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2 Poetry as feminist research methodology in the study of female faith

Nicola Slee

Introduction

Elsewhere, I have written of the ways in which I employ poetry as a means of theological exploration and reflection,¹ but until now I have not reflected on the use of poetry within qualitative research methodology. In this chapter, I reflect on my use of poetic forms of analysis in my study of women's faith lives² (conducted some twenty years ago) and discuss how I am developing new forms of poetic analysis as an interpretative lens to re-read the original data. The discussion is focused around a pilot study of one specific case, that of Meg,³ a participant in my original study with whom I have maintained intermittent contact and whose transcript offered rich potential for analysis. One of the first cohort of women accepted for training for ordination in the Church of England, Meg's transcript provides a fascinating glimpse into the power dynamics operative in the church at that time, as well as the costly personal journey of women seeking recognition of their priestly calling. This case study thus combines methodological innovation and reflection with commentary on a significant moment in recent feminist history, particularly within English Anglicanism. While the primary focus is on research methods and methodology – specifically, how poetry may contribute to analysis of and engagement with women's faith lives – the data is also of significance in its own right for the light it sheds on recent feminist struggles within the church.

Despite a resurgence of academic and popular interest in the relation between theology and poetry,⁴ Heather Walton notes that 'poetics and practical theology do not enjoy an easy relationship'.⁵ Practical theologians, Walton suggests, tend to distrust poetics' attention to 'the exotic, the beautiful, the tragic, the unknown, and the unnameable'⁶ in favour of a commitment to the values of rationality, order, morality and practical forms of wisdom and action. Walton evidences exceptions to this mutual suspicion, however, noting how feminist practical theologians in particular have been advocates for poetic modes of reflection, recognizing poetry's capacity for prophetic speech that can help to dismantle the power structures of patriarchal religion. She refers to Bonnie Miller-McLemore's 'poetics of resistance',⁷ Rebecca Chopp's 'poetics of testimony'⁸ and Riet Bons-Storm's 'unstories', which abused women have

not had heard or validated⁹ as examples of such use of poetics to ‘express unique events or experiences outside the representation of modern rational discourses’,¹⁰ and thus make the unspeakable speakable. Walton’s own work should also be added to the list. Employing ‘experimental forms of pastoral poetics through writing that is deeply metaphoric and reflexive’,¹¹ Walton draws on life writing, journaling and other forms of creative writing to revision both academic and religious traditions in prophetic and liberating ways.¹² My work joins forces with these, and other, feminist practical theologians in the pursuit of prophetic and resistant discourse.

Qualitative researchers as poets

While few qualitative researchers describe themselves as poets (some do), a growing number are employing poetry as a method of research, and there is a flourishing literature on poetry as research method.¹³ Poetry may be used during data collection as a stimulus for focus groups or individual interviews,¹⁴ as a means of organizing, presenting and analysing data at transcription and writing up stages,¹⁵ and as a medium in which to reflect on findings and practise reflexivity.¹⁶ Poetry has been used in a wide range of research studies, particularly to give prominence to the voices and experiences of participants in marginalized groups, settings or contexts.¹⁷ The poetic medium enables a condensed and accessible summary of content in the presentation of research findings to audiences who may not respond well to academic discourse, and can permit an ongoing dialogue with research participants in a medium more accessible than scholarly writing. The concern in such research to foreground previously ignored individuals and groups resonates with classic feminist concerns to hear into speech the voices and lives of women.

Poets as ethnographers and researchers of the human spirit

While social scientific researchers make use of poetry as a means of examining human and social life, poets employ techniques that come close to ethnographic and qualitative methods of research, though they may not recognize the similarity. Many poets utilize the so-called ‘found’ poem¹⁸ – taking text that already exists in the world (in newspapers, street signs, graffiti and so on) and turning it into poetry, in similar fashion to the work of ethnographers who take what already exists in the social world and turn it into text.¹⁹ The dramatic monologue, used by many contemporary poets, presents the voice of a character, real or imagined, as authentically as possible, in poetic form. A number of poets have engaged in more extended ethnographic projects, in ways that blur the boundary between art and social science. Muriel Rukeyser’s 1938 *The Book of the Dead* represents an ethnography of a West Virginia mining town where the miners were dying of lung disease due to unsafe working conditions.²⁰ Rukeyser interviewed miners, their families, union and company officials, and wrote a suite of poems widely regarded as one of the major sequences of

American modernism. More recently, the English poet Alice Oswald travelled the length and breadth of the river Dart in her native Devon for three years, interviewing people who lived on or by the river, weaving their stories alongside mythic narratives of dyads and naiads into her long narrative poem, *Dart*.²¹ In the variety of these forms, there is a shared commitment to represent the other as faithfully as possible, in their own words and voices, and a concern to create empathy, even for the most unlikely or alien other.

