HOPE AND THE LONGING FOR UTOPIA
Futures and Illusions in Theology and Narrative

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To David Jasper,
for his support of Theology and Literature at Iowa and around the world.
Who We Are Is God’s Dying
The Real Presence of God’s Absence in Bonhoeffer’s Prison Poems

—Steven Schroeder

Many times the same dream visited me in my past life, appearing in different forms but saying the same thing. “Socrates,” it said, “get to work and make music. At the time, I took this to mean what I was doing already and assumed the dream was encouraging and urging me on—the way people cheer for members of their own team—to make music. And, philosophy being the greatest music, I was doing that already. But now after the trial, with the religious festival delaying my execution, it occurred to me that if the dream was urging me to make popular music, I ought not disobey but do it. It seemed safer not to go without easing my conscience by making poetry and obeying the dream. So first I wrote in praise of the god of the festival. And after god, I thought a poet had to make myth, not history, to be a poet. I was no mythmaker, so I took the myths that were at hand, those we knew, those of Aesop, and made a poem of the first one that came along.¹

¹. Plato, *Phaedo* 60c–61b. All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.
My purpose in this essay is neither exegesis nor exposition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writing. Bonhoeffer wrote clearly and succinctly and does not need me to tell you what he said. Nor do you. To understand Bonhoeffer, read Bonhoeffer.

But reading is active, not passive, a conversation, not a monologue; and for a number of reasons that I will outline briefly, Bonhoeffer remains one of the most interesting and provocative conversation partners I know. Though he was murdered more than six decades ago (to say that he was executed would give those who carried out the act more legitimacy than they deserve), his work remains lively and engaging.

The clarity with which he wrote is one of the reasons I return to him time and time again. His dissertation and his habilitationsschrift are lucid accounts of the philosophical and theological conversation that occupied Europe (and particularly Germany) as Nazism crept into power. That alone is reason to return to his work. Early, clearly, decisively, he laid a philosophical/theological groundwork for the resistance that brought him to the attention of the second half of the twentieth century. The resistance makes a compelling story, but the groundwork is indispensable. If it is true that the first step is more than half the journey, these two early documents, and especially Akt und Sein, deserve particular attention. The "religionless Christianity" for which Bonhoeffer is perhaps best known (certainly among theologians) was not a sudden turn taken during his imprisonment. The Christology of his early writing is the seed from which it grows, pointing as it does to an understanding of freedom as pure act and human being as Dasein between transcendence and transcendence. He has been criticized for laying the problems of dialectical theology entirely at the feet of the philosophical systems dialectical theologians embraced, but I think he had good reason for doing so.2

For me, there are also biographical reasons to turn to Bonhoeffer. As a young scholar who grew up in a conservative Lutheran and conservative rural context and went off with a firm sense of vocation to study at a conservative Lutheran university (that later advertised itself as being just far enough from Chicago), I was delighted to discover a committed scholar whose careful reading of philosophy and theology empowered his critical engagement with the world. Like many theologians and philosophers in formation at the time (particularly outside Germany), I worked my way back from Bonhoeffer's prison correspondence to his early scholarly work.


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Working my way back, it never seemed to me that there was a break—and I continue to be puzzled by comments like those of the editor of the German edition of Akt und Sein in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, who wrote in his "Afterword" that "the bewildered reader who takes up this book after having studied his writings of the 1940s—for example, the Letters and Papers from Prison or the Ethics—may well ask whether we are dealing with one and the same author. Indeed, this very reader, whom Bonhoeffer had impressed as the theological writer of those better known works, may well have the sense when reading Act and Being of visiting another planet." Perhaps it was because I suspected this text might lead me closer to a rendezvous with that for which I had been waiting since early adolescence, but I did not feel bewildered. I had the feeling that I was getting to the bottom of things that mattered with an author I had already come to respect deeply.3

I first encountered Bonhoeffer as I was preparing to enter a conservative Lutheran seminary—at the moment, as it happens, that the Missouri Synod was taking a decisive turn away from its history of critical scholarship and the increasingly open stance toward the world that had been evolving under the leadership of Oliver Harms in the 1960s. Act and Being was helpful to me personally in working my way through that series of events (which, among other things, diverted me to the University of Chicago Divinity School, where I discovered Paul Ricoeur and Anglican theology, both relevant to what I am doing here). I was (and am) drawn to Bonhoeffer for many of the same reasons I was (and am) drawn to Luther (and, among Anglican theologians, F. D. Maurice)—not as an authority from whom to receive directives or obtain answers, but as a person passionately engaged in the world, a person with whom it would be possible to have a good argument. Most helpful was Bonhoeffer's reading of Kant's epistemology as decidedly Lutheran and his reflection on dangers posed by various responses to transcendental philosophy, particularly the turn to verbal inspiration in Protestant thinking about the Bible. In that reflection, I believe we see most clearly the philosophical foundation on which Bonhoeffer was able to maintain the consistently critical stance that makes his life and work so instructive now.

And it is no small thing that the trajectory of that life and work led him to lyric poetry at the same time that it led him to imprisonment and death, all the while engaged critically in the world, reflecting on time, with God (as he put it in Akt und Sein) always at his back.

I confess that I can't think that image of God always behind us without seeing the shadowy figure of Jean–Paul Sartre's Zeus in Les Mouches, always

3. Bonhoeffer, Act and Being, 162.
lurking, thinking himself incognito, but unmistakable on the very edge of our field of vision. But for Bonhoeffer, God on the edge as deus absconditus, encountered always in Christ as boundary, is a key to maintaining a critical edge in the face of the constant temptation to be like gods. Bonhoeffer, I believe, grew to understand more and more deeply that all confront the temptation to be like god and all confront it in exactly the same way, with exactly the same immediacy and in exactly the same paradise where Eve confronts it in the myth of creation and fall, with exactly the same results. When we fall, we fall in on ourselves, cor curvum in se, and live as though we gave rise to the world because we think we did. We cannot act our way out of this or think our way out of it. And this is why Bonhoeffer (like Socrates) turned to lyric poetry while, imprisoned, he awaited execution. It would be interesting to contemplate the coincidence of Bonhoeffer’s evolving understanding of what is meant by telling the truth with his resistance and imprisonment in the light of Socrates’ insistence that he was no teller of tales and so turned to the familiar fictions of Aesop—tales everybody knew—when he finally decided his daemon really might want him to try his hand at what other people thought of as poetry.

Never forget that this Socrates is a fictional invention of Plato, who has his own axe to grind in turning to Aesop (to whom Luther also turned) in the middle of a tale as common as a friend dying at the hands of the State—a tale that has become more common as history has marched on. I find it interesting that this Socrates—Plato’s Socrates—insists he was not ignoring his daemon but simply going on doing what he had been doing because he assumed he was doing poetry and had been doing poetry all along. He turned to something more conventionally poetic—or so Plato has his characters say—only at the end, in case he had misunderstood and because, in prison, waiting, there was time. But I will save that for another time, simply noting now that Bonhoeffer took up fiction first in the form of drama, then in the form of prose (short stories and a novel), and finally in the form of poetry while he was in Tegel prison. And he did all this at the same time he was writing a scholarly essay on time, which he says in his correspondence was nearly finished, though it is not among the fragments that survived.

But there is a sense in which the essay is finished (and in our hands) in the same way the narrative of a life is finished and in our hands (which is to say, as long as it is living, it is not). And, as with Socrates, that means a turn to old familiar stories in the form of poetry. The Bonhoeffer we know is arrested in time, confined in space. But like a number of contemporaries and near contemporaries, Bonhoeffer sees the condition of imprisonment as characteristic of life in the twentieth century (and perhaps of human life more generally). Paradoxically, what imprisons us is also a condition for our humanity: life, like poetry, calls attention to its own form. And that is a key to critical engagement. Christ as boundary makes us what we are, makes it possible for us to live the examined life, to be conscious of what we are—siners, in language Bonhoeffer, like Kierkegaard, took up from Luther, who took it up from Paul (a sentiment pithily expressed by William S. Burroughs and Laurie Anderson in “language is a virus from outer space” and by Martha Nussbaum in her reading of Socrates’ sacrifice to Asclepius, “life is a disease for which death is the cure”). As Bonhoeffer’s Christological reading of the social condition of human beings (or being human) deepened and grew more radical (working its way the way roots do to the bottom), he saw Christ (again taking up a theme of Luther’s) as entirely for others and in others. God disappears entirely into humanity, and the absolute absence of God becomes the real presence that makes us conscious of who we are—word made flesh, calling attention to its own form in the form of encounter with the other, who is a person.4

With that and God behind us, I turn now to a close reading (a translation in both narrow and expansive senses of the term) of the ten poems Bonhoeffer left, in the probable order of their composition.

2

The poems—ten of them, written in a period of six months during 1944—are embedded in the correspondence, particularly in the theological letters to Bethge.5 The theological letters to Bethge are grounded in years of resistance as part of the Confessing Church and also in the early theological work—especially Sanctorum Communio and Akt und Sein. The embeddedness of this theological work (including the poetry)—the conversational architecture of it—exemplifies how reading ought to be done where the word is taken as a living (and embodied) thing.

The first comes with a confession to Bethge: “I feel like a silly kid, keeping from you that I’ve been trying my hand at poetry here from time to time.”


I've kept it secret from everyone until now—even Maria, who would be the one it concerns most!—simply because I was embarrassed somehow and I didn't know whether she might be more shocked than pleased. You are the only one whom I can be sure of telling it to somewhat reasonably, and who I hope will pour cold water over my head if need be and tell me plainly to forget it.  

One of the most interesting aspects of Bonhoeffer's confession (and of the "confession" of Socrates cited at the beginning of this essay) is that it simultaneously connects poetry with inwardsness and with philosophy. For Bonhoeffer, poetry is so intensely personal as to be embarrassing when shared with another. (And, as a side note, this is one of many instances in the prison correspondence where Bonhoeffer suggests that the relationship between friends is more intimate—or makes a space in which more intimate matters can be shared—than the relationship between lovers.) But it is performative, undertaken in the context of a conversation—and so it demands a weaving together of the personal with the social.

This is a central problem addressed by Bonhoeffer in his scholarly work beginning with his dissertation. It would be interesting to connect the form that weaving takes in a context that cuts one off from social intercourse (prison) with the form it takes (in Life Together) in a context that imposes a common life on an intensely private person. (Though it is critical to keep in mind that prison, like the underground seminary at Finkenwalde, imposed one social life as it cut participants off from others. Bonhoeffer's prison experience was no less intensely social than his experience with the underground seminary. So the devotional text and the poetry are formed in contexts with more in common than one might initially think.)

It is instructive that Plato's Socrates sees poetry as "common" (or popular and philosophy (which is, for Socrates, a practice, a way of life) as its most perfect form. In the telling of this tale (which tells us as much about the teller—Plato—as the told), conscience drives the practitioner of the most perfect form to make it popular under constraints that, paradoxically, make time and space for it—an interesting comment on the way in which time and space are related in practice to the weaving of the personal and the political. Among other things that make it interesting is the connection with piety which Plato's Socrates also makes with philosophy. This is very much like Bonhoeffer's focus on the pure act and his turn (at the end of Act and Being) to the church as "solution" to the problem posed in the relationship of act with being (which he sees as the key to the loss of criticism, a loss that underwrites the rise of Nazism). It is hardly surprising that a careful reader of Luther would locate freedom in constraint (perfectly free, perfectly bound): here we have paradoxical hope entirely dependent on the temporal structure we inhabit, which depends in part on the manner of our dwelling, threatened by the ever present temptation of inward collapse in our desire to be gods.  

The first poem Bonhoeffer chose to share (which is generally taken to be the first he wrote, though we can't be certain of that) begins with an instance illustrating what Husserl calls temporal perspective:

You left, good fortune loved so, pain so hard to love.
What shall I call you? Necessity, life, bliss,
Part of myself, my heart—past?
The door shut,
I hear your footsteps slowly fall and fade.
What's left for me? Joy, pain, desire?
I know only this: you left—and all is past.

Here he connects the past with good fortune, pain, necessity, life, and bliss by way of a description of his fiancée walking away after a visit in Tegel prison. The last line of this stanza concentrates a critical reading of Husserl into a single image in which an "I" knows (and knows only this, a note on the phenomenology of awareness, which always hinges on a distinction between this and that) as a result of a "you" acting. And in that knowing, past becomes fully present (it is all) as an absence. I say this concentrates Husserl into an image; but there is as much Augustine as Husserl here, and Bonhoeffer has been grappling with both for some time. But what is most interesting philosophically and theologically, I think, consistent with Augustine and Luther, is that the past is present in the same way God is present, on the edge, as an absence.

In the letter that accompanied the poem, Bonhoeffer writes, "For me, this confrontation with the past, this attempt to hold on to it and to get it back, and above all the fear of losing it, is almost the daily background music of my life here, which at times—especially after brief visits, which are always followed by long partings—becomes a theme with variations." The temporal space we inhabit, like our consciousness, is musical. Bonhoeffer quotes music from memory in his letters to Bethge, evidence of just how attentive he is to the aurality of being in the world—and evidence of his capacity for rendering sound visually, one dimension of a capacity for poetry.

6. Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison. #3/157, 416; cited hereafter as LPP.
The experience of receding footsteps translates into an experience of space rendered in much the same way space is rendered by perspective in a drawing. And Bonhoeffer’s reading of this experience is evidence of the influence of a eucharistic theology centered on real presence: the past is fully present not in the grasping of it (which it necessarily eludes, so that the grasping is always after, never of) but in the absence of another constituted by a movement from here to there coinciding with then and now: this is . . . do this in remembrance . . . drink it all.9

Consciousness of time (keeping time, which is different from getting a particular past back and far removed from the fear of losing it—which is what I think is meant by the idea of perfect love casting out fear) is a musical phenomenon, an instance of the interplay of linearity and nonlinearity that is key to the ubiquity of presence Bonhoeffer takes up from Luther. The editors of the English edition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Works call to mind an earlier reference to an essay on “the sense of time,” which Bonhoeffer said “arose primarily out of the need to make my own past present to myself . . . . Gratitude and repentance are what keep our past always present to us.” (Which calls “Simple Gifts” to mind—to turn, turn will be our delight and to keep on turning till we come down right.) In the poetry, the presence of the past is undeniable—and it is manifest in the experience of absence—walking away—characterized by the repeated demand to say good-bye, the constant rhythm of brief visits (presence always a glimpse) followed by long partings, one after the other, all present as the experience of past.10

The poem continues:

Do you feel, as I reach for you now,
how my talons grasp you
so hard it must hurt?
How I wound you, tear
until your blood pours out,
just to be near you,
your embodied, earthly, entire life?
Do you suspect that I now have a dreadful desire
for my own pain?
That I long to see my own blood,
just so all does not sink
into past?

