The making of God

“I don’t believe in God as character,” says poet Pádraig Ó Tuama, “but I do believe in God as plot.”

Interview by Lisa M. Wolfe and Leslie Long
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Poet and theologian Pa?draig O? Tuama (Photo by David Pugh)

Pádraig Ó Tuama *is a poet, theologian, and host of the podcast* Poetry Unbound *with On Being Studios. In 2022 he published both the chapbook* Feed the Beast *and the anthology* Poetry Unbound*. This interview took place at Oklahoma City University, where both interviewers teach.*

Lisa M. Wolfe: In preparation for this interview, I read your 2015 collection *In the Shelter*. It felt very comforting and pastoral, kind of devotional. There’s even a litany in it. After finishing that, I pulled *Feed the Beast* from

the library shelf. I sat down and read the whole thing at once. It was so engrossing and compelling, even searing. But it is completely different from *In the Shelter*! What happened between those two works?

Nothing really. I suppose partly, I became safer. I'm not working in religious environments anymore, even liberal ones. I'm not looking for employment in those areas either. In *In the Shelter*, there is reference to the antigay exorcisms performed on me—my first foray into trying to put something of that in print. I was curious about how to bring literature into conversation with those events. The experiences I had are relatively mild in comparison to other people's, but I still wanted to come back to them.

To my mind, underneath *In the Shelter* is the quiet narrative saying, "None of this worked." What I mean is none of the religious literature worked in the sense of the promises of belonging that it offered. *In the Shelter* pays close attention to literature but contains a certain recognition that all of the promises that religious literature offers fail. *Feed the Beast* is just exploring that side of the failure.

LMW: I like to introduce my students to resistant reading of the biblical text, which is something you're using in *Feed the Beast*. How did you come upon that style or hermeneutic?

I was always attracted to it. But the more I read, the more I thought, "Oh, you can do that?!" I think learning about midrash was a great life changer. I was at a conference in London, looking at the Holocaust and human behavior through the lens of history. The conference was about teaching young people about critical thinking, and I was one of the few non-Israelis there. There were conversations about midrash that changed the way I looked at things. I began reading historical midrash like Rashi, but from there I continued to look at contemporary midrashic scholars, particularly Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, and began seeing what you're able to do when it comes to reading text.

I also love *The Gospel in Solentiname*, by Ernesto Cardenal. There's something about the way that he doesn't correct people: they read a text, and then immediately they're talking about what happened yesterday. These unconscious associations are a psychoanalytical approach to seeing what happens when you open a text. He's right not to correct people, because they're doing nothing wrong. But so often, in the

context of a controlling environment regarding a text, the desire is to say, “Well, you need to get it perfectly right in order to be able to justify making that association.” He doesn’t try to do that.

It’s not just in biblical material. What would it be like to do that with *Gilgamesh*? Or with Irish mythology, or Greek mythology? The way the interpretation of narratives develops has a lot to do with the associations and personal experiences the reader brings to it. I see biblical literature as another world literature onto which human projection is entirely welcome, as part of the project about what it means to live with a story.

Leslie Long: Your poem “There Is a Time to Love and a Time to Hate; A Time for Making War” is based on the Vatican’s 2021 “*Responsum* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a *dubium* regarding the blessing of the unions of persons of the same sex.” You call this an “erasure poem,” and you’ve said, “I had great fun with that.” I was really struck by the idea of having great fun with a text that is doctrinal documentation of exclusion, a text that is inherently not fun for the people about whom it’s written.

There’s an Irish writer, Nuala O’Faolain, who was an editorialist for the *Irish Times*. Her book *Are You Somebody?* is a collection of her editorials, but half of the book is a long introduction, like part of an autobiography. I read it in my early 20s. One of the editorials says something like, “Me and the pope have reached a new level of our relationship: I no longer care what he says.” I remember thinking, “I yearn for your life. I yearn to be in a situation where I don’t care.” I was still trying to be very devoted at that stage, but I loved the freedom she had. The fact that she was writing about it meant she wasn’t entirely free, either. I didn’t see that as hypocrisy, I saw that as cultural: How could you be a feminist in Ireland in the ’80s and ’90s and not care about what the pope was saying? Because it’s not about caring for the pope or not, it’s about thinking, “This shit is going to affect me, and it’s going to affect other women.”

During the pandemic, somebody asked if I had seen this new Vatican paper that had just come out. I had known that something was being released, but it wasn’t like I had marked it down to go, “God, keep an eye out on Monday morning for what’s

going to come through.” I don’t sign up for any of those lists anymore. So when I did read it I immediately thought, “What can I make it do?”