Employing poetry to revisit data from my study of women's faith

In my earlier study of women's faith development,²² I drew upon my interests and skills as a poet in a number of ways when transcribing and analysing the data, though at the time I was not aware of other studies employing poetry as research methodology. When transcribing, I adapted Chase's²³ method of setting out the verbal data in 'speech spurts' as a way to 'reflect the original richness and complexity of the data',²⁴ recognizing that 'nobody talks in prose'²⁵ and that converting interview data to prose is, to some degree, to do violence to it. In analysing the data, I paid particular attention to linguistic features of the interviews such as metaphor, voice, hesitation, repetition and so on, in order to bring to light the artistry of the data and to 'invite new levels of engagement that are both cognitive and emotional'.²⁶ Nevertheless, I was conscious of the potential within the interview data for a much more extensive analysis than I was able, at that time, to accomplish. More recently, in the light of my discovery of the use of poetry within qualitative research, I have returned to the original data in order to experiment with new methods of poetic analysis. Whereas in the original research, I employed a largely thematic, cross-sectional approach to analysis (while seeking to remain alert to differences, tensions and contradictions within the data), I am now using a case study approach, going back to individual transcripts and examining the depth and detail of the material in each woman's narrative. I am still at an early stage of analysis and this chapter therefore represents work in progress, reporting on a pilot study aimed at testing out the potential for poetic analysis and engagement.

In what follows, I report on the development of a series of poetic analyses of material from one interview transcript in an endeavour to demonstrate the potential of poetic analysis in researching female faith.²⁷ While I selected Meg's transcript as the first participant whose material I decided to re-analyse initially for the practical reason that I knew how to re-establish contact with her and seek permission to revisit the old data, I have since come to recognize that there are deeper motives at work in my choice to re-engage with this particular narrative. Meg and I attended the same university (where we met), studied with many of the same teachers and were both involved in similar Christian societies and activities. While both committed Anglicans and feminists, we made different life choices. Where Meg went on to train for priestly ministry, I have remained an active lay member of the church. Where Meg married and

had children, I remained single for many years and childless. I suspect that, in returning to her narrative, I was making an unconscious decision to revisit some of these life choices and to examine them in the company of someone who had made a parallel but different journey. At a later stage in the process of data analysis (described below), I wrote a series of poems in response to Meg's narrative, and pondered:

What brought me back to your story
amongst all the others I could have chosen?

The poem continues:

I am reading for sameness and also acknowledging difference
looking for a bridge across the shared story that separates us

It goes on to ask:

Could we find a way to connect and distinguish
our mutual but separate ministries and misery?

This excerpt from one of my poems demonstrates the way in which I began to use poetry to interrogate the data and my own re-engagement with it, and to bring myself more overtly into the frame of the research. But this is to anticipate a later stage of the analysis. Let me now describe the various sequences of the data analysis.

In my original study, I set the transcripts out in speech spurts, largely without punctuation, in order better to approximate patterns of speech. The text thus resembles poetry more closely than prose. In returning to Meg's transcript, I took this process a stage further by selecting a number of smaller episodes, narratives and voices within the transcript and turning them into poems, or perhaps more accurately, 'poem-like' representations or 'research poems'.²⁸ The intention in doing so was to stay with Meg's own words, using only what she had spoken within the interview, but to select, edit out and shape particular narratives into discrete poems, in an effort to allow the data to speak more directly and fluently on the page. For example, here is a section of the original transcript, from the beginning of the interview in which Meg talked about her present experience of faith in light of a recent move to a new parish:

- 4 M having moved here
things are very much in transition really
but for the last four years
as you know
have been incredibly
a very dry period
5 N Right

