

INTERVIEW for PRESENCE 4 (2019)

In October and November, 2019, Mark S. Burrows interviewed Daniel Tobin regarding his forthcoming book entitled *This Broken Symmetry: A Poem*. It is the second of a trilogy of books: the first, *From Nothing* (2016), explored the thought of Jesuit priest and scientist Georges Lemaitre; the third, in process, engages the witness of Teilhard de Chardin, tentatively entitled *At the Grave of Teilhard de Chardin*.

MB: *How did you discover Simone Weil's writings? What is the trajectory of your involvement in her work?*

DT: I discovered Simone Weil's writings initially through Wallace Stevens, surprisingly enough. I'm not sure whether it is widely known how she influenced Stevens' ideas. He makes reference to Weil in *The Necessary Angel* and invokes her concept of decreation as a way of defining the art and poetry of his time. Stevens died in 1955, so he would have discovered Weil in the last decade of his life after her writings started to find wider publication. The other path to my discovery of her work was through Czeslaw Milosz, the great Polish poet, who invokes her in *The Witness of Poetry*. I believe it was in 1982 that Milosz gave the Norton Lectures at Harvard, and those lectures would have formed the blueprint for *The Witness of Poetry*. I attended the Norton lectures during my time as a student at Harvard Divinity School—a thrilling experience since I had read *Bells in Winter* shortly before he won the Nobel Prize in 1980 and found myself completely taken with the poems and the sensibility behind the poems. So Stevens and Milosz would have been the instigators of my fascination with Weil's work and life. I can see myself heading off right out of the lecture, across the Yard, and into the Harvard Bookstore to buy *The Simone Weil Reader*, the big black-covered hardback among the books on sale for discount in the basement. What followed, after I left Harvard for the University of Virginia and my doctorate, would have been Simone Petrement's biography. I wanted to find out more about the life that produced such starkly compelling and challenging ideas about the world, history, faith, God, human suffering, human corruption, the commitment to justice, and the difficult and (dare I say) self-obliterating path to transcendence.

Now, some thirty-five or more years later, when I crack open my copy of *The Reader*, I see my first underlines, checks, asterisks, where something in the "The Spiritual Autobiography," or "Factory Work," or "The Illiad, Poem of Might," or "The Love of God and Affliction" struck me with the urgency of real discovery as well as recognition. So I would say my trajectory of involvement with her work is characterized as much by a continual return to that first engagement as by my moving ahead through *Waiting for God, Gravity and Grace, The Need for Roots, Lectures on Philosophy* and so on. It is as if my younger self knew something, intuited something relatively early on, that I would be called to discover and re-discover over and over again, and hopefully deepening the encounter.

MB: *What led to your decision to write this particular collection? How did the writing take shape?*

DT: I wrote *This Broken Symmetry* directly out of my desire to compose a book-length poem on the life of Jesuit priest and scientist Georges Lemaitre, the father of the Big Bang. *From Nothing* came out in 2016, though the inner conversation about the shape that book really started some six or seven years before its publication. Eventually I decided on a poem in

thirty-three sections in tercets, eight stanzas in each section, and the whole book in three parts. That probably tells you that, for good or ill, I have a strong architectural approach to the making of poems. Those tercets are in conversation with the longer poems of Wallace Stevens—each of the three parts of *From Nothing* allude to a poem by Stevens—though obviously the thirty-three sections along with the tercets alludes formally to Dante as well, without assuming a strict *terza rima*.

As I worked on *From Nothing* it occurred to me that what I wanted beyond the one book-length poem was a still larger design, also in the same form: a total of three book-length poems, each with the same structure, ninety-nine sections in all, with four six-line continuing couplets woven at the beginning and end of each book forming a kind of helix through and across all three. So: three book-length poems forming a single larger whole, ninety-nine sections with the twenty-four-line weave forming the final section, not at the end but immanent in the whole design of twenty-four hundred lines. *This Broken Symmetry*, on Simone Weil, forms the center work of the whole. I did not realize at first that the subject of the center work would be Simone Weil. I originally had Dorothy Day in mind (who surely deserves a poem in her honor!). In the end, Weil asserted herself incontestably, despite being the subject of a number of poems before my own, including Stephanie Strickland's *The Red Virgin*, Kate Daniel's *Four Testaments*, and Anne Carson's *Decreation*, along with a short sequence of poems by Edward Hirsch. There are probably more out there. I had read Edward Hirsch's, and found them beautiful, but I studiously avoided the others for fear of being overly influenced.