“There Is a Time to Love and a Time to Hate; A Time for Making War” demonstrates a dialogical relationship with the Vatican’s text—dialectical too, in the sense that every text is always saying much more than it seems to be saying. There’s an attempted forensic precision that you find in a Vatican document like that; it thinks it’s being so clear. Part of me wanted to initiate some psychoanalytical anarchy into the text, to say, “Well, look at what else is there, hidden.” Some of it is creative; some of it is playful; some of it is theological; some of it is just protest.

I had another page at the end of it, which was all from the footnotes, that just spelled out “flibbertigibbet” because I kind of wanted playfulness of language. But I was limited in terms of pages, because it’s a chapbook. So whenever that poem gets published in a full-length collection, I think “flibbertigibbet” will go back in.

I do see “There Is a Time to Love and a Time to Hate; A Time for Making War” as a literary project. Language is always saying much more than we think it’s saying. Terrence Tilley has a book, *Story Theology*, which is a very basic introduction into reading gospel texts through the lens of literary criticism: plot, character, locale, time. He has a line, “The teller of the story cannot control a story’s power to reveal.” I find that anarchic in its insight about what happens in writing; and for him to say that theologically, that’s very interesting. It confirms something that poets are always trying to say: you can never control a poem in its reception. The Vatican can’t control the story that they’re telling you.

LL: We live in the Bible Belt, and many of our students here were raised with a strict understanding of scripture and its interpretation. So it feels very unsafe to step away from those interpretations. How did that process begin for you?

For me, it was kind of an accidental falling into Ignatian spirituality. Ignatius, in his guidance on prayer, says, “Read a text, maybe read it twice, then close the text, and call it to mind and then put yourself into it and describe what you can see.” These are very imaginative readings, to free-associate with the text; they’re also an exercise in point of view, in close reading, and in plotting the gaps of the text. So I think for me, Ignatius was the surprising door in.

In my late teens, I heard a few lectures from biblical scholars, one of whom, Frances Hogan, focused on the gospels. I loved the way she'd say, "Well, this is the Jesus of *Mark* we're talking about here." I'd never heard anyone say that. Again, I asked, "Can you say that?" I loved that she had read closely enough to say, "Jesus of Mark and Jesus of John are very different characters; my God, I don't think they would have liked each other at all." Mark's Jesus would have told John's Jesus to shut up.

So for me, the opening door was a literary one: I began to see texts as works of art. As much as I appreciate the art of poetry and the art of fiction, you can also appreciate the art behind the gospels. It's a mystery as to how they're compiled; of course, there's some historical data, but there's also so much we don't know. I feel full freedom therefore to bring what my limited brain says about art appreciation to these texts—and to a life in response to those texts.

I feel freedom to say, "You can say whatever you want." So what do you want to say? What have you thought about saying—about religion, its experience, its influence, and its relationship to the text? So many of the problems of the texts are not in the text itself, rather it's the policing and controlling mechanism of the text's interpretation. That is both boring and dangerous.

LMW: As you were talking about Ignatius, it struck me that in your podcast you offer an Ignatian reading of poetry. Have you thought about it in that way?

Completely! I also think that all Ignatius was doing was learning from others who read texts closely. All good historical engagement is people who read texts carefully and then can read the world in conversation with those texts. Ignatius was brilliant at it, and he created a very simple system for teaching others, but it's not a specific project to Ignatian spirituality or to any one religion.

I think what we've found over and over again throughout world literary history is how revolutionary it is for somebody to take a text—or a mythology or a piece of art—and read it in a new way. A new point of view is enlivening. The idea of point of view can be dignifying for people who've been told their point of view is invalid. I found my way into that both through midrash and through Ignatius. I suppose the two are doing different things, but in a certain sense each is paying close attention to the text, to reading carefully, and—alongside that—to reading yourself very

carefully.

LMW: My sense is that you are not particularly interested in questions about belief. If that's the case, what does interest you?

I mean, what is God? God's just a sound that we make with our mouths. Whatever God is—or as Aquinas says, "that which we call God"—is discovered and made and remade in the possibility of doing something surprising.

Wouldn't it be extraordinary if voices of compromise, creativity, unexpected alliances emerged from within warring factions? Can you imagine, in much of the world's population, what a collective sigh of relief and excitement it would be, to think, "Oh my God, listen to that." That is the making of God, in a certain sense. Always small, always naive, because something is always being born. I don't believe in God as character, but I do believe in God as plot—and the emergence of God as plot is always small and risky. And open to being killed.

LMW: It sounds to me like you're also identifying God as seeing, observing, noticing.

As art, also. Any creative endeavor on a geopolitical scale is artistic. In the Good Friday Agreement between Britain and Ireland, the preamble concludes, "in a spirit of concord, we strongly commend this agreement to the people." In the "spirit of concord": *concordia*—shared heart. It's that level of elevated language that moves me deeply. To think, "Look at what is possible when people do creative work with each other."