoint, I often find myself remonstrating with them about misconstruing my stand.²⁷

V

For the sake of style, I do not hesitate to call for a “revolution” in academia. A revolution like the premiere of Ludwig van

²⁵ Cf. Jean Starobinski. *The Style of Autobiography*. In: Trev Lynn Broughton (ed.). *Autobiography: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*. London and New York: Routledge 2007, p. 159.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

²⁷ John D. Caputo. *Not in Tongues, but Tongue in Cheek: A Response to Kearns*. In: Mark Dooley (ed.) *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus*. SUNY series in Theology and Continental Thought. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 2003, p. 295.

Beethoven's Symphony No. 3 (*Eroica*) in April 1805, which changed Western classical music forever.

Maynard Solomon explains how “the startling and unprecedented characteristics of the *Eroica*” were made possible because Beethoven had realized what the flexible framework of the *sonata form* allowed him to pull off.²⁸ Haydn and Mozart had never exploited it to the extent that Beethoven did, because they were too constricted by the expectations and niceties of their time: Music was supposed to be light, accessible, melodic, and strictly symmetrical. When Haydn or Mozart composed in the sonata form, the result was inevitably limited to a particular kind of musical drama:

[T]he sonata cycles of Mozart and Haydn were frequently musical analogues of the comedy of manners: rational, unsentimental, objective, witty, satirical treatments of the conventions, customs and mores of society [...] As Alfred Einstein observed, the symphonies of Haydn and Mozart “always remained within the social frame”, and in their sonata-form works they “limited themselves to the attainment of noble mirth, to a purification of the feelings”. Hence, however well it mirrored the rich variety of emotional states and strivings of its composers, patrons, audience, and the larger collectivity of which these were parts, the Classical style had as yet failed to map several inescapable and fundamental features of the emotional landscape in so tumultuous an era. In particular, it rarely plumbed either the heroic or the tragic levels of experience.²⁹

Beethoven, on the other hand, would have probably given anything to be spared of his all too personal knowledge of the meaning of heroism and tragedy. At the time of the completion of the *Eroica*, he had been progressively losing his hearing for the past eight years. The symphony reflects this struggle, which makes it different, indeed revolutionary. For in order to speak of hope, Beethoven also needed to speak of loss:

Beethoven took music beyond what we may describe as the pleasure principle of Viennese Classicism; he permitted aggressive and disintegrative

²⁸ Maynard Solomon. *Beethoven*. Paperback ed. New York: Schirmer Books 1979. Cited from the Kindle edition, location 4538.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, location 4544.

forces to enter musical form: he placed the tragic experience at the core of his heroic style. He now introduced elements into instrumental music that had previously been neglected or unwelcome. A unique characteristic of the *Eroica* Symphony, and its heroic successors, is the incorporation into musical form of death, destructiveness, anxiety, and aggression, as terrors to be transcended within the work of art itself. This intrusion of hostile energy, raising the possibility of loss, is what will make affirmations worthwhile.⁵⁰

Academic writers need to find courage like this. The nerve not to completely break away from the established form but to allow their texts to be interrupted by the forces that today are unwelcome as external to science. One can only hope that these would be the forces of responsibility and friendship. It is in this way, I think, that an otherwise cold analysis can acquire existential relevance.

VI

Life stories make all the difference in the world, quite literally. As it happens, historians are nowadays rediscovering the value of anecdotes. Robert Frykenberg, for example, begins his article entitled *Anecdote as the Essence of Historical Understanding* by quoting Richard Coe, who thinks that “ideally, history itself should be rewritten entirely in terms of anecdote, for these alone assert their authenticity above the prejudice and conformism of the professional historian”.⁵¹ But there is much more going on here than that. While we may all spend our days on a speck of dust in a remote corner of a totally indifferent Universe, stories of our lives do not unfold in such a vacuum. We interact and address one another with proper names, we dream and love and sometimes hate, and this somehow changes everything. Stars do not seem indifferent to lovers that gaze at them, just as there is no better way to come to grips with modern science than to understand the passion that drives it. Ask a cosmologist. He or she may think the passion is for

⁵⁰ Ibid., location 4568.

⁵¹ Richard N. Coe. The Anecdote and the Novel: A Brief Enquiry into the Origins of Stendahl's Narrative Technique. *Australian Journal of French Studies* 20 (1985), p. 7. Cited in Robert E. Frykenberg. *Anecdote As the Essence of Historical Understanding*, p. 116. In: Keith E. Yandell (ed.) *Faith and Narrative*. Oxford, New York (NY): Oxford University Press 2001.

pure knowledge, and yet tell you right away about Einstein's lifelong quest for a unified theory, or recount with a smile how he experienced heart palpitations after calculations based on his general theory of relativity which predicted Mercury's orbit more precisely than those done by Newton.

The truth is that science is lore, ultimately it is neither more objective nor less human than the stories whispered by those lovers. Even to our cosmologist stars matter because of somebody else to whom they mattered before or matter now. To understand science or any academic work really, we need to think of it otherwise (Levinassian pun intended).

VII

There is, of course, no single right way to do this, but an example might be helpful. I, for my part, find John Caputo's attitude towards Jacques Derrida quite illustrative in this regard. Caputo and Derrida were good friends, that is a well-known fact, but a close reading of Caputo reveals a story. What is already interesting is that it is possible to reconstruct the story from serious academic texts. However, to make most of this example we need to have a quick look at what actually happened.

We begin in the early 1980's when Caputo thought of Derrida as a brilliant commentator of Husserl³² and a refreshingly unconventional reader of Heidegger unlike other "Heidegger literati who talk like Heidegger talks, who repeat what Heidegger says, and who regard every criticism of Heidegger as a misunderstanding".³³ Even so, Caputo felt troubled by this new "Franco-Heideggerian alliance".³⁴ Derrida's reading strategies serve their purpose, Caputo agreed, but "left to themselves they cut us off entirely from the things themselves, delivering us over to a surfeit of fictions and willful constructions".³⁵ Derrida appeared

³² Cf. John D. Caputo. Hermeneutics As the Recovery of Man. *Man and World* 15 (1982), pp. 343–367, 362.

³³ John D. Caputo. From the Primordially of Absence to the Absence of Primordially: Heidegger's Critique of Derrida. In: Hugh J Silverman – Don Ihde (ed.). *Hermeneutics & Deconstruction*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 1985, p. 191.

³⁴ John D. Caputo. The Thought of Being and the Conversation of Mankind: The Case of Heidegger and Rorty. *The Review of Metaphysics* 36, 3 (1983), pp. 661–685, 684–685.

³⁵ John D. Caputo. "Supposing Truth to Be A Woman ...": Heidegger, Nietzsche, Derrida. *Tulane Studies in Philosophy* 32 (1984), pp. 15–21, 21.

to be a kind of ‘Jacques the Seducer’ – a Kierkegaardian aesthete who never got as far as understanding “the anxiety of Job and Abraham”⁵⁶ – so Caputo pledged “to try to make Derrida say what he does not want to say, to make him own up to something transcendent”.⁵⁷

These last words date back to 1985, the same year when Caputo attended a conference at Loyola University of Chicago, where he presented a paper on Derrida. It was not really a critical paper and Caputo even praised Derrida for giving the critique of metaphysics “a socio-political cutting edge, pointing it in the direction of a politics of liberation”⁵⁸, something that Heidegger never did. Nevertheless, he was quite terrified because Derrida sat in the audience and Caputo worried that he might criticize him for getting it all wrong.⁵⁹ He did not need to worry. Derrida was very gracious,⁴⁰ and before long Caputo began to display the same kind of chivalry.

Two years after the Chicago conference, Caputo mused over the annoyance that Derrida seemed to face everywhere, his name acting like a “red flag at the mere sight of which many philosophers today charge”⁴¹, and he seemed quite pleased that “in the midst of this brouhaha several sensitive Derrida readers have appeared on the scene to lend Derrida a hand by lending him a more favorable ear”⁴². He was of the opinion that “the time has come to show with some patience that Derrida is engaged in a critical project which is deeply in accord with the critique of metaphysics which has marked continental philosophy throughout this century”⁴³.

At the same time, Caputo pulled a one-eighty with respect to portraying Derrida as an aesthete “without regard for truth”⁴⁴, while

⁵⁶ Caputo. *Hermeneutics As the Recovery of Man*, p. 363.

⁵⁷ Caputo. *From the Primordially of Absence to the Absence of Primordially*, p. 195.

⁵⁸ John D. Caputo. *The Economy of Signs in Husserl and Derrida: From Uselessness to Full Employment*. In: John Sallis (ed.) *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1987, p. 108.

⁵⁹ Carl Raschke – John D. Caputo. *Loosening Philosophy’s Tongue: A Conversation with Jack Caputo*. *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 3, 2 (2002), p. 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ John D. Caputo. *Derrida, a Kind of Philosopher: A Discussion of Recent Literature*. *Research in phenomenology* 17, 1 (1987), pp. 245–259, 245.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

⁴⁴ John D. Caputo. *Beyond Aestheticism: Derrida’s Responsible Anarchy in Continental Philosophy and the Question of Ethics*. *Research in Phenomenology* 18 (1988), pp. 59–73, 59.

confessing that he too had been guilty of such “ill-begotten critique”⁴⁵. But Caputo was not yet ready to break free from the established form: “Lest anyone think that Derrida must be a friend of mine whom I feel called upon to defend,” Caputo wrote, “I can, with the best manners of the university, cite a text.”⁴⁶ And cite a text he did.

Then, within another year or so, Caputo was on a plane “soaring off to another conference, reading *Circonfession* [Derrida’s autobiographical book] for the first time”⁴⁷, in which

God help us, this is what he actually said – Derrida confessed that he was a man of prayer; that he prayed all the time, and that if we understood this about him we would understand everything, and that failure to understand this had caused him to be misread again and again. I was 37,000 feet above the earth when I first read this but I signaled the stewardess to let me off the plane immediately, a parachute would do, so that I could get to my computer.⁴⁸

Derrida’s unexpected confession startled the bejesus out of Caputo, a theologian hiding in the closet; he could not remember the correct altitude when explaining why he so much wanted to get to his computer: “Flying thirty thousand feet above the ground, I decided to write about Derrida’s religion without religion ...”⁴⁹ Maybe also, Caputo thought

I will speak about *my* religion. I can slip my religion in, in pockets, like the windows in *Glas*, in little asides, *apartés*, like commercial, “words from our sponsor”, or what my hero Johannes Climacus called “edifying divertissements”. His religion and mine, intertwined in a kind of unscientific double helix, all along trying to keep them straight.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 73. n. 2.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 67.

⁴⁷ John D. Caputo. A Game of Jacks: A Response to Derrida. In: Mark Dooley (ed.). *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus*. SUNY series in Theology and Continental Thought. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 2003, p. 35.

⁴⁸ John D. Caputo. After Jacques Derrida Comes the Future. *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 4, 2 (2003), p. 9.

⁴⁹ Caputo. A Game of Jacks, p. 45.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 35.

Thus it happened that *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* was conceived, and the rest is history.

VIII

As an example illustrating my point, this book is particularly interesting. It is neither Caputo's first book, nor is it his first book "on" another author, nor finally is it the book that made his name famous. But it is the first of his books that is passionate and personal at the same time and, at long last, respectfully disrespectful of academic standards of writing. Jack (that is how friends call Caputo) wrote it on behalf of Jackie (that is the real name given Derrida by his parents) and with an explicit wish to "scandalize everyone"⁵¹. Caputo's *Prayers and Tears* is both a serious academic study and a scintillating work of friendship.

It also happens to bear marks of a comedy. Not that of manners, as was the case with Haydn and Mozart, but, as Cleo McNelly Kearns observed, an *esoteric comedy*. As she explains, this is a genre often deployed "when a writer is caught between a subject matter in some sense sublime and an audience whose expectations run to the other extreme"⁵². A perfect tool, in other words, to keep the hazards of academe at bay. Kearns argues that:

There is pleasure in hearing in counterpoint his [Caputo's] open, humorous, democratic voice and the European elegance, the aristocratic high-handedness, the witty elaborations of Derrida's. Nor is this counterpoint merely instrumental. Caputo's plain style testifies to the willingness of the writer to sacrifice dignity, decorum and respectability, to forfeit his place among the knights of good conscience, in the name of something he wishes to present, much against the spirit of his times, as of higher value than these. As Helmling remarks, one may be a fool for ideas as well as a fool for love. We might add that one may be a fool for style as well, running the risks of mistranslation in order to serve another's unique voice, unique persona, unique mode of being.⁵³

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Cleo McNelly Kearns. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Esoteric Comedy and the Poetics of Obligation*. In: Mark Dooley (ed.) *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus*. SUNY series in Theology and Continental Thought. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 2005, p. 289.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 293.

Whose “another’s unique voice” are we talking about? The songs of suffering Europe, which would have never been heard, had Beethoven not “taken fate by the throat” and broken from the niceties of the Viennese tradition? The prayers and tears of Jacques Derrida, his religion “about which nobody understands anything”, and before Caputo few really tried to understand? Who or what else might be without a voice, silenced by the strict rules of what counts and what does not count as scholarly discourse?

IX

Kearns also notices how *Prayers and Tears* represents “an instantiation of what [Caputo’s] *Against Ethics* defines as a poetics of obligation, obligation in this case to the other, not perhaps so tout autre after all, [but to the other] that is Jacques Derrida”⁵⁴. Now, obligation may not seem the luckiest choice of a word (I prefer to think of it as responsibility), but as Caputo explains he does not mean anything profound:

I have in mind [...] a very earthbound signal, a superficial-horizontal communication between one human being and another, a certain line of force that runs along the surface upon which you and I stand: the obligation I have to you (and you to me, but this is different) and the both of “us” to “others”.⁵⁵

Obligations simply happen, Caputo says, they wield the power of facts; obligation is as much a fact as any other fact, very much like the empirical facts of science.⁵⁶ And it is a fact that ‘serious science’ cannot drive away: “Obligations rebound after every philosophical debate, after every academic conference ...”⁵⁷

Were we to allow obligations to one another to influence our scholarly work, the resulting texts would be far removed from Roudinesco’s “ledger full of entries for people who have become things”. Like *Prayers and Tears*. Unfortunately, as we have seen, for the most part the

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ John D. Caputo. *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction*. Studies in Continental Thought. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1993, p. 5.