- 6 M and that I mean
 actually working
 to provide a spiritual focus
 for a group that was dwindling and
 literally dying
 in a *building* that was literally dying
 was very kind of *stripping* really
 Um [p] and I suppose the kind of
 Mother Julian thing of 'all shall be well'
 you know actually just holding on
 to something at the centre
 and thinking
 'There's something' but you know
 not always sure what
- 7 N Right
- 8 M Emm [p] so that it's
 it's felt like kind of being underground and [p]
 you know when is this bulb going to emerge?
 Like when you plant snowdrops
 and you don't see anything for about three years
 and then suddenly you get this little
 tiny little snowdrop and I think I feel like I'm
 I'm the green shoot at the moment
 that's actually beginning to come up²⁹

The transcript seeks to remain as close to the verbal data as possible, recording every spoken word (including speech fillers such as 'um', 'you know' and 'I mean', repeated words, incomplete sentences and pauses). This was important for the original analysis so that I could study the quality and process of the exchange, as well as the content, paying attention to such features as hesitation, repetition, stammering or emphasis as a clue to Meg's narrative. While staying close to the living speech-act, however, such transcription methods may impede the power and immediacy of the narrative and detract from the accessibility of the data; hence the endeavour to convert sections of the data into research poems, which would make a more immediate impact. A number of writers have argued, with Richardson, that 'poetry can re-create embodied speech in a way that standard sociological prose does not'.³⁰ I experimented with taking extracts of Meg's transcript and, while using only her words, deleting potentially distracting features such as the para-linguistic 'umms', 'ahhs' and repetitions. I chose excerpts from the transcript that appeared to possess strong thematic cohesion, arranged the text in a format approximating to poetic form (for instance, using lines of similar length arranged in couplets), and gave each 'poem' a title. Here is a poem composed of transcript material from the beginning of the interview (including some of the above transcript excerpt):

Snowdrop emerging: reflections of a woman priest

The last few years – a very dry period
the dryness of being alone

Working to provide a spiritual focus
for a group that was dwindling and dying

Still get up on a Sunday morning and
preach the Easter stuff

Moments of getting to the brink
‘What are you doing with your life?’

I’m not experiencing it but the truth never deserted me
That was the call

Like being underground
when is the bulb going to emerge?

Like when you plant snowdrops
and don’t see anything for about three years

Suddenly you get this tiny little snowdrop
I’m the green shoot beginning to come up

Even in the most negative and dry absence
there is still a presence

There’s a core at the centre of me
something very deep like a seed

Will it wither before it blooms?
I am trusting it but there’s always fragility

In returning to Meg’s transcript, I was newly struck by her use of the metaphor of the underground bulb that puts out life several years after it has been planted, as an analogy with her own fragile but resilient faith. A persistent theme in her interview was the struggle to maintain hope and faith amid adversity, gender discrimination, suffering and despair. This poem seeks to capture the struggle, the sense of forces of life and death weighed in the balance, the precariousness yet persistence of Meg’s own faith and the triumph of hope represented in the emergence of the snowdrop.³¹

Having composed the above poem, I was immediately aware of the selectivity and partiality of its representation of the data. This is an issue faced by all qualitative researchers in their analysis, selection and representation of data, regardless of how they present the data. In selecting excerpts of transcripts to quote against other excerpts that do not receive attention, the researcher is exercising the power of choice and using data to make a case or highlight one feature over another. This is no less true when the means of data analysis is poetic; indeed, the use of poetic means of analysis may concentrate the selectivity in a heightened form. A poem takes its power and meaning from myriad choices

the poet makes, either consciously or unconsciously. Where the poem begins and ends, the system of images and metaphors employed, the metre and rhyme scheme, the choice and combination of particular word sounds, the voice of the poem – all of these contribute to the overall impact and meaning. Thus in the above poem, I endeavoured to reflect the delicate paradox and tension of hope and despair, resilience and fragility, that seemed to be at the heart of Meg's narrative. Yet it would be quite possible to represent the same data in a different form in order to convey a different outcome, to tip the balance one way or the other towards hope or despair, triumph or failure. Here is a reworking of the same material, compressing and omitting some of the material from the first poem and adding in some data from later in the interview:

Under siege: the experience of ministry

Working to provide a spiritual focus
for a group that was dwindling and dying

Still get up on a Sunday morning and
preach the Easter stuff

Moments of getting to the brink
'What are you doing with your life?'