10. LPP #2/73, 181.

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The terror of desire, closely connected with what Virginia Woolf called “the terror of the present moment” is evident here.11 Bonhoeffer addresses it by intensifying the rhythm of Life Together, in which he maintained that there can be no time together if there is no time apart, no presence without absence. The connection with pain addresses nostalgia (a splendid Greek concoction of home and pain worthy of Homer)—but also the often overlooked terror of real presence in the Eucharist (no one sees God and lives—nobody gets out alive). The power in the blood is a terrifying recognition that everything sinks into past as long as it is living. There is terror in that, there is pain; but that is also where we dwell, where we put down roots (sinking, for better for worse, used here in much the way Virgil used it for what Aeneas did), where we make ourselves at home. (Making a home is making a self, something Bonhoeffer returns to in “Who Am I?”) We have caught a glimpse of Augustine and Husserl at our backs. Now we catch a glimpse of Heidegger and his Sorge, living toward death. Bonhoeffer repudiates that central theme of Sein und Zeit Christologically, by embracing death as the moment of resurrection, dying to be free, placing the end in the middle of time. (We see this most clearly perhaps in his early lectures on Genesis.)

Bonhoeffer goes on for several verses layering pain upon pain in parting—the algia of nostalgia; but he grounds it in an answer to the question he poses to life in language reminiscent of the Psalms:

Life, what have you done to me?
Why did you come? Why did you go?

The answer (itself in the form of a question), consistent with Akt und Sein and still making something of Husserl’s temporal perspective, is that my past remains mine when it flies from me:

Past, when you fly from me, —
do you not remain mine, my past?

The “I” (here under the possessive form) is a fact that endures in the act, in the flying, not the being, a reminder that Bonhoeffer has much in common with the pragmatism of William James, who understood the “fact” as a perching, a moment in the act of flight by which James defined consciousness.12

The pain in parting is illuminated by a series of natural images:

As the sun sinks ever faster over the sea,
as if it preferred darkness . . .

11. Woolf, Orlando.
12. James, Principles of Psychology.
As the hint of warm breath
dissolves in cool morning air . . .

The terrifying desire associated with the pain is unmistakably embodied:

I want to breathe the scent of your being,
drink it in, dwell in it,
as blossoms heavy on a hot summer day
invite the bees
and intoxicate them;
as the privet makes the hawk-moth drunk at night; –

and unmistakably associated with the fragility of the body –

but a harsh wind dissolves scent and blossoms,
leaves me standing like a fool
before the vanished past.

and with the futility of grasping to get back the past:

I feel as I would if flaming longs
tore pieces from my flesh,
as you, my past life, hurry away.
Furious spite and anger overcome me,
I hurl wild and useless questions into the void.
If my senses cannot hold you,
passing away, past life,
I will think and think again,
until I find what I lost.
But I feel
as if everything over me, in with under me,
smiles at me, unmoved and enigmatic,
at my hopeless effort,
to capture the wind,
to win back the past.

Bonhoeffer told Bethge that “everything depends on the last few lines”
and worries that “they turned out too short”:

I stretch out my hands
and pray –
and I learn what’s new:
past returns to you

as the most living piece of your life
by thanksgiving and remorse.
Grasp in the past God’s forgiveness and grace,
pray that God bless you today and every day after.

The danger here, with which every poet is familiar, is that everything is resolved too easily, too neatly. Bonhoeffer’s concern with these lines is evidence of a critical perspective on his own work that I suspect would have made him an excellent poet had he had the chance to continue. Whether the lines are too short, the resolution too simple, after the richly layered complexity of the pain of parting behind them is an open question. But what is clear is that Bonhoeffer locates the resolution of the problem (posed by the sinking of all into past) in forgiveness and grace. This is hardly a surprise in a Lutheran theologian. But it is important as a corrective to one form of the temptation to be gods, a reminder that every action by which we would constitute a world is a passion, pathēmatā pathēmatā in the language of Greek tragedy that built so brilliantly on Homer’s two-volume foundation myth, a war story and a nostos tale in which the last hero standing is largely defined by all he has learned in the way of suffering.

Bonhoeffer continues to work with the image of fortune and misfortune joined at the hip (under the influence of Greek thinking about ῥυθμός, which may be good or bad) in a poem titled “Fortune and Misfortune” that probably dates from the same time as “Past”:

Fortune and misfortune
confront and quickly overwhelm us
and are in the beginning,
like the sudden touch of heat and frost,
almost indistinguishably close.