⁵⁶ Caputo, *Against Ethics*, p. 25.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

scientific style of choice has been an impartial, disinterested “naming”, and the consequences are dire: “In vain is the whole of ‘world literature’ piled up around modern man for his solace,” Nietzsche complained,

in vain is he placed amongst all the artistic styles and artists of all times, so that he may give them names – as Adam gave names to the beasts; despite all this, he remains eternally hungry, a ‘critic’ without desire or energy, Alexandrian man who is basically a librarian and proof-reader, sacrificing his sight miserably to book-dust and errors.⁵⁸

X

Nothing profound, Caputo says, only “facts as it were”⁵⁹ – yet profoundly moving facts and, concerning his texts about Derrida, also strikingly true. And *that* is the whole point. That is what Cleo McNelly Kearns meant when she wrote:

There is, however, a moment of truth, a kind of realized eschatology in this text [*Prayers and Tears*], though not the one we perhaps expected. Rather, it is a moment more fraternal than numinous, more earthly than sublime. For [...] Caputo directs his affirmation to his friend and colleague, Jacques Derrida himself, to whom he offers the gift of a saving faith in the other’s work which marks a singular act of solidarity. “*Me voici*,” Caputo says to that friend: “*viens, viens, oui, amen*, I am here praying and crying with you.”⁶⁰

Derrida recognized this gift. “Another reason why I am so grateful for [Caputo’s] writings,” he said in an interview with Mark Dooley, “is because when he reads my texts, which is especially the case throughout *Prayers and Tears*, he is the first one, and so far the *only* one, to bring the most philosophical and theoretical of my writings together with those which are most autobiographical.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy*. In: Raymond Geuss – Ronald Speirs (eds.). *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999, p. 88.

⁵⁹ Caputo. *Against Ethics*, p. 246.

⁶⁰ Kearns. *Esoteric Comedy and the Poetics of Obligation*, p. 294.

⁶¹ Dooley – Derrida. *The Becoming Possible of the Impossible*, p. 22.

If, as somebody said, my proper name is the most important word to me, Derrida is grateful for that word being spoken by Caputo. In science especially, it is wonderful to be more than just a text. Finally, Kearns wonders if all of this is, on Caputo's part, nothing more than humanism:

Is this fellow-being all that Caputo "loves" when he "loves his God"? Yes, I think so. Unless, of course, by a strange chance, this other, this "you", is the *tout autre* after all.⁶²

Unless, of course, this other, this you, is the truth, and the only "scholarly" truth that makes sense – I would add. In *Prayers and Tears*, according to Kearns, Caputo recognizes Derrida's religious hunger, "clothing and supplementing Derrida's thought in an answering work at once original and dedicated to another's point of view"⁶³. Responsibility, friendship, life story, and yes, also academic rigor, all coexist in one work. Maybe this particular work is still too technical to make impact on the wider public. But it is along these lines that I think we should consider speaking and writing theology.

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ABSTRAKT

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Popularizace a autobiografie aneb Pokus o srozumitelnou teologii

Výzkum v oblasti přírodních a humanitních věd nabývá stále specializovanějšího a techničtějšího rozměru. Damoklův meč *publish or perish* (publikuj anebo zmiz) se vznáší nad hlavou každého vědce. Akademické publikace tedy přibývají co do počtu, ale často tomu bývá na úkor relevance pro širší okruh čtenářů. Teologie zde není výjimkou. Ve srovnání s ostatními vědami jsou v takovém případě důsledky pro teologii potenciálně mnohem katastrofálnější. K fungování a využití pozitronové emisní tomografie skutečně není potřeba, aby každý chápal základy kvantové mechaniky. Když ale nikdo mimo akademickou obec nerozumí moderní teologii, je těžké si představit, jak může známý výrok „víra hledá porozumění“

⁶² Kearns. *Esoteric Comedy and the Poetics of Obligation*, p. 294.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

dávat smysl věřícím. Smysluplná teologická práce by měla být přístupná širší veřejnosti a měla by mít jistý existenciální rozměr, který by byl každému srozumitelný. Tento příspěvek nabízí několik doporučení, jak by se teologové mohli přiblížit k splnění těchto kritérií.

Klíčová slova

teologická metoda, věda, popularizace, John Caputo, Jacques Derrida