I'm not experiencing it
but the truth never deserted me

Having to hold the experience myself
holding on to something

Like being underground
when is the bulb going to emerge?

I was the go-between, containing
[doing] the motherhood thing

Under siege, dried out
going through the motions, keeping it going

Living on a shoestring
keeping each other sane

years of resources dragged out of us

While this poem retains the image of the underground bulb, it omits the development of that metaphor in the extended reflection on snowdrops emerging years later after their original planting. In addition, the image of the bulb is now set within a wider frame of harsher, less obviously hopeful images such as 'getting to the brink', being 'dried out', 'living on a shoestring' and so on. The poem ends on a bleak note and the title, 'under siege', suggests something very different from 'snowdrop emerging'.

Which of these poems more authentically reflects Meg's sense of vocation, ministry and faith? Both poems are composed entirely of Meg's own words drawn from the interview, yet arranged in different ways by the researcher-poet (me). Whereas the first poem uses material from the beginning of the interview, the second poem draws more widely on material from across the transcript. I have given only two examples of reworking the data, but the possibility of representing data in different poetic forms is potentially endless. The point is that there is not one, or even two narrative voices or interpretative lenses at work in this transcript, but several. In the interview, Meg was working with her own questions about how far she could continue to hold on to her sense of self and faith, as well as her commitment to marriage and family life and a meaningful priestly ministry, in the context of prolonged struggle and in the face of opposition from church hierarchy and parishioners. At times she spoke hopefully and at other times there was a sense of weariness and exhaustion. By creating a series of poems, I tried to give voice to the diverse perspectives and narrative lines that exist in uneasy tension within the one transcript. It would be perfectly possible to do this in prose, but the poetic form may concentrate and intensify the different narrative voices in a peculiarly effective fashion. As Jean Rath has argued in her use of poetry to script meaningful research texts with rape crisis workers, the poetic scripting

resists the desire for analytic certainty, decentering both the texts of researcher/author and the texts of participants. It foregrounds the negotiation of meaning between researcher and participants, and invites the reader into the text in order to take part in this.³²

At the point of my interview with Meg, the Church of England had only just endorsed women's priestly orders and remained highly ambivalent towards women priests – particularly young, clever women such as her. Meg's story was one of repeated experiences of gendered discrimination, exclusion, infantilization and abuse, whether intentional or, more frequently, the result of unconscious bias and centuries old androcentrism. As one of the first cohort of women accepted for training for priesthood in the Church of England, her dilemma was not merely personal, but mirrored the situation of a whole generation of women who went on to become pioneering priests (or, in some cases, left the church and priesthood altogether). The interview contained many reflections on and readings of gender, rooted in her personal, familial experience as well as the processes of selection, training and ordination she had undergone. She had been introduced to the church by her grandmother and associated church with a warm, feminine, familial space that provided an alternative to her chaotic and disruptive family. On the other hand, many of her experiences of selection, training and seeking a first curacy were governed by androcentric norms, and were associated for her with coercive male power, reinforcing a problematic and abusive relationship with her father. These various gendered associations with church, pulling in opposite directions, were scattered throughout

the interview rather than focused in any one place. I brought them together in two brief poetic statements, using Meg's own words, representing feminine and masculine associations with church and priesthood respectively:

Feminine associations with church/priesthood

My first memory of being in church
going with my grandmother

Going into that building was going into somewhere good
I associated her with that building

Church was a very important place
because my home was a disruptive and chaotic place

A very abusive place
church became a safe place, my safe haven

The woman superintendent of the Sunday school
half adopted me

She took me to a Deanery Synod meeting
I remember her saying 'This is for you'

They were debating the ordination of women
'This is for you'

I hadn't ever met a woman who worked in church
women weren't even allowed to dust in the sanctuary

Masculine associations with church/priesthood

There was a calling
but it was like being menaced by something

A Selector asking questions like
'Why wasn't a woman like me at home having babies?'

Living on a shoestring
trying to beg borrow from charities

Didn't look like I was going to get a job
interview after interview

One emotional trauma after the next
there were no resources – we were down to peanuts

The morning of the cesarean when Sophia was born
my parents came in – there was something in my father's look

I'd repressed a lot of the stuff that had gone on
between me and my father as a child

Having employed poetry as a means of analysing and representing the different voices and perspectives present within her transcript, I then used poetry as a means of interpreting and 'talking back' to Meg's story. At this point, I began using my own poetic voice to give shape to questions and hunches about the narrative and to continue a dialogue that I might have engaged face to face but did not have the opportunity to do so. This process represents a more upfront personal dialogue with the interview data than I had engaged in my original study where, although my own experience and concerns were by no means absent, they were less overtly expressed. The use of poetry to engage with Meg's narrative now permitted a more direct, emotionally engaged and interrogative style of commentary that would not have been appropriate in the earlier study. This style of more personal engagement may have been elicited because a case study approach in itself reveals far more of the life story and personal reflections of the interviewee than a more thematic approach, and thus may invite a more sustained personal response.

I found myself writing poems that were attempts to bring to the surface some of the gendered dynamics at work in the transcript, bringing to voice and visibility the discrimination, misogyny and abuse (psychological and possibly physical/sexual, although this was not made clear in the interview), which ran like underwater currents throughout the entire interview but were not always directly named. At the same time, I wanted to endorse and applaud the courage, resilience and determination that were evident in Meg's narrative and that kept her engaged in the struggle to be accepted for priestly ministry in the church as the person she was. 'Wanting it all' affirms the largesse of Meg's vision for priestly ministry and the resistance she faced from the institution of the church:

Wanting it all

As if being young, female and pretty were not enough
As if being working class and bright were not enough
(first generation of women to read theology at Cambridge)
you wanted more

You wanted marriage, motherhood and ministry with your PhD
 You insisted on producing babies one after the other
 parading your leaky maternal body
 in the hallowed cloisters of Cambridge
 in the chaste spaces of the sanctuary
 in the theological college lecture rooms
 in the studies and church halls and sherry-drinking parlours
 of clerics who'd carved out the rules over generations
 who'd demarked the spaces
 your body and mind defied

You took them all on, the rules that said

Women shall not be priests
Women shall not preside at the eucharist

Women cannot be academics (minds too flimsy, distractable)
Women shall not work outside the home
taking the authority away from their husbands
If women wish to be mothers
let them fulfil their God-ordained role quietly at home
out of the sight of the public assembly

You would not obey their strictures or accept their authority
you wanted it all
you were greedy, unholy
your desires spurted out with your milk
fouling their snow white cassocks

The following poem, 'Punishment', reworks the same territory but is written in the voice of the male authorities that Meg frequently experienced as constraining, controlling, withholding and punishing. While doubtless, as individuals, many of these male authorities perceived themselves to be merely doing their jobs and exercising appropriate pastoral care and discernment, the cumulative impact upon Meg of a whole series of impediments, put-downs and exclusionary practices was devastating. The poem is an attempt to name the systemic power of patriarchy that was operative, according to Meg's understanding, in the church, and that transcends while subsuming the actions and intentions of individual actors (some of whom could, of course, have been women – although in the main they were not).

Punishment

We had to contain you.
You were a danger to everything we hold most sacred
masquerading as innocent female piety.

We had to constrain you.
As Adam mastered Eve, curbing her insatiable curiosity,
binding her voluptuous sensuality,

we put you in the basement with the nursing mothers
where no light would reach you,
your fertile bodies hidden.

We had to restrain you,
clawing back the resources we'd promised you,
threatening to withdraw your grant.

We had to punish you,
compelling you to travel hundreds of miles, pregnant, in winter,
chasing unsuitable appointments.

We had to make you wait, wear away your persistence
through a war of slow attrition,
death by a thousand qualifications,

watch the men you'd trained with enter first incumbencies,
 while you held on through the humiliations and deprivations,
 damp houses, low-paid, low-status curacies.