Most interesting is that Bonhoeffer sees the two as virtually indistinguishable and suggests that both—“great and terrible”—can overwhelm us. This is consistent with his Ethics as it has been reconstructed posthumously by a number of excellent scholars beginning with Bethge. There he integrates the heritage of Greek thinking into a philosophically Lutheran understanding of faithful action as passion. This poem ends with the present moment as the moment of truth, kairos not chronos, as he suggested in his New Year reflection “After Ten Years” just before he was imprisoned.13

From the time of Akt und Sein, Bonhoeffer has understood identity as pure act in the presence of God—and he has further defined righteous action in much the same way Luther came to define our righteousness as

the righteousness of God. Pure act is God’s act, a radically incarnational understanding of ethics that transforms ontology in terms of the kenosis Paul invoked in the great christological hymn he recorded in his epistle to the Philippians and paralleled in the image of Christ in all things (“the first born of all creation”) in Colossians. Practically, this works itself out in the admonition to be Christ to one another (“little Christs,” as Luther suggested) that Bonhoeffer develops in the radically social image of the Christian as entirely a person for others.14

That this sociological/ecclcsiological approach is psychologically challenging is evidenced in Bonhoeffer’s “Who am I?” written in the summer of 1944, where Bonhoeffer finds himself suspended in the tension between what “they” tell him and what he “knows.”

The first two stanzas begin with the same line (and the third varies it only slightly, a parallel structure reminiscent of the Hebrew poetry Bonhoeffer knew via the Psalms): “Who am I? They often tell me…” The person “they” tell is “calm and serene and strong” and speaks with his captors “free and friendly and clear / as if…” The “as if” speaks volumes about the social self. Here it announces a reversal in which the captive speaks to his captors with authority. “They” tell a person who bears “days of misfortune / calmly, smiling and proud, / like one accustomed to winning.”

But this social self, told by others, is brought up hard against the self the speaker of the poem knows: “Restless, longing, sick, like a bird in a cage / gasping for breath, gagging, / hungry for colors, for flowers, for birdsong, / thirsty for good words, for neighborliness, / trembling with anger over arbitrary and petty insults, / driven in expectation of great things, / trembling powerlessly for friends endlessly distant, / weary and too empty to pray, to think, to make, / weary and ready to say goodbye to it all?”

And the collision leads to a question—“This or the other?”—run through a series of changes, first in terms of time—“today,” “tomorrow,” “at once”—and then in terms of space—“before others,” “before myself.” And, in a marvelously social image, the self like “a defeated army / fleeing in disorder from a victory already won?” That image of a defeated army fleeing not from defeat but from victory is followed immediately by the assertion that God knows. Now, I am tempted to play with how “God knows” plays in English as something one usually says in exasperation (when losing one’s religion, as the wonderful colloquial expression for being at a loss would have it).


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While that would be stretching, there is something in Bonhoeffer’s conclusion of snatchng something from nothing when he locates his identity in God’s knowledge: “Whoever I am, you know me, God, I am yours!”

Bonhoeffer’s poetry is consistent in taking what Descartes’ doubt resolves in an “I” and moving out to an other embodied in the presence of God, always understood as Christ. It is important to be clear here that the concept of presence from which Bonhoeffer proceeds when he gets to work and sings is drawn (as is the gospel) from the Hebrew concept of Shekinah: it is here, dwelling with us, Emmanuel. And so what “they” tell—the telling, the tale, the tellers—cannot be discounted. The question of identity is thoroughly entangled with ecclesiology, always asking what we mean by “we.”15

That is evidenced in “Christians and Heathens,” where “the people” (a potentially explosive term in the Germany of 1944) and “God” are both constituted by the going to an other in need. People go to God in their need, people go to God in God’s need, and “God goes to all people in their need, / fills the body and soul with his bread, / dies for Christian and heathen crucified / and forgives them both.” This is a dramatic image in which who we are is God’s dying, an act that is not ours but makes us who we are—an image of God’s absolute absence, God’s disappearance into humanity.

The influence of the Psalms on Bonhoeffer’s poems, both in terms of structure and content, has already been mentioned. Structurally, this is clear in the repetition of phrases with slight variation (as in “Who Am I?”). In terms of content, it often manifests itself in lamentation, crying from the depths, singing songs of abandonment as people who do not believe they could be abandoned do. This is nowhere clearer than in “Night Voices in Tegel,” which is another instance of Bonhoeffer’s ability to hear the world—and in hearing it to hear his own soul: “I hear my own soul saying and trembling. / / I hear / voices like cries / like pleas for a plank to cling to, / waking, / dreaming companions / silent night thoughts. / I hear the creaking of restless beds. / I hear chains.” In the voices of the prison Bonhoeffer hears his soul trembling. And he hears what is not here, what is in another time: “I hear happy lisping teenage boys / who feast on their childhood dreams. / I hear them tugging at their blankets / and hiding from awful nightmares.” This is a reminder that soldiers are, more often than not, children. But it is also a reminder of the presence of the past in a time like dream time, the past “suspended in the future,” as he said in Act and Being, the child growing “out of the human being of conscience.” But he also hears “the sighing and weak breathing of old men, / who are quietly preparing for the great

15. Descartes. Meditations on First Philosophy.
journey. / They have seen justice and injustice come and go, / now they want to see the eternal, everlasting.”