In terms of shape and movement, *This Broken Symmetry*, in contrast to *From Nothing* and the expanding universe itself, works contrary to the arrow of time—it starts after Weil's death and ends before her birth. As Weil reflects in *Waiting for God*, "Time as it flows wears down and destroys that which is temporal. Accordingly, there is more eternity in the past than in the present... Thus, the past presents us with something which is at the same time real and better than ourselves, something which can draw us upwards—a thing the future never does." I wrote each section from the beginning at Weil's end to the end at Weil's beginning, or still on the way as it were in her mother's womb. The design does not mean the book forms a straightforward narrative, but there are motifs running through it and I've done enough research to give the poem a sub-structure connected to the life but, hopefully, an imaginative life beyond the merely archival. The last book in the trilogy, which I hope to write someday before too long, will be titled *At the Grave of Teilhard de Chardin*.

MB: *At the heart of this collection is, as the title suggests, a notion of symmetry, a symmetry we sense, if at all, in the shards and fragments of this world—and of our lives, as Weil knew in the anguish of her life. And yet this is the motive for love in her writings, which you point to in an early poem in this sequence. Why love and not, say, duty or obligation, surely also themes in her writings?*

DT: Yes, the title *This Broken Symmetry* is meant to suggest the human experience of the world as somehow fragmented or incomplete, though my first thought was to allude to the physical reality of symmetry breaking, which is the elemental process that brings the universe into being out of the primeval singularity from which it arises. I like to say "arises" rather than "arose" because much of the latest discussion (as I'm familiar with it) conceives of the universe "in creation," as Roy R. Gould of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics suggests. The point is that the big bang isn't something that happened billions of years ago;

rather, it's ongoing—some physicists are coming to the idea that creation wasn't a one-shot event, or an infinite compendium of one-shot events within some “metaverse.” In any case, we are in it. I like the theological resonance of a universe in creation, even though from the standpoint of a physicist that reality, if true, implies nothing at all theologically, and probably shouldn't (though Teilhard de Chardin would posit otherwise).

So, as far as the title goes, I wanted it to spin off *From Nothing* and its focus on Lemaitre's work in physics and his theory that became known, derisively at first, as the Big Bang. Simone Weil, like all of us, inhabits this broken symmetry—we are part of it, which is one way to think about our “fallen” natures, and the fallen nature of the world as well conceived of in the broadest sense. Out of some perfect symmetry the universe evolves over vast stretches of time and space to greater complexity, which means it becomes more greatly fretted and involuted as it expands and accelerates in that expansion. One might dare say in human terms we find ourselves more and more at risk, not only from the fundamental conditions of our being but from ourselves. How do you we live in such a world?

I love Simone Weil because she recognizes what is so vitally at stake in how we conceive of reality, and she involves her whole being in the question, which is at once marvelously admirable and fills one with trepidation, precisely because it deepens the risk to the self. And, as we should know, our selves are flawed simply by virtue of being here at all. Hence her longing for the “uncreated.” At the same time, one can respond to life in the world as one finds it with a sense of duty and obligation, and if one's sense of duty and obligation is truly moral then, one hopes, one will have added to the sum of worldly justice and betterment. Her attraction to communism surely emerges from this critical moral sense.