These poems of course represent *my* interpretations of Meg's narrative. In many ways, the poems 'big up' or write large what were often implicit or partially expressed thoughts and feelings within the transcript. Talking from her present experience of priestly ministry, still wrestling with challenges to her own authority and trying to find a way of expressing her priesthood authentically, Meg's narrative was full of the tension of needing to name the powerful forces that resisted her priestly ministry and of hopeful determination to withstand them. I am conscious that I responded to her narrative with a certain 'outsider/insider' ambivalence, which perhaps enabled me to name things I saw more directly and unambiguously than it may have been possible for Meg, at the time, to do. I was the researcher hearing her story but standing outside it, identifying strongly with many aspects of it, knowing at least some of the contexts she described quite intimately since they had also formed me. As a lay woman who had worked very closely with others over many years to campaign for women's priestly orders in the Church of England, I both identified with her journey and was conscious that I had taken a different path. In effect, I was reading between the lines of her narrative – as all data analysis must do – and bringing to consciousness and visibility things that were present in the data but, by being foregrounded and expressed in a particular voice, had a greater force and clarity than when embedded within the narrative itself.

The next poem makes this 'reading between the lines' explicit:

Reading between the lines

You didn't say your father abused you
 But 'there was something in his look'
 when he came into the recovery room.
 You were on a drip and pinned down.
 You spoke of flashbacks for months afterwards.

You didn't say your mother failed you
 but you felt like a freak, a zoo piece on show,
 a money-maker who could look after her in old age.
 That plan fell apart when you married
 and took your potential earnings elsewhere.

You didn't say the church abused you
 but charted one incident after another
 of calculated control, withdrawal of funding,
 living under siege, getting to the brink,
 one emotional trauma after the next.

You couldn't say what it was doing to you
 but calmly told how you put your hand through the window

one morning, blood everywhere,
your husband bearing the brunt of your unspoken rage.
You tore up identical Valentine cards.

You didn't say God had abandoned you
but something worse:
'There was a kind of calling
but it was like being menaced by something'.
'What kind of a God is this?' you asked me.

I didn't reply:

This God is a tyrant,
This God is an abuser,
This God wears the face of your father
and all those priests who hold the reins of power.

You didn't say you could not withstand the violence,
you were going to have to get out.

That would come later

after being held at knifepoint by a desperate addict
after being held hostage by a second attacker

after being thrown into broken glass that could have severed an artery
after months of sickness of the body
and the terror unto death
until one day like any other you walked out the door
and never went back up the grave-strewn path.

I am aware that this poem raises ethical as well as methodological issues and that it is only permissible to publish such a poem with the full and explicit consent of my interviewee. The poem is mine, the voice is mine (though it makes use of a great deal of Meg's narrated reflections), the interpretation is mine – and some might question whether it is legitimate for me, as the researcher, to bring into the limelight aspects of her story that Meg (deliberately?) kept in the shadows. By writing the poem, I have brought to consciousness aspects of Meg's psychological and spiritual struggles that, at the time of the interview, might have been profoundly damaging to articulate. That I have done so many years later, and in the knowledge that Meg has moved on from these earlier struggles and stands in a completely different relation to them (having left the church and active priestly ministry a good number of years ago following a physical attack in the church and having established herself in a new community and professional role as a writer), does not entirely resolve the issues. Even if Meg herself is now in a place where it is safe for her to receive my poem, do I have the right to displace her own narrative by this formulation of my own?

Perhaps the only person who can answer this question is Meg herself. My own hope and intention is that, in so naming the realities that seemed to me to be at play in Meg's narrative (and in that of countless other women priests),

the poems may have an empowering impact, not only on Meg herself, but on other readers. There is both rage and disbelief in my own voice in this poem as I chart the unspoken violence and abuse that Meg experienced at the hands of the church she longed to serve and to which she gave years of her life in a costly outpouring. The poem is offered as a protest against abusive patriarchal power and a witness to the women, such as Meg, who have paid dearly for their efforts to combat that power and model something different. Thus I offer it as an act of solidarity and advocacy, an attempt to share and bear – as little as I can – the suffering that Meg and other women priests of her generation have experienced. As poets themselves may exercise the priestly ministry of naming, bearing and witnessing to profound human experience – including suffering – so I see these poems as priestly offerings back to one courageous, wounded and transformed woman priest who is herself now also a poet (and perhaps would never have become one had she not left the church). Established as a writer and someone who works with others to encourage and bring to birth their creative gifts, Meg's priesthood has metamorphosed into new forms and finds expression in alternative communal contexts – yet is no less real for that.