What follows is one of the most beautifully lyrical passages in Bonhoeffer’s poems, in which Lutheran hymnody (and particularly Paul Gerhardt) sings as surely as the Psalms:

* Mute is the choir,
  * wide open my ear:
  * “We old, we young,
    * we sons of every tongue,
    * we strong, we weak,
    * we sleeping, we awake,
    * we poor, we rich,
    * in misfortune the same,
    * we good, we bad,
    * what we have always been
    * we men of many wounds,
    * we witnesses of those who have died,
    * we defiant and we despondent,
    * we innocent and we much maligned,
    * by long solitude deeply troubled,
    * brother, we seek, we call you!
    * Brother, do you hear me?

In the night voices of the prison, the whole world sings. And it is hearing the whole world sing in those imprisoned voices that empowers Bonhoeffer to conclude this poem with confidence rather than despair, returning to the place from which he began—on the cot, staring at a prison wall—but seeing for the first time:

* Stretched on my cot I stare at the gray wall.
* Outside a summer morning
  * that is still not mine,
  * rejoicing
  * among nations.
  * Brother, after a long night
  * our day breaks,
  * we stand firm!

The challenge of standing firm when the ground beneath one’s feet is crumbling is understandably on Bonhoeffer’s mind as it becomes clear to him that he is unlikely to be released. But that challenge was already on his mind in his turn from being to act in *Akt und Sein*. Our lives depend not on some fixed ground beneath our feet but on our action in the presence of others. His “Stations on the Way to Freedom” (calling the act of devotion embodied in the stations of the cross to mind) names four moments on the way that is freedom: cultivation, action (“in the deed is freedom”), suffering (“Only for an instant did you touch the bliss of freedom”), and death (“Freedom, we have long sought you in discipline, deed, and suffering. / Dying we now know you yourself in the face of God.” This may read like traditional Christian piety, rooted especially in Pauline language—and that it is. But it is also a manifesto of ethics as formation, singing what Bonhoeffer says in what we have of what was to have been his *magnum opus*.

And it is not surprising that this manifesto, emerging as it does in conversation with Bethge under conditions of imprisonment—an impossible conversation with a distant friend—is followed by “The Friend,” a defiant repudiation of the blood and soil massification of Nazism that begins with a “no” like the no of Camus’ *Rebel* and moves seamlessly to yes: 27

* Not out of the heavy soil
  * where blood and race and oaths
    * are mighty and holy,
  * where the earth itself
    * against insanity and outrage
    * sacred ancient orders
    * guard and protect and avenge.
    * not from the heavy soil of the earth
    * but from free pleasure
    * and free desire of the spirit
    * that requires neither oath nor law
    * friend to friend is given.

The poem ends with a similar movement from no to yes—what does not make us free, what does:

* Not orders, not compulsory foreign commands and teachings,
  * but advice, good and earnest,
  * makes free,
  * seeks the mature person
  * from the loyalty of his friend.

* Far or near
  * in fortune or misfortune
  * know one another
  * the loyal helpers

To describe a body of poetic work that spans six months as maturing may smack of exaggeration. Yet this one does, and I believe that is indicative of a long preparation for poetry that precedes the writing of it in Bonhoeffer, as it almost always does in poets worth reading. Bonhoeffer was immersed in the Psalms and hymns of the church throughout his life, and that immersion—a long, careful disciplined reading of a substantial body of work—was an excellent preparation for poetry. So the maturation evident in the ten poems Bonhoeffer published for a small circle of friends (more often than not, a circle of two) is the maturation of a lifetime.

Bonhoeffer’s maturation as a poet is marked by increasingly disciplined attention to form that leads him to a remarkable series of rhyming couplets inspired by the death of Moses and, finally, two hymns. The subject matter is important (and thus the question “why Moses?” that has often come up in response to the first of these three final poems), but it is the form that is remarkable and that returns us to theological work in which Bonhoeffer was already engaged when he wrote Sanctiorum Communio. The paradoxical hope that sustained his action in the middle of time—between resistance and submission, as Bethge emphasized—is a vision of the presence of the divine embodied in human community.