On the other hand, her spiritual growth during her short life enters upon the most profound transformation when she comes to feel the presence of love at the core of all that is, as when she was reciting George Herbert's poem “Love III” and Christ in spirit came into her being. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say she came into the transfiguring apprehension of Christ's being there, as Christ must be, always (though we as human with all our powers of reflection, consciousness, do not feel that presence of the transcendent in the immanent given our adherence to the partial, the broken). She did not die for communism or even the Church—she died for love, transcendent love experienced immanently. One can argue over the extremity of her answer to love's call, or at least admit that extremity—self-starvation—verges on the life denying and may well involve the elusive complexities of psychology and upbringing. Still, I don't think one can deny but that a passionate love for God is at the root.

So, why love? If all that is, is only material, and matter and energy have no aspect and fundament in what we traditionally call the spirit, then there is no need for love—duty and obligation are perfectly suitable to improve incrementally and, if only for a time, the social and cultural conditions of human beings and the environment. It will all eventually pass away anyway. Such a view assumes that one's duty and obligations are directed for the betterment of life's conditions for others. History is rife with those who felt duty and obligation toward some ideology or cause that treated others most contemptuously and brutally, and our contemporary moment is no different. To seek and hopefully find love at the core of all our

actions is to see that this broken symmetry isn't fragmented at all, but is bound together by love, and bound toward some more fulfilling symmetry of both being and consciousness, which are obviously mutually enfolded in each other—an All-in-All beyond any static, unmoved One. It means that one keeps faith with love not merely as a template for moral living but as a teleology at the very heart of creation—creation that is ecstatic with God's own ecstasy.

MB: *You write of "the emptied God" in one of these poems, an idea that has Pauline roots but reaches as well into Weil's broader philosophical interests. And, in that poem, you point to the power of the imagination to enter, somehow, into that emptiness. Is it fair to see the interplay of absence and waiting, of loss and hunger, so central to Weil's writings, as a dimension of the way you yourself work as a poet? Does this tension express something of the dynamic interplay of the "given" and the "imagined" in your work of rendering Weil's thought and life into poetic form—i.e., something "made" from what we know of her life and work?*

DT: I have been drawn to the idea of the emptied God for a long time, since as an undergraduate I took a class on the Pauline epistles and became fascinated with Philippians 2:5 – 11 with its extraordinary, formative hymn of the kenosis or self-emptying incarnation of Christ. I'm aware of the long history of interpretation this early hymn has produced, as well as its ontological and ethical implications, depending on one's Christological approach. I've always read it with a mind toward God becoming present in the creation through the person of Christ's incarnation, and I suppose one can draw a line from the kenosis of Philippians to the Cosmic Christ of Colossians, as Teilhard does implicitly if not explicitly—God's creation an emptying into becoming from God's own Being: the infinite *I am*. And one can hear, echoing ahead, Eckhart's eternal birth of Christ in the soul out of the Godhead he conceived as God beyond God, in what he called "an eternal boiling." Reading this way leads one to see the being and becoming of things as a kind of surplus, and emptying of God that is simultaneously an overflowing.

Weil's understanding is really the inverse of that vision. God withdraws, and that original primordial creational withdrawal of God is how the universe comes into being, and therefore into becoming with all of its risk, limitation, and ultimately the human propensity for evil. For Weil, the emptied God highlights God's absence from the creation rather than God's presence within it. I suppose it depends on how one theologically inflects God's emptying—God emptying into the world, or the world emptied of God yet still dependent on God for its being, since there would be no presence without God's original withdrawal, which renders God, from this side of being, *deus absconditus*. Weil's ethical response, to my mind, is very much attuned to Philippians. She takes on the role of the lowly servant, and it would not be going too far to say that she lived a life of emptying herself, perhaps to the point (and beyond) of masochism. Can one make oneself an idol in the desire to empty oneself, even perhaps in imitation of Christ? It's that kind of question that drives my interest in Weil, why I find her so dramatically compelling beyond any theological preoccupations.

So, as far as my own efforts with *This Broken Symmetry* are concerned, I would say yes, the imagination needs to enter the emptiness by listening and waiting. Perhaps the real effort is in readying oneself, always trying to be ready, but more than that to do the steady work of practice. One needs to be a servant to one's subject, needs to be negatively capable rather than positively capable, in Keats's sense of the poet's work. The page before the words begin to appear, however laboriously and, hopefully, graciously, from some capacity more encompassing than the ego, is after all empty.

At the same time, I find it compelling that Weil did not trust the imagination, saw it more in league with human delusion than with human creation—a danger. I would love to overhear Weil in conversation with Coleridge, if such were possible, Coleridge of the primary and secondary imagination—the imagination of the infinite *I AM* and the human imagination in the image of God's—and Weil with her whole impetus to decreate, to return things to the uncreated. I'd invite Teilhard to the table as well, with his essentially Pauline vision of God all-in-all in some evolutionary human future beyond even the death of the species, everything transfigured in and through his Christ Omega; Weil with her vision of the past offering something more real and better than ourselves, Teilhard with his theologically and biologically utopian future.

This last fanciful conclave probably speaks to some deep-seeded spiritual hunger in my work, and one that could easily devolve into dull abstraction. Obviously, one needs to avoid that end. Your last question about the dynamic interplay of the given and the imagined really goes to process. The way in for me requires access to the drama of the life through particular details, scenes, relationships, places. My job as poet is to try to enter them, to let them speak through the poem's formal means at every level and facet of the writing. But I can only enter them if I have begun to lay myself bare before them, to let them enter me.

I don't want to over analyze this, but I am drawn to Weil because of something deeply rooted in me that involves what Seamus Heaney called the definition of a poet's stance toward life, a poet's definition of reality. So, as far as possible, as poet I need to set our stances toward life—mine and Weil's-- in dialogue. That can only happen if I am able to render the life credibly and dramatically, and not just by offering her ideas about the life. The boy who appears in the second section, "Roots," really did wait at her door in the Notting Hill rooming house where she lived, not long before she died. He was the landlady's son and was mentally challenged. That is all mere information unless the poem places us there, where the boy curls as if in utero at her door. In the previous section, the first, we are at her burial at Bybrook cemetery, and now we have a child curled in a fetal position, waiting. I have no desire to overstate the resonances, but I can tell you I did not plan any such juxtaposition. The poet has to follow the poem.

That also means in the case of Weil, as in the section "Decreation" (which follows "Roots,"), to let her thought gain dramatic presence: "But to enter the uncreated, Nothing's naked open sea, / Before God abandoned God to these various forms / Of hunger, gravity riveted plumb in every scattered part, // And each I like a standing pole to blot the infinite...." This section ends with the scene in Gethsemane, with God waiting for God under the olive trees. In

writing this section I did not arrive in Gethsemane imaginatively by intention but by trying to let the poem lead me, by trying to allow her thinking to inhabit me as much as my trying to represent her thought. Really, the more so letting the habitation take place in me. And before any of that there is listening to how the words move together and in lines and in sentences and in accordance with the poem's formal requirement as imposed or, really, discovered for *From Nothing*. I suppose for all of this, while the desire to be a poet and make a poem is an assertion of self and surely obtains some force of the ego, the poet's work, the maker's work to go back to the etymology of the word, really involves the hope of self-emptying so the poem can come into being as if of its own accord, or from somewhere more significant and abiding than willful desire.

MB: *A striking aspect of your collection is the manner in which you create poems "toward" Simone Weil in the voices of others—e.g., Thibon, Picasso, Stein, her brother, father and mother. Here, the "fiction" of poetic invention takes on another richness, a wider complexity. What does it mean for you to enter into such historical persons and "re-create" them within the horizon of Weil's life and witness?*

DT: The impetus to imagine a way into these people, some central, some peripheral to Weil's life, came first from the demand of *From Nothing* in which I wanted to view Georges Lemaitre's life through the lens of people like Edwin Hubble, Robert Oppenheimer, and the like. In the case of Weil's mother and father, I wanted to understand, to feel, what it would be like to have a child with this intensity of spiritual genius and worldly commitment to her ideas. Not at all easy I would say. Her mother laments that she is not marriageable, and did tell an acquaintance that if they had a daughter to pray she is not a saint. In the case of Thibon, I wanted to try to take on the friend's perspective, to gain a sense of compassion for the extremity of her conviction to the point of turning against her own bodily life—the Manichean streak in her.

There is no evidence I could come across that Stein and Picasso ever encountered Weil, but both lived at least for a time in close proximity to the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris, not far from the Weil apartment on Rue Auguste Comte. What would it be like if they had caught sight of her, and new who she was—really could there be a duo of such significance to the culture and yet more contrary to Weil? The fictional encounter is plausible, and I wanted each to respond to that encounter in a manner commensurate with the tenor of their own lives—both in my view less than exemplary morally and spiritually, if not artistically. Simone de Beauvoir struck me as something of Simone Weil's anti-self, or perhaps Weil is the anti-matter to her materialist twin, whom she encountered at the Sorbonne.

Finally, Andre Weil, one of the great mathematical geniuses of the twentieth century, presents perhaps the biggest problem to his sister because, first, as children they were so close, and, second, because they were divided from each other by the gender roles of the time. "A brother is like a tooth," Simone would say, "a good thing, provided one is not too often forced to know that it exists." Simone Weil, of course, defied those gender roles. I wanted to imagine a way into that complex family dynamic from Andre's point of view. As a whole, these different vantages in *This Broken Symmetry* are meant to enlarge the scope of

the poem's engagement with the life. That life, in relief of the infinite in which it shares, cannot be pinpointed. Simone Weil exemplifies in the most urgent and dramatic terms the inexhaustible aspect of every life.

MB: *This collection is the second of a trilogy, the first volume devoted to Georges Lemaitre. How will the momentum of this volume carry you into the final volume you have planned, one devoted to the life and work of Teilhard de Chardin? In what sense will that volume be in conversation with this one?*

DT: It's been about a decade since I started on what has become the trilogy. *From Nothing* gave structural, thematic and conceptual momentum to *This Broken Symmetry*, and I'm hoping the same will happen for *At the Grave of Teilhard de Chardin*. The overall structural design is a given, but how the sections move from one to the next needs to be discovered along the way. I've been immersing myself in Teilhard's writings, and the work of others, having been drawn to Teilhard since my college days. I had a poem about him in mind for more than twenty years, not knowing how to approach it. There are leitmotifs so to speak connecting *From Nothing* to *This Broken Symmetry*, and I trust the same will be true for the Teilhard poems. *From Nothing* moves along the arrow of time in a linear fashion; *This Broken Symmetry* moves against the arrow of time. I'm not sure yet how these poems will "move," though I suspect in a manner that suggests time as a current within a greater non-temporal reality. But how that works structurally, from section to section, I have no idea as yet. It will need to be discovered in the concentrated effort of composing the piece, appropriately enough, over time. Weil finds more reality in the past; Teilhard in the future, in the *Parousia* of God All-in-All, so that tension needs exploration in dramatic form. For Weil, God is absent; for Teilhard, Mass is celebrated on the altar of the universe. The other larger issue will be the first-person pronoun—not necessarily Teilhard speaking but perhaps a voice closer to the inner voice of the one seeking the answer. The last enemy to be destroyed is death, according to Teilhard's understanding. That's *Alpha* and *Omega* for the reflective consciousness. The challenge will be for the poem to find a way through.

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Daniel Tobin was born in Brooklyn, New York. He is the author of nine books of poems, including *From Nothing*, winner of the Julia Ward Howe Award, *The Stone in the Air*, his suite of versions from the German of Paul Celan, and the newly published *Blood Labors*. He is author of the critical studies *Awake in America*, *Passage to the Center: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, and *On Serious Earth*. Tobin is also editor of *The Book of Irish American Poetry from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*; *Light in Hand: Selected Early Poems of Lola Ridge*; *Poet's Work, Poet's Play: Essays on the Practice and the Art* (with Pimone Triplett); and, *To the Many: Collected Early Poems of Lola Ridge*, which received a Special Commendation from the Poetry Society. His poetry has won the "The Discovery/The Nation Award," The Robert Penn Warren Award, the Robert Frost

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