While this is my interpretation and reading rather than hers, Meg herself both accepted and endorsed my interpretation when I sent her an earlier draft of this chapter. She responded with a poem of her own, a poem that picks up some of the imagery in her original interview and that I had used in my poems quoted above. This gift of a poem from Meg in response to my work was an unexpected development in my process of employing poetry as a means of data analysis, and suggests the possibility of giving the poetic voice and authority back to our research participants. The (almost) final word, then, belongs to Meg:

Holding to the light

for N, Christmas Eve, 2016

I'm the shoot still greening
wondering if I'll wither
before I bloom

Christmas Eve
and the light has gone by three
no petals on the fragile stem

And I no longer preach
the Easter faith
yet Advent's here – the hope, the fear

If there's a bridge
it stretches from your spiel to mine
– those shared and separate ministries

and misery –
it's the story's arc across
dry river bed

The call is silent now
No menace there
but absence –

yet your witness waits
holds tight the fear
bears hope

Conclusion

By their careful observation and listening, their painstaking work to represent the lived experience of the human other in all its 'thickness', particularity and nuance, the poet and qualitative researcher both testify to the value and significance of human life and experience, holding up to the light lives that otherwise might remain hidden, unnoticed and marginalized. The very work of poetry and ethnography (broadly understood), when well done, is a witness and sign of the sacramental quality of human experience, an out-working of the Christian doctrines of creation and incarnation, the conviction that God is present in creative and redemptive fashion in every human story, in the concreteness and mundaneness of life as it is lived. In honouring Meg's story, finding poetry within it, turning it into poetry and responding in poetry, I hope to have highlighted and affirmed its sacramental nature. Meg's answering poem does more than triangulate and enrich my own reading of her story; it recognizes the poetic analysis as a work of 'witness' that holds the continuing ambivalence in her own story, balancing the fear with a hope contained in the story's arc.

I hope to have demonstrated how poetic analysis allows a dynamic and deepening conversational engagement with the lived experience of the other, offering the potential for genuinely collaborative and participative research encounters. Poetic analysis highlights and upholds the complex, shifting and multivocal nature of qualitative enquiry, resisting closure or singular analysis. Poetic analysis offers both a frame and a lens on experience that is focused yet capable of multiple refraction, enabling the many-layered texture of the conversations engaged between research participants to be both held and analysed. The use of poetic analysis by the researcher and the offering of the fruits of such analysis back to the participant can invite further poetic response, which opens up new dimensions of insight and enquiry. The conversations are multiple and varied: between different narrative lines and voices within the one story; between the different selves of the researcher and the participant; between different readings of the research transcript. Every poem is an offering rather than an assertion, an opening into multiple meaning rather than a closing down into fixity. Poetry, no less than ethnography, can make a vital difference to the lives of women and other marginalized groups.

Notes

- 1 Nicola Slee, '(W)riting Like a Woman: In Search of a Feminist Theological Poetics', in *Making Nothing Happen: Five Poets Reflect on Faith and Spirituality*, ed. Gavin D'Costa *et al.* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 9–47.
- 2 Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).
- 3 'Meg' is a pseudonym; data from the transcript is presented here with her permission, and she has had an opportunity to read and comment on this article.
- 4 See, for example, Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); Francesca Bugliani Knox and David Lonsdale (eds), *Poetry and the Religious Imagination: The Power of the Word* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), and subsequent volumes; The Association for Theopoetics Research and Exploration at <http://theopoetics.net>; as well as popular texts such as Mark Pryce, *Literary Companion to the Lectionary* (London: SPCK, 2001); Janet Morley, *The Heart's Time* (London: SPCK, 2011); Malcolm Guite, *Word in the Wilderness* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2014); and Mark Oakley, *The Splash of Words* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2016).
- 5 Walton defines poetics as 'concerned with the construction of literary texts and the conventions employed by creative writers in the making of these works'. Heather Walton, 'Poetics', in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Malden, MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 173. See also p. 178, where Walton outlines Aristotle's distinction between *phronesis* and *poesis*.
- 6 Walton, 'Poetics', 173–182.
- 7 Bonnie Miller-McLemore, 'The Subject and Practice of Pastoral Care as a Practical Theological Discipline: Pushing Past the Nagging Identity Crisis to a Poetics of Resistance', in *Liberating Faith Practices: Feminist Practical Theologies in Context*, ed. D. M. Ackerman and Riet Bons-Storm (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 175–198.
- 8 Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) and *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).
- 9 Riet Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman: Listening to Women's Silences in Pastoral Care and Counselling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).
- 10 Rebecca Chopp, 'Theology and Poetics of Testimony', in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, ed. Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney and Kathryn Tanner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 56.
- 11 Walton, 'Poetics', 175.
- 12 Heather Walton, *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection* (London: SCM, 2014) and *Not Eden: Spiritual Life Writing for this World* (London: SCM, 2015).
- 13 See, for example, Monica Prendergast, Carl Leggo and Pauline Sameshima, ed. *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences* (Rotterdam: Sense, 2009), accessed 1 May 2017, www.sensepublishers.com/media/765-poetic-inquiry.pdf; Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage, 2013), 129–142; Patricia Leavy, *Method Meets Art: Arts-based Research Practice*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2015), 77–120.
- 14 See Robin Mark Pryce, 'The Poetry of Priesthood: A Study of the Contribution of Poetry to the Continuing Ministerial Education of Clergy in the Church of England' (DProf thesis, University of Birmingham, 2014), accessed May 10, 2017, <http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/5772>.
- 15 For example, Laura Brearley, 'Exploring the Creative Voice in an Academic Context', *The Qualitative Report* 5, no. 3/4 (2000), accessed 1 May 2017, www.nova.edu/ssss?QR/QR5-3/brearley.html; Laurel Richardson, 'Poetic Representation of Interviews', in *Postmodern Interviewing*, ed. Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (New York: Sage, 2003), 187–201.

- 16 For example, Carol L. Langer and Rich Furman, 'Exploring Identity and Assimilation: Research and Interpretive Poems', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 5, no. 2 (2004), accessed 1 May 2017, www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/rt/prINTERfriendly/609/1319.
- 17 For example, C. C. Poindexter, 'Meaning from Methods: Re-Presenting Narratives of an HIV-Affected Care-Giver', *Qualitative Social Work* 1 (2002): 59–78; C. Langer and R. Furman, 'The Tanka as a Qualitative Research Tool: A Study of a Native American woman', *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 17 (2004): 165–171.
- 18 See www.foundpoetryreview.com for definitions and examples.
- 19 See Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM, 2005), chapter 1, for a discussion of turning life into text as a method in practical theology.
- 20 Available at <http://murielrukeyser.emuenglish.org/writing/the-book-of-the-dead/>, accessed 25 April 2017.
- 21 Alice Oswald, *Dart* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010). See www.poetrysoc.com/content/archives/places/dart/, accessed 25 April 2017.
- 22 Slee, *Women's Faith Development*.
- 23 S. E. Chase. 'Taking Narrative Seriously: Consequences for Method and Theory in Interview Studies', in *Interpreting Experience: The Narrative Study of Lives, Volume 3*, ed. Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich (London: Sage, 1995), 1–26.
- 24 Brearley, 'Exploring the Creative Voice', 2.
- 25 Dennis Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), in Richardson, 'Poetic Representation', 189.
- 26 Brearley, 'Exploring the Creative Voice', 2.
- 27 The stages I describe are similar to those employed by Langer and Furman, 'Exploring Identity'.
- 28 For a discussion of research poems, see Rich Furman, Cynthia Lietz and Carol L. Langer, 'The Research Poem in International Social Work: Innovations in Qualitative Methodology', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5, no. 3 (2006): 1–8, accessed 1 May 2017, www.ualberta.ca/~ijqm/.
- 29 Italics indicates emphasis by the speaker; [p] indicates a pause in the interview; 'M' = Meg and 'N' = 'Nicola', i.e. myself as interviewer.
- 30 Laurel Richardson, *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 143.
- 31 This is a classic poetic metaphor of renewal employed by generations of poets such as George Herbert in 'The Flower' – see www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/50700, accessed 25 April 2017.
- 32 Jean Rath, 'Poetry and Participation: Scripting a Meaningful Research Text with Rape Crisis Workers', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 13, no. 1 (2012): 13, accessed 25 April 2017, www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1791/3312.