I absolutely do not believe and hope in no way to imply that “formal” verse is more mature than “free” verse. But for a poet—philosopher concerned as Bonhoeffer is with the relationship between freedom and constraint, engaging formal verse with an eye on the possibilities it contains is a mark of maturity. All of the ten poems Bonhoeffer wrote are attentive to form (as poetry, even free verse, must be). I single the last three out, however, because they appear to grow out of challenges Bonhoeffer set for his art that further his work by casting light on his marking of time.

“The Death of Moses” consists of ninety rhyming couplets that scholars following Henkys have grouped into five sections. The poem has the appearance of a narrative, taking up an old story in much the same way that Plato has his Socrates take up Aesop. Bonhoeffer does not create a new story but sets an old one to music. It begins with Moses, who glimpsed the land of promise but did not dwell on it. Rather than following the life of Moses from beginning to end, however, the poem stays on the mountaintop and moves to the point at which Moses is ready to die. The story of Moses’ life is contained in the moment of his dying—on the mountaintop from which he can see the promised land but not enter it. Now, this means the past is lifted up into the future—and that is pointing to what was said in Akt und Sein. The act of the poem is an essay on time, and that makes a prophet in the act of seeing the perfect subject.

Writing ninety rhyming couplets demands a great deal of discipline from the poet (and perhaps even more from the translator). Some would say that the best way for a translator to demonstrate his or her discipline would be to abandon rhyme no matter how tempting, particularly in English. And there is something to be said for that. On the other hand, there is, presumably, reason in the rhyme; and that makes it interesting to explore (in much the same way that it must have been interesting to Bonhoeffer at a difficult time in his imprisonment). A discipline like this could pass the time in a place where movement is constrained, and that could serve as a metaphor for time passing while Moses stands in place on the mountaintop, in the act of dying.

On the mountaintop, in the presence of God, in the act of dying, Moses prays: "Atop the mountain’s summit / stands Moses, man of God and prophet. // At the holy land of promise / his unwavering eyes gaze. // That he might prepare him to die / the Lord appears at his old servant’s side." It is interesting, particularly with the sound of the world singing in Tegel prison still in our ears, that the poem seeks a place of silence in which to see the promised future.

Wishing for a high place where the people are silent, a place to show him the promised future, he spreads before the wanderer’s weary feet a homeland to quietly greet him, blessing him in his final breath in peace to meet death. It is also interesting that a contrast, reminiscent of being and act, is set up between seeing and entering:

"From a distance you shall see salvation, but your feet shall not enter it!"

And the old eyes see, distant things like dawn they see.

Kneaded into a sacrificial chalice
by God's mighty hand—Moses prays.

Moses sees, but he will not enter. Bonhoeffer uses the strict discipline of the rhymed couplets to great effect, playing freedom off the form and wrapping one explosive paradox after another into the lines. Among other things, it appears that Moses the seer sees that he has, in fact, been in the promised land, which (true to Bonhoeffer’s theology) is a way, not a destination. But Moses, along with all the people of God, has had to struggle at every step to see that. And the struggle, of great interest to Bonhoeffer, is the burden of being chosen:

you forgave. Yet standing faithless before
faithfulness is a burning fire.

Your nearness and your countenance
are a painful light to penitents.

Your sorrow and your great wrath
dig into my flesh like a thorn of death.

Before the holy word—that inflamed
by you I preach—I am damned.

Those who taste the fruit of doubt
are from God's table left out.

From the holy land heavy with grapes
drink only those of unwavering faith.

Only those of unwavering faith, of course, would be no one.

The words Bonhoeffer puts in the mouth of Moses recall Shir Hashirim, a poetic source with which Bonhoeffer was well acquainted, and one that locates sacramental power in love. The holy land is “decked out as a bride, beautiful, glorious, / virgin in a bright wedding gown,” its “bridal jewelry costly grace.” It is “God’s vineyard” moist with fresh dew, filled with heavy grapes glistening in bright sun, a garden of swelling fruit with springs from which “clear water gushes.” A long sequence of couplets sings an apocalyptic vision of a hoped for utopia in which “God’s rest” comes “as a great festival comes.”

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And quiet people in simple satisfaction
will plant vines and plow the fields,

and one will call the other brother.
Neither pride nor jealousy will burn in their

hearts, and fathers will teach their
children to respect the old and honor

the sacred. Young girls, beautiful and good and pure, will
be good fortune and ornaments, the honor of the people.

As in so much of Hebrew prophecy, the apocalyptic vision is a vision of present hospitality rooted in past experience, of a people who, conscious of having been strangers, welcome strangers:

Those who themselves once ate the bread
of strangers, strangers will not leave in need.

To the orphans and the widows and the poor
the righteous will willingly show mercy.

It is a vision of a world transformed that ends with a declaration of present freedom: “Great is the world; it widens the sky, / looks at the people raising a ruckus. // In your word that you gave ts, / you show all the people the way
/to life . . . ”

... Return, my people,
the free earth and the free air beckons and calls.

Take possession of the mountains and the plains,
blessed be the footsteps of the pious forefathers.

Wipe from your brow the hot desert sand
and breathe freedom in the promised land.

Wake up, reach out, it is no dream, no illusion,
God has done the weary heart good.

Look at the glory of the promised land,
all is yours and you are free!”

As the past is lifted into the future, the future breaks in to the present. And that returns the poem to where it began: “Atop the mountain’s summit /
stands Moses, man of God and prophet. // At the holy land of promise / his unwavering eyes gaze."

You have been wonderfully good to me,  
turned bitterness to sweetness for me,  
allowed me to see through the veil of death  
these, my people, go to the highest celebration.

Sinking, God, into your eternity,  
I see my people stride to freedom.

You who punish sin and gladly forgive,  
God,—I have loved these people.

That I carried their shame and their burdens  
and have seen their salvation—that is enough.

Take hold of me! I drop my stave,  
faithful God, I am ready for my grave.

Bonhoeffer and Bethge refer to the hymns of Paul Gerhardt throughout their correspondence, and it is clear that the sacred music of the German Lutheran tradition is always present between them. Gerhardt was a poet as well as a pastor, and the influence of his lyrics on the conversation between Bethge and Bonhoeffer could serve as a subject for another essay. But I will conclude simply by pointing to the last two poems Bonhoeffer wrote, both in the form of hymns (the last being particularly successful as such). The first turns to another prophet, Jonah, who responds to God's call by going the other way. The poem picks up the story in the middle, with frightened sailors on the ship carrying Jonah struggling to keep from being swept away by the storm.

They screamed before death, their bodies clawing  
at the wet, storm-whipped ropes,  
and they gazed full of horror  
at the sea in turmoil, its powers suddenly unleashed.

"You eternal, you good, you angry gods,  
help or give a sign that may tell us  
who offended you with a secret sin,  
the murderer or breaker of oaths or blasphemer  
who hides from us his evil misdeed

Schroeder

to salvage his miserable pride!"  
So they pled. And Jonah said: "It is I!  
I sinned against God. My life is forfeit.

Cast me away from you! Mine is the guilt. God is very angry with me.  
The pious shall not perish with the sinner!  
They trembled. But then with strong hands  
they cast the culprit away. There stood the sea.

The poem begins in the middle—and it ends there as well, with the sea standing, there. God's presence is undeniable, and it is not always experienced as grace. But it stands. We know the rest of the story, so it can go without saying—and the poem, like us, can take place in medias res.

The final poem takes up the philosophical image of Dasein suspended between transcendence and transcendencc and wraps it in "still and good and true" powers that enfold us. It is a sort of homily on Colossians, on Christ in all and all in Christ. The poet, like Moses, is ready to die, powerless, tasting what is promised, enfolded in the power of God, a power that resides in God's dying, an act—a source of paradoxical hope—that is not ours but makes us who we are.

By powers enfolded still and good and true  
sheltered and consoled most wonderfully—  
so I wish these days to spend with you  
and with you a bright new year to see.

The old lives on our poor hearts to torment,  
and evil days still heavy weigh us down.  
Oh Lord give our frightened souls in ferment  
a taste of what you've promised is to come.

And should you offer us the cup of suffering,  
with bitterness filled up to the rim,  
grateful we will take it without trembling,  
likened in your good and loving hand.

But should you wish to give us joy once more  
in a world with bright and shining sun,  
then all that's gone before we will remember  
and know to you all our lives belong.

Now let the bright warm candle that you brought us  
in our darkness flame up again today,
and if it can be done together lead us,
all your children singing your high praise.

By powers of good most wonderfully enfolded
with joy we wait hopeful come what may.
Each morning till the day is ended,
God is with us every dawning day.

It is worth noting again that Bonhoeffer's earliest scholarly work, *Sanctorum Communio*, is an exercise in ecclesiology and that his second major scholarly work, *Akt und Sein*, is a prequel to the first, reading Hegel critically with Heidegger and Husserl in mind to point to the community called "church" as solution to the problem posed by encounter with being. Encounter with being takes place in *human* being as an encounter from outside in revelation, which is an encounter with human existence.\(^{20}\)

God's disappearance into humanity—God's absolute absence—is nowhere more evident than this. Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is radically incarnational, and that means it is fully human, human without remainder. There is no place but this to meet God, and that, as Bonhoeffer sees it, is the heart of the gospel.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


20. Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 109. Bonhoeffer's reading anticipates Paul Ricoeur's reading of similar material in "Religion, Atheism, and Faith." It also has much in common with Jan Patočka's phenomenology, outlined in *Body, Community, Language, World*. More generally, the parallels and echoes between Bonhoeffer's radically incarnational ecclesiology and the concepts of "parallel polis" and "second culture" (associated with Patočka and the circle that included Ivan Martin Jirous, Václav Benda, and Václav Havel) are mutually illuminating and worthy of further consideration.