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"Artful theology": Sara Maitland's *Stations of the Cross*

ALEKSANDRA SŁYSZEWSKA

Abstract

Among a number of modern female writers engaged in religious as well as feminist discourse Sara Maitland seems to occupy a very particular place. She not only presents a coherent and innovative theoretical framework and points at vital correspondences of literature and religion but also creates works that in a unique way connect feminism and Christian theology. Moreover, she is able to find common ground between tradition and postconciliar changes within the Church. All these aspects can be found in *Stations of the Cross*, a collection of stories inspired by paintings by Chris Gollon and intended either to be read as short literary forms or to facilitate religious services.

Keywords

Christian literature, theology, art, feminism

« Théologie artistique »: *Les stations de croix* de Sara Maitland

Résumé

Parmi les auteures contemporaines engagées dans le discours à la fois religieux et féministe, Sara Maitland semble occuper une place très particulière. Non seulement elle présente un cadre théorique cohérent et novateur, mais aussi elle suit ses propres règles et elle

crée des œuvres qui mettent en relation le féminisme et la théologie catholique. De plus, elle est capable de trouver un espace commun pour la théologie et l'église après les changements postconciliaires. Tous ces éléments peuvent être trouvés dans *Les stations de croix* – un recueil des récits inspirés par les tableaux de Chris Gollon, destiné à la lecture simple ou à la contemplation religieuse du Chemin de croix.

Mots-clés

art, féminisme, littérature, chrétienne, théologie,

Artystyczna teologia: *Stacje Krzyża* Sary Maitland

Abstrakt

Wśród współczesnych autorek zajmujących się dyskursem religijnym i feministycznym Sara Maitland zdaje się zajmować szczególne miejsce. Nie tylko nakreśla innowacyjne ramy teoretyczne i wskazuje istotne zależności między literaturą a religią, ale także tworzy prace, które w niezwykły sposób łączą feminizm i teologię chrześcijańską. Co więcej, jest w stanie nakreślić wspólną przestrzeń łączącą tradycję ze zmianami, jakie w kościele przyniósł Sobór Watykański II. Wszystkie te elementy odnaleźć można w *Stacjach krzyża,* zbiorze opowiadań inspirowanych obrazami autorstwa Chrisa Gollona przeznaczonymi do zwykłej lektury lub też w rozważaniach Drogi Krzyżowej.

Słowa kluczowe

literatura chrześcijańska, teologia, sztuka, feminizm

1. Feminist and theologian

For a considerable part of her literary career, Sara Maitland let herself be known as an ardent advocate of feminism and a fervent critic of social and religious patriarchal systems. She refers to herself as a "daughter of feminism" (1995: 2) but unlike

many other feminist authors, she does not reject the Church altogether as an institution run primarily by men; instead she struggles to reconcile the goals of feminism with Christian tradition. Her attempts to raise consciousness of gender inequality and redefine the place of women in the history, tradition and culture of the western world are presented, alongside her engagement in religious issues, in works of fiction (among them *Daughter of Jerusalem*, for which Maitland won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1979) as well as non-fiction. Among the latter, a prominent place is occupied by *A Map of the New Country: Women and Christianity*, published in 1983. Her efforts to reconcile feminism and Christianity are part of a large literary movement "calling for a dramatic change" as to the position of women in the Church (DelRosso 2005: 173). In her works Maitland refers to a number of other writers who raise similar issues, among them J. Danielon SJ (*The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* 1969), Ruether and McLaughlin (*Women of Spirit* 1979), Clark and Richardson (*Women and Religion* 1977). The seemingly contradictory status of women, as Jeana DelRosso (2005: 2) states, is also manifested in contemporary fiction, for instance in works by Mary Gordon (*Final Payments*) or Mary McCarthy (*Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*).

One work by Maitland which deserves particular recognition and which distinguishes her from many other literary critics is *A Book of Silence* (2008), devoted entirely to her experience of voluntary seclusion and deep appreciation of silence. This is also a work that brought about substantial changes in Maitland's writing and inspired her transition from second-wave feminism to a more specialized engagement with theology. This new direction seems equally demanding. Religious writing remains on the margin of literary studies, especially in culture that is often described as thoroughly secular and dismissive toward religion in general (Labrie 1997: 277).

Maitland's next book, *Stations of the Cross*, is clear evidence of the changes in her writing and it seems to encompass her new premises: Maitland employs her feminist approach in or-

der to present a new point of view and redefine well-known elements of traditional devotion connected with Christ's Passion. By doing this, she allows new voices to emerge from silence and enter into dialogue with Christian tradition. In this way she establishes a unique connection between literature and theology and uses both to retell, in fourteen short stories, a well-known narrative of Christ's sacrifice and death presented traditionally in the form of stations - images focusing on the *via dolorosa*, to be followed and contemplated by the faithful.

2. Between art and modern literature

Stations can be seen in terms of a dialogue for a number of reasons. First of all, they present the mutual influence of theology and literature, where each transforms and enriches the other. Secondly, they result from a collaboration between literature and visual arts, as the stories were originally designed as comments to paintings by Chris Gollon commissioned by the Rector of St John's Church, Bethnal Green (London's East End). Maitland in the introduction to *Stations* attempts to define her attitude towards Gollon's work in terms of "the process of engaging with [his] images"; she also states that her stories "are all responses to his pictures, as well as to the primary narratives his pictures illustrate" (2009: 7). Her responses, however, do not fully correspond to Gollon's vision and some discrepancies can be observed. There are, for example, substantial differences in the presentation of the crucifixion. Maitland turns to more rigorous physical realism (which may be caused by differences between the nature of written and visual forms): "I'm not criticising Gollon's choice here, but I found I made a different one" (2009: 7). Although Gollon's images are a starting point to her own work, she does not hesitate to exercise freedom of choice.

Another conscious decision regarding the collection was to structure it according to the standard traditional sequence of stations referring to the biblical Passion of Christ. Although

the aim of the stations was to depict and evoke real events, they include elements which have no support in Scripture; there is no scriptural basis, for instance, for Christ's three falls, the meeting with his mother or the scene of Veronica wiping his face. A number of other versions of the stations exist, including the new version accepted by the Pope in 2006 consisting solely of scenes supported by Biblical authority (Maitland 2009: 3). Following new trends strictly connected with the biblical narrative was, however, of little interest to either Gollon or Maitland. Significantly, in the collection there is no fifteenth Station; the text is silent about Christ's resurrection. Maitland refers to all these choices and admits that in her work she and Gollon follow the "dark and painful traditional pattern" (2009: 4), offering recipients "a way in to an older theology of the Incarnation" (2009: 1).

Finally, the dialogical character of the project demanded cooperation on the part of representatives of various religious standpoints: an agnostic (Gollon) as well as a religiously involved Roman Catholic (Maitland converted in 1993) and an Anglican parish in London. Individual members of the congregation, of different race and social class, were also invited to participate, as at the end of each story Maitland places their short personal comments concerning a given painting. The comments are sincere and not always favourable: "I don't like them" (88); "I don't understand this very well" (40), and yet the paintings and their reception are evidently of major importance to Maitland, as in her introduction she expresses her hope that the stories and paintings will "set free all our imaginations so that we can engage with this rich and complex tradition" (8). It seems that the project succeeds in this regard, as the viewers comment: "I hadn't noticed that before" (65), "I like to look at this and try and understand" (40). At least for some of them, and hopefully for some of the readers, the dialogical form of the book contributes to better understanding of the stories, paintings and tradition behind them.

3. A big-enough theology

Maitland turns to Christian tradition and makes it central to her work in her other books as well; in 1995 she published *A Big Enough God: Artful Theology*, much more theoretical than *Stations* and yet based on similar premises. In the book Maitland defines theology as the art of telling stories about the divine, *as well as* the art of listening to those stories (1995:4). Employing the figures of storyteller and listener, Maitland once more refers to the reciprocal communicative process which she finds necessary for both literature and religion. Also, already at this point, years before her retreat to an isolated Scottish moor and publication of *A Book of Silence*, she is clearly occupied with the notion of silence, as she believes it is inherent in any act of communication and, what follows, understanding. Later on she refers to this line of thought in *Stations* where she introduces the notion of "a listening silence" that "creates the space for someone to speak into" (2008: 86). It is vital, she argues, that this type of silence, and readiness to listen, should characterise both literature and theology.

However, Maitland is painfully aware that this aspect is notoriously neglected and that throughout centuries of development, art and theology have become and still remain separated. What she calls "the struggle between the priests and the poets" is very ancient and reaches as far as Plato's banning of the lying poets from his utopian Republic (1995: 121). The ongoing conflict between religion and cultural production is, according to Maitland, a serious mistake; in *Artful Theology* she draws attention to the fact that the earliest known human artistic creations (like Neolithic paintings in caves) were something more than just depictions of life, or rather that the impulse for such representations was deeply religious (1995: 121). Originally then, art and religion used to be inseparable and were different forms of participation in the divine. With time, as Maitland claims, this strong connection weakened and in modern times "theology increasingly withdrew into the inte-

rior of life and spiritual private moralism" and is nothing more than "ethics tinged with emotion" (1995: 26-27).

Such a pitiable state of affairs, as Maitland suggests, is a result of the dominant male discourse and limitations in points of view accepted and incorporated in the Grand Narrative of salvation. In her *Lent meditation* aired by BBC Radio 4 in 1993 she strongly criticises the prevailing discourse and at the same time offers a possible solution: "The universalist claims of the patriarchs have damaged the world. I want to hear the experiences of other people, from other places and times, and accept the voices of their visions" (bbc.co.uk). In her theoretical works she continuously reminds us of the necessity to connect literature and theology and advocates that this can be achieved only by opening to new points of view, new experiences, new narratives. As an artist she is well aware that in practice such ambitious aims are difficult to achieve, as in 1995 she admits: "I have not yet written the fiction that says what I want to say in this context: it is much harder to write that sort of fiction than it is to write 'proper' theology" (1995: 110). However, it seems that with the publication of *Stations* she takes a serious step in this direction; in the stories she refers to the traditional narrative of Christ's suffering and death and develops it, adding new points of view and discovering new aspects of well known events.

4. Pluralism of voices

All this is possible primarily thanks to narrative technique (first person narration governs the majority of stories) as well as careful and creative choice of narrators: the captain of a battalion, Mary Mother of Jesus, Simon of Cyrene, Veronica, the women of Jerusalem, the "hammerman", John and Mary Magdalene are witnesses to Christ's sacrifice and tell his as well as their own stories. The narration is strongly subjective; personal remarks often occur and the point of view is limited,

as it is in the case of the battalion captain who is in charge of scourging Jesus (Station 1: "Jesus is condemned to death"):

> Back in barracks earlier, someone told me that the officer in charge of the crucifixion said afterwards that he thought the man was innocent; that he thought he was holy - "a Son of God", they say he said. But that doesn't feel right to me. He wasn't a god, not at all; he was just more human than anyone I have ever had to deal with before and I could not cope with it (2008: 17).

The captain's testimony, although subjective, nevertheless introduces a crucial aspect of the story: it reminds us that Jesus in his suffering was painfully human and experienced the scourging, the bearing of the cross and the crucifixion very physically, like any other human being (or even more painfully, as "he was more human"). Thus the story evokes an important dimension of the original narrative which, when interpreted, tends to focus on the glory of the Resurrection rather than on ugliness, suffering and loneliness.

The captain's narration is obviously not part of the biblical narrative. But even those narrators who are originally mentioned in the Bible develop their stories in a way that changes and enriches our understanding of the story. Station 8: "Jesus meets the Women of Jerusalem", told from the collective point of view, is a case in point. In Maitland's story the women repeatedly refer to themselves as "nobodies" and "the crowd". Only after they meet Jesus, are reprimanded by him on his way to Golgotha and given a proper collective name (Daughters of Jerusalem) do they become aware that they are not just "fragments of the crowd" but "friends" who can share common experience and thus become a true community: "he had called us into friendship with each other" (71); "We were nobodies, and now we are the Daughters of Jerusalem. A name gives you dignity and he gave us a name" (72). A great change occurs in the way they perceive themselves and their purpose, a change in who they are. This vital aspect, an integral part of the traditional narrative, is highlighted by Maitland and employed in

order not only to enrich the story but also, it seems, to indicate possible similarities with the situation of modern women and their choices: "We were busy with our lives, as women always are. But we need to talk, we need to understand and hold on to what we had been given" (71). Here her feminist views seem to be voiced and incorporated into a traditional religious message.

The narratives, although they broaden our perspective and introduce voices silent in Scripture, are by no means complete nor definite themselves. The Daughters of Jerusalem, for instance, openly and honestly admit: "The way we have described it is not quite how it was. It was all too strange, and hurried, and confusing. We do not all even agree about what exactly he said" (72). A similar inability to convey the full story is also part of Simon's narration: "I'm not really a man for telling stories, so you'll have to bear with me. I'll probably tell this all wrong" (43). Their deficiency as narrators is no hindrance to them in telling their stories, however faulty they might be. This determination to share experience is what Maitland values most, as each element contributes to the understanding of the whole.

What is more, there is a clear indication that the stories may be developed further, that each of them may in fact be a starting point to a different story, not strictly connected to the Passion of Christ, but nevertheless important if one wants to understand the stories and motivations of individual narrators. Such continuity is signalled by Simon of Cyrene:

> So, to cut a long story short we – and that means me and my two sons, Rufus and Alexander (and don't tell me these aren't Jewish names, that's a long story and I'm not telling it now) – we got up in the morning, and when we got to Jerusalem the whole city was in turmoil (43).

In fact, Simon's narration focuses mainly on his children ("That's how I got to know them" 49) and the influence that his wife's death has on his family. The meeting with Christ is just

a short incident: "it doesn't really have anything to do with the story" (47). It only causes anxiety and forces him to leave the boys under the protection of a woman he does not know, and yet he senses that the events in Jerusalem have changed him; the fact that he can openly confide in Jesus when they carry his cross is an unusual and fruitful experience: "it didn't feel weird; it felt great"; "I suddenly surprise myself. I hear me singing. I haven't sung since she [his wife] died; I've helped a man to his death, and now I am singing. Strange day" (48). The story when read separately presents a day in the life of a man who is struggling to cope with grief, to understand his sons and establish a good relationship with them; its place within the collection develops this message and transforms it into a tale of suffering, trust and love. In this way Maitland seems to indicate that the influence is reciprocal: the individual stories enrich the story of the Passion to the same extent that they themselves are enriched by it.

Maitland in structuring her narration goes one step further and decides to include a particularly disturbing voice which has no biblical basis and is not part of traditional devotion: "there is Satan, close and grinning" (28). Satan's position within the collection is not that of a narrator, but he appears in three stories concerned with the falls and makes continuous attempts to prevent Christ from fulfilling his promise of sacrifice: "Of course, if you had turned the stones into bread as I suggested, you wouldn't be here, and they wouldn't be hurting your poor knee. But, you know, you can still get out of this if you want" (29). His voice is tempting, more and more convincing as they approach Golgotha, and finally it seems that "Satan is closer to him [Christ] than everyone else will ever be" (80). Each conversation with Christ and every attempt to influence the events ends in a fall, of which the third one, just before they reach their destination, seems to have the most destructive effect: "[Christ] wants it to end. He wants to go to sleep and never wake up. God is not here. Satan is here. There is no God" (80). And yet, in spite of all the pain, humiliation

and loneliness, Jesus manages to take his cross a few yards further and reach Calvary. The serpent disappears and never speaks in the story again.

5. Conspicuous silence

The voices presented in *Stations*, although highly subjective and not always a part of traditional devotion, are all meaningful and together constitute a coherent story connected by the figure of Christ. It seems unusual, then, that Christ himself is never allowed to speak directly; he does not narrate any of the stories and his thoughts and words are only reported by others. Even the stations concerned solely with him (like the three falls) are told in third-person narration. This conspicuous silence indicates that he is not, after all, the focus of the events around him, as he seems to be "miles away" (94); in his silent moments he repeatedly turns to Jerusalem and contemplates the beauty of the city, whose architecture is a source of awe and consolation to him. At times he also recollects various moments from his childhood. On the other hand, however, when other characters cross his way, he speaks to them and with just a few words he is able to change their lives. It seems that, although he suffers in silence, whenever needed he can overcome pain and address consoling words to people who need him. By Christ's silence Maitland seems not only to convey his vulnerability, his pain and loneliness, but also to draw attention not to what is done to him but rather to what he does to other people, as each of them leaves transformed.

Christ's deep appreciation of silence seems to have much in common with Maitland's own experiences; in one of the stories he is even described as "a free citizen of silent places" which he "seeks out whenever he can, and wishes that that happened more often" (87). Also, at a certain point in the collection he ponders on various types of silence which correspond to the ideas included in *A Book of Silence*: the tender, intimate silence of the mother and the child after the night feed, the huge

fierce silence of the clifftop, the mountain height, the lightning bolt, the storms on the lake; an attentive listening silence, which opens the heart as well as the mind to the speaker; the silence of protest, the silence of companionship, the ineffable silence in the presence of God, the silence of death (85-87). The latter is perhaps closest to him, as all those considerations are included in Station 10: "Jesus is stripped of his clothing", which is the last story that presents his thoughts before his death.

Station 10 is also a moment of most serious doubts and, although no direct conversation with Satan seems to take place, his influence together with excruciating pain, humiliation and utter loneliness cause a desperate reaction; it is at this point that Christ is forced to deal with silence which he does not want and surely did not ask for:

> But now the silence is terrible. There is nothing.
> Perhaps God is silence. Perhaps there is no God.
> "Abba, Father, " he cries out silently, but there is no answer.
> He is stripped to the bone. There is nothing left.
> No words.
> No memories.
> No desires.
> No fears.
> No God.
> They have taken everything away.
> There is silence.
>
> The silence of God is a very terrible thing. (87-88)

The suffering and humiliation are so great that Christ desperately seeks for God's attention and signs of his support; God seems not to answer his call, he does not provide consolation. By creating this moving scene, Maitland seems to suggest that, in our human understanding (as the words are not directly his own but they are mediated and conveyed by someone else), Christ is ready to accept the most painful sacrifice for the sake of humanity, but he feels devastated and powerless at the per-

spective of being abandoned by God. Also, when facing death he seems to be the most human and in this final moment there is little of God in him. What motivates him and helps him endure the pain, humiliation and the feeling of abandonment are the people he meets on his way: people he recognises like Veronica, people who talk to him and tell him the stories of their lives like Simon, and even people who never turn to him directly (like the dog-loving soldier in Station 10) but whose small and seemingly insignificant acts of kindness towards other living beings remind him of the true meaning of his sacrifice.

Maitland consciously manifests Christ's humanity in her collection; by evoking very specific people, memories and places, her stations seem to emphasise "the scandal of particularity": the fact that Jesus became "human" not in some abstract terms but bound, as all human beings are, into a very particular set of circumstances - and those circumstances are depicted with the use of highly subjective but often precise narration. As she states (1995:5) in *A Big-Enough God,* the fact of the incarnation holds up difference and specificity as desirable and invites new elements to be incorporated into the traditional story. Additionally, in the project the figure of Christ becomes even more human and convincing when one realises that Gollon's model was his own son (in fact, Gollon admits that painting the face of his son in Station 12: "Jesus dies on the Cross" was the most difficult thing he had to do).

6. Conclusion

What Maitland aims at and successfully achieves in her collection is dialogue between Scripture (as the source of the story), Christian tradition (celebrated by the choice of the traditional 14 stations) and artistic vision (both her own and Gollon's interpretation). Incidentally, these three notions correspond to three sources of revelation accepted by the Catholic Church; it follows that dialogue is not the goal in itself but only a means

to facilitate our understanding of theological truths and an encouragement to pursue new ways of looking at them. *Stations of the Cross* seem to be an attempt to create fiction that engages in dialogue with Christian theology, enables new voices to emerge from silence and allows them to contribute to better understanding of the narrative concerned with the mystery of Christ's sacrifice. In her attempt to "embrace the posture of Catholicism" and desire to learn from different religious perspectives, Maitland follows features underscored on the one hand by the feminist movement and on the other, due to the ecumenical dimension of her work, by the Second Vatican Council (Weaver 1995: 46).

Christ – a silent listener in the stories – although he is at the centre of events, by his silence creates a space for new narratives and new points of view. The story of his suffering and death becomes not only his own but also, maybe most of all, the story of people whose life is transformed by him. Maitland, allowing and encouraging this "pluralism of voices" (Weaver 1995: 39), does not introduce entirely new elements to traditional devotion, but interrogates it, rediscovering already existing stories and presenting them in a new light. In *A Big Enough God* she voices her strong belief in and sense of the need for "more artful theology" (146). *Stations of the Cross*, with their original and creative treatment of devotion, seems to be the first step in this direction.

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Aleksandra Słyszewska
Filologiczne Studium Doktoranckie
Uniwersytet Gdański
ul. Wita Stwosza 51
80-308 Gdańsk
Poland
Email: olaslyszewska@gmail.com