

## **The Poetics of Peace: Non-violent storytelling as ephemeral resistance**

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In 2010 I was commissioned by two anti-war organisations, the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Pax Christi, to create a piece of theatre about women activists. One of those women was Muriel Lester.

Muriel was from a wealthy, middle class family of English Baptists, and went on to become a founder member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a faith-based anti-war organisation founded in 1914 in the early days of the First World War. She later became a travelling secretary for its international branch in which capacity she travelled the world meeting both the powerful and those fighting for peace and justice in volatile situations. She interpreted these conflicts and struggles for a wide audience through talks, books and articles. She was also a lifelong champion of social reform and, with her sister Doris, spearheaded the creation of Kingsley Hall, a radical community centre and church in Bow which played host to Gandhi in 1931. She was inclined towards the ascetic in her personal practices, mystical in her approach to faith, and progressive in many matters of social policy (though not so much when it came to sex). Despite all this work, she managed to stay acutely aware of her privilege and considered herself ‘very lucky to have been born with the knack of enjoying things’<sup>1</sup>. She enjoyed a great many things, including parties, walks, jokes and games. Nevertheless, many around her found her serious and intimidating. Her story provides a view of twentieth century history that is transformed by a determined hope, often focused on unheard voices, and which challenges many of the narratives we have come to associate with accounts, particularly fictional accounts, of the period. She was idealistic, complex, unflinching, and yet ultimately likeable. The more I

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<sup>1</sup> Muriel Lester, *It Occurred to Me* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1937), p.64

read of Muriel's writings, the more I was compelled and challenged by the contradictions and edges in the story of her life.

After working on the performance, I set out to write Muriel Lester and her activism into a novel, in the hope that such a novel might also be able to provoke change in its own right. As I did so, I found that her activism made its own demands on the form and style of the novel. The more I understood and tried to emulate this activism, the more insistently it cast itself into doubt, until what began as a novel about Muriel Lester became a novel about the possibility of activism, and an exercise in activism in the spirit of Muriel Lester. Even at the distance of almost a century, Muriel surprised me; she transformed my work, my creative practice, and my own approach to activism.

I have written and spoken elsewhere in detail about the process of this transformation and the 'poetics' that emerged from this fictional experimentation, but what I want to focus on in this presentation is a particular kind of powerful ephemerality that I discovered in Muriel's work and ideas. This ephemerality significantly influenced the writing I created about her, and, I propose, captures something essential about the nature of storytelling and its potential as a mode of resistance.

In one of her books Muriel described the core tenets of her practice as follows (slide): 'Our business is to stop war, to purify the world, to get it saved from poverty and riches, to heal the sick, to comfort the sad, