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**CREATIVE EXPRESSION AND
THE ART OF THEOLOGICAL
REFLECTION**

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Preamble

The primary focus of this paper is the potential for creative art to depict and explicate personal experience in a way that allows the voice of critically reflected upon experience to be heard alongside Scripture, tradition, cultural analysis, reason and other conversation partners in the enterprise of theological reflection. My experience with students in Supervised Theological Field Education (STFE) and with experienced, ordained pastors (including myself) in peer reflection groups, leads me to the conclusion that the theological interpretation of contemporary experience is difficult but not impossible. It requires engaging what Paul Tillich described as ‘ontological reason’, which is ‘cognitive and aesthetic, theoretical and practical, detached and passionate, subjective and objective’²⁹, in other words embracing all of the human faculties, and this includes the ability to create art as a vehicle for expressing meaning. It also requires a recognition of the essential intersubjectivity of the human predisposition to interpret experience and attribute meaning to situations; humans make meaning in communities and in relationships; perceptions, ideas, values and beliefs are formed as ‘ontological reason’ is applied to situations within the intellectual and cultural milieu of one’s particular ‘world’. Meaning emerges as persons and communities experience birth and death and all that lies between; as they tell stories; as they engage in ritual; as they create meaningful expressions of life and faith through art, craft, praxis and liturgy.

This paper addresses briefly the epistemological questions of what can be known and understood, tracing the developments in hermeneutics and phenomenology that occurred through Husserl, Gadamer et al. It then traces the nexus between art and theology and proposes a methodology for engaging creative forms of expression in the task of theological reflection.

Phenomenology in the 20th Century

The extent to which it is possible to understand and interpret contemporary experience has been a contentious issue through the 20th Century and is still a matter of controversy in many educational and theological institutions (e.g. how valid is experience-based learning?) Some of the major contributors to the debate include:

1. Edmund Husserl through his concept of ‘transcendental phenomenology’³⁰. Husserl proposed that it was possible for a skilled researcher to achieve ‘pure consciousness’, or ‘transcendental consciousness’, by identifying and ‘bracketing out’ perceptions, biases and prejudices contaminated by culture, history and societal pressure (a process he described as ‘phenomenological reduction’). What would remain in the mind of the researcher after such a process would be an understanding of the ‘essence’ of the experience. Husserl’s positivist project was judged a failure by his successors, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, yet left a legacy of concepts and principles which have been redeemed by researchers in the behavioural sciences convinced that many of his insights had merit for enquiring into human experience.

²⁹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Three vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp.72ff.

³⁰ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson, 5th ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969).

2. Martin Heidegger, a pupil of Husserl, rejected phenomenology as an impossible task. Unlike Husserl, whose training was in mathematics, Heidegger's formation was in theology and this drew him towards a synthesis of phenomenology with hermeneutics, sometimes called 'hermeneutical phenomenology'. Heidegger's 'hermeneutical circle' was located in the lived experience of the interpreter rather than in the mind and world of the author of sacred text as it was for, say, Schleiermacher. In order to access this cycle of meaning and interpretation, one must 'endeavour to leap into the "circle", primordially and wholly'³¹. The interpreter does not stand outside the circle of interpretation and analyse existence from an objective, disinterested perspective as had been proposed by Husserl; rather it is the very fact of participating in the structures of Being that enables the interpreter to understand Being.
3. Hans Georg Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, was critical of the 'modern surrender to technical reason'³² and was profoundly suspicious of the merit of personal reflection as a way of accessing the meaning of human experience. Like Heidegger, he considered humankind to be an intrinsically historical being, therefore all interpretations of existence needed to be framed in terms of historical consciousness. Gadamer was also convinced of the importance of linking aesthetics and hermeneutics³³, but at the same time did not believe that the meaning of a work of art was immediately accessible – only historical works of art were open to interpretation, and interpretation came as much from the evaluation of the community as it did from individual reflection. Gadamer wanted to rescue the concept of 'prejudice' from the pejorative connotations that now attach to it, and believed that 'the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgements, constitute the historical reality of his being'³⁴. It is these prejudices which were formed by the participation of an individual in a family, a society and a state that were thus historically constituted and facilitated interpretation, contrary to Husserl who believed that they could be bracketed out by the skilled researcher. Subjectivity, according to Gadamer, was a 'distorting mirror'; the task of hermeneutics was to bring about a 'fusion of the horizons of the past and the present', but it was the horizon of the past that needed to inform the horizon of the present. Gadamer's project was in part an attempt to restore the authority of the tradition over against contemporary experience.
4. Jurgen Habermas was, in turn, critical of Gadamer's failure to recognise the potential for tradition to become an instrument, not only for understanding human experience, but also for the domination and control of communities³⁵. He rejected the idea that tradition was a univocal source of reference for hermeneutics and instead proposed a 'distinction between hermeneutics that can interpret the meaning of a distorted text and depth-hermeneutics that is needed to interpret the meaning of the distortion itself'³⁶. His concept of depth-hermeneutics

³¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, First English ed. (Southampton: Camelot Press Ltd, 1962), p.363.

³² Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*, *Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy* (Evanston [Ill.]: Northwestern University Press 1969, 1969), p.164.

³³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp.95ff.

³⁴ Michael Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1998), p.103.

³⁵ Terry A. Veling, *Living in the Margins: Intentional Communities and the Art of Interpretation* (New York: The Crossroad publishing Company, 1996).

³⁶ Ibid.

was modelled on Freudian depth-psychology and required the kind of personal reflection on experience of which Gadamer was suspicious.

5. Paul Ricoeur acknowledged the problems associated with phenomenology, the impossibility of complete transparency of consciousness and self awareness required to achieve 'pure consciousness', and the human capacity for self-deception. Nevertheless, he considered the principles of phenomenology provide the best approximation to Freud's understanding of 'the unconscious'³⁷ and the best method for the explication and interpretation of experience. Ricoeur wanted to affirm Gadamer's contention that humankind is an historical being and that interpretation occurs within a particular historical and cultural context, but also wanted to assert that, through a process of reflection akin to Husserl's phenomenology, one could arrive at a new understanding of experience through a process of critical reflection (what he referred to as a 'second naïvete'³⁸). On the one hand, then, there is a hermeneutic that is deeply suspicious of the capacity of tradition to be a bearer of truth and sees 'truth as lying' and the exercise of 'false consciousness' (represented by Marx and Freud), a hermeneutic that places greater trust in depth psychology and phenomenology as resources for interpretation³⁹. On the other hand there is a hermeneutic of trust that considers historical interpretation as the only reliable resource for interpretation and is deeply suspicious of reflection as a means of discerning truth. Ricoeur did not seek to harmonise these polarised positions, but rather sought to allow each to speak from its own perspective in a way that gave dignity to both tradition and experience under the umbrella of critical reflection.

STFE operates in the disputed hiatus between tradition and experience; those who operate out of a Gadamerian distrust of reflection may not consider the inclusion of experience in theological reflection as valid theology; a pure phenomenologist may regard the dialogue with tradition as a distortion of the insights gained from phenomenological enquiry. It is precisely because it is prepared to operate within this frequently depreciated territory in which both tradition *and* experience are taken seriously that STFE has performed an integrative function within the seminary, bringing together the benefits of a rigorous academic theological education and the student's experience in the world.

Creative art and theological reflection

Faith has always sought to interpret its understanding of existence through art as well as through narrative and dogma. Whether it be the elegant and tender 'Crucifix from the Santo Spirito convent' of Michelangelo (left) or the confronting and controversial 'Piss Christ' of Andres Serrano (right), each work represents something of the inner life and faith of the artist, and her/his understanding of Jesus as the Christ. It also represents something of the contemporary life situation and world view of the artist's community. Recognising art *as* theology, and applying the discipline of hermeneutics to art, however, is a more recent development.

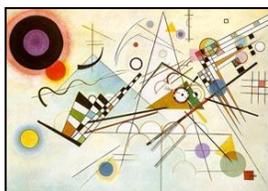
As recently as the late nineteenth century, the nexus between art and theology, and the possibility that art might be a medium of interpreting human experience, had been recognised. It would be true to say, however, that the emphasis of



by: *An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New haven: Yale

most theologians and philosophers has been on ‘significant’ works of art by recognised artists, (eg. Picasso’s ‘Guernica’ – left – has been widely recognised as one of the finest interpretations of the obscenities and absurdities of the Spanish Civil War⁴⁰). Such a construction opens the door to engaging art in ‘the theological interpretation of situations’⁴¹, but still excludes the artistically challenged person from this hermeneutical medium unless s/he becomes a student of the history of art. Art in this context falls within the rubric of ‘Culture’ rather than ‘Experience’.

The relationship between art and theology was articulated principally by European theologians and philosophers and tended to perpetuate the impression that theology was the province of the professional theologian, and art appreciation the province of the professional artist or art historian. De Gruchy made a distinction between ‘religious art’ (which would fit within the categories described above), and ‘spiritual art’ which was so labelled by Wassily Kandinsky and ‘intended as a focus for meditation’⁴². De Gruchy wrote:



Wassily Kandinsky
Composition VIII, 1923

‘Spiritual art’ expresses the quest for transcendence and as such it reflects the search for spirituality that has become important to our post-modern world. A spiritual work of art will arrest us, prize open our minds and hearts, and bring us into relation with a world beyond the ordinary.

Whilst this is an admirable attempt to liberate art from the custodianship of the ecclesiastical institution, it does not necessarily render it accessible to the participation of the seemingly non-artistic. It still belongs to an aesthetic elite who have the talent to produce works capable of inspiring awe and wonder in the viewer. My intention in this paper is not, as it might seem, to diminish the significance of religious art or spiritual art, nor is it to question the valid insights of Tillich et al. who have drawn connections between theology and art, aesthetics and spirituality⁴³. Rather I am wanting to explore ways in which different modes of artistic expression, employed by any person, can be enlisted to represent experience in the enterprise of theological reflection and in the context of supervision for ministry.

One starting point for this quest might be the renewal of interest in art as worship in Protestant faith communities (it might be argued that it was never lost in Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions). The combination of Reformation iconoclasm and Enlightenment rationalism led to what Begbie described as ‘the alienation of art’⁴⁴ in Western society, the outcome of which was ‘the [isolation] of a work of art from the particularities of everyday life’⁴⁵. The catch cry ‘art

⁴⁰ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 1 ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959). Tillich regarded ‘Guernica’ as the outstanding example ‘of an artistic expression of the human predicament in our period’.

⁴¹ Edward Farley, "Interpreting Situations: An Inquiry into the Nature of Practical Theology," in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge and James N. Poling (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987). Farley was critical of the structure of theological education in the modern era and its inability to equip students to interpret situations theologically.

⁴² John W de Gruchy, "Visual Art in the Life of the Church," *Journal of Theology for South Africa*, no. 107 (2000).

⁴³ See particularly Jeremy S. Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991).

⁴⁴ Ibid. pp. 186ff.

⁴⁵ Ibid. p.193.

for art's sake' reflected this sense that art and aesthetics were unrelated to everyday life and thus divorced from the tasks of understanding and meaning-making⁴⁶ which had become restricted in the modern era to rational processes. In recent decades Protestant churches have experienced their own renaissance through the recognition that art (often in the form of banners, flower arrangements, liturgical dance and the like) could breathe new life into worship practices that may have become sterile.

Dyrness described art as a form of meditation (as for Kandinsky's 'spiritual art'); 'Like the biblical notion of Sabbath (which means at its root to "stop"), art stops us in our tracks and forces us to pay attention to life in a way that we had not previously done'⁴⁷. It is this 'paying attention' that makes creative art a potentially powerful instrument in the processes of supervision and theological reflection. In their classic work 'Method in Ministry'⁴⁸, James and Evelyn Whitehead identify 'Attending' as the first stage in their method of theological reflection. By 'Attending' they mean listening to the necessary sources for theological reflection that they identify as 'Tradition', 'Experience' and 'Culture' (other models add 'Reason', 'Scripture' (as a separate source from 'Tradition'), 'Revelation' et al). Attending also includes listening to the community and listening to oneself, and it is in the latter task that the use of creative art can be especially helpful. Reflection on experience, especially when embodied in a case study or verbatim, is always revelatory. Representation of the experience in some artistic form adds a dimension of depth not always accessible through reflection or written description and analysis.

So then, having begun to establish a case for the employment of modes of art in theological reflection I need to suggest some ways in which this can happen. In this I am indebted to Dr Warren Lett, the Director of the Melbourne Institute for Experiential and Creative Arts Therapy (MIECAT), for his published material and for modelling procedures of enquiry with postgraduate students, including myself. In the early 1990's Lett conducted research with a group of therapists which he described as 'a process as near as possible to a purely phenomenological journey'⁴⁹. He wrote:

Four conceptual blocks were combined to underpin this research.

1. The arts, as modes of knowing, are conceived of as vehicles for carrying meaning in supervision, as in therapy.
2. It is an assumption that emotion is significantly attached to experience, often disconnected from full awareness, and acts as signifier for access.
3. The experiencing self is the experiential container of awareness and can be refocussed into fuller awareness.
4. A phenomenological process can be adopted to encounter the essence of experiential structures, leading to the acquisition of meanings in an amplified self-awareness⁵⁰.

For Lett, the arts 'as vehicles for carrying meaning in supervision' needed to stand apart from other sources for interpretation so that meaning was allowed to emerge from the experience and not from any external interpretive framework (such as Scripture or Tradition). Lett argued, 'A hermeneutic interpretation that goes outside the text for paradigms of meaning is not

⁴⁶ Ibid. pp.201f. Gadamer's call to interpret art according to the 'horizon of the past' was a protest against the estrangement of art from culture.

⁴⁷ William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

⁴⁸ James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*, revised and updated ed. (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995).

⁴⁹ Warren Lett, "Therapist Creativity: The Arts of Supervision," *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 20 (1993).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

phenomenologically pure in this writer's view'⁵¹. By 'text' he meant the text created through the processes of phenomenological enquiry. Lett's model of supervision and phenomenological enquiry reflects Habermas' 'hermeneutic of suspicion' towards tradition as a bearer of truth, and is optimistic about the possibility of meaning emerging purely from phenomenological enquiry.

Obviously in supervision for ministry, theological reflection must make significant reference to the tradition, but the quality of reflection will be greatly enhanced, and will be more grounded, if the tradition is in a dialectical conversation with the meaning that emerges from a phenomenological enquiry into experience. The tradition will raise questions about the meaning of the person's experience and will challenge an unreflective interpretation of that experience (Ricoeur's 'first naïvete'). However critical reflection on experience will also raise questions about one's perceptions of the meanings handed down by the tradition. Describing experience through some mode of artistic representation will enhance the enquirer's ability to discern intrinsic meaning in an experience before passing it through the filters of other sources for theological reflection. In this way not only does tradition inform one's interpretation of contemporary experience, experience (phenomenologically interpreted) informs one's interpretation of tradition and may lead to a re-framing of one's 'operational theology'⁵².

A phenomenological enquiry into STFE

In 2002 I conducted research with a peer group of four STFE students to enquire into their experiences of the program. In particular I invited them to reflect on what it was like to:

1. present goals to the peer group.
2. prepare a case study.
3. present a case study to the supervisor.
4. present a case study to the peer group.
5. present evaluations to the supervisor.

The process required that each student respond to a questionnaire and then participate in a group enquiry for each of the five aspects of the research. The questionnaire asked them to spend time reflecting on the experience, as it were to re-experience the event, and then to:

- describe the experience in as much detail as possible.
- recollect sensory and emotional responses associated with the particular task.
- represent the experience in some creative form such as prose, poetry, drawing etc.
- complete, in 35 words or less, an essence statement beginning with, 'Preparing a case study is like ...'

The questionnaires guided the students into focusing intentionally on the experience, to identify its affective impact, to describe the experience in plain language, and then to represent it in a creative mode of their choosing. It is significant that the creative representation was situated after a time of reflection and description, but before developing an essence statement and working with the peer group to develop a common description and representation of the

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² I understand 'operational theology' to be the core beliefs and values, recognised or unrecognised, by which a person instinctively makes judgements and takes action in response to situations. One's operational theology is formed cognitively, affectively, aesthetically and socially through one's life experiences. It may well embody contradictory values (e.g. 'I value the rule of law *and* I value justice') assimilated from different sources (family, church, popular culture) that create dissonance in the face of a given situation.

experience. The creation of a piece of art thus made a contribution to their interpretation of the experience.

As an example, one of the participants developed a poem in response to the experience of preparing a case study:

Snatching Moments

By Chris Turner (permission given to identify the author)

*Can one moment ever really
find itself snatched from the fabric of time,
to be relived, rejoiced, rehurt,
relost, like an eternally rotating rhyme?*

*What are tears if they fall for a moment lost?
Was not anxiety wasted?
Spent on events unchangeable
like prayers for a fallen forest;
like warmth after a fatal frost.*

*Yet time boasts many dimensions.
Memories are never frozen,
and the heart of creation beats to the rhythm of
a million moments snatched
from the fabric of time.*

*Savored like a smooth red wine,
bitter and sweet.,
dancing on a palette of eternal horizon.
Memories of moments,
snatched from the past.*

*Moulded into a single
reflection, mirrored in an empty, stained glass,
swallowed by the soul of creation,
thirsting for a healing past.*

His verbal description of the experience was analytical and identified well the cognitive and affective aspects of the experience, but in a dispassionate way. The poem, however, was able to not only express the feeling content of the experience, but to evoke within the reader the feelings and the questions in a way that invited her/him into the experience itself.

Chris's response to the experience of presenting a case study to his peers was equally evocative:

All will be well

Have you ever noticed

*what strange things
will happen to
you if you let them?*

*The other day I was
lying on a table with
a good number of
my colleagues
standing around me
all dressed in white gowns
with gloves on.*

*I was chatting with them
about this and that and
they kept bending over me
to look at my chest.*

*So I looked down and noticed
that my entire front was
cut open and my
colleagues were actually
performing surgery on me.*

*I was about to protest when
I noticed that they all
had large healing
scars on their fronts
and they were looking
at me with deep gratitude.*

*It is the least we could do
they said,
after you healed
us.*

*All will be well,
all will be well.*

The other participants produced similarly creative and insightful responses to the questionnaires and all indicated that the representation of the experience through art helped clarify and sometimes reframe their subsequent interpretation of it.

This paper does not purport to offer a new model or method of theological reflection. What it seeks to do is suggest a way in which the dimension of contemporary human experience can be more effectively accessed and depicted in order to engage the dimensions of tradition and culture in a process of critical theological reflection. My contention, supported by the research findings, is that phenomenology is an effective methodology for examining and articulating

experience, and that creative art provides an important enhancement to cognitive, verbal modes of enquiry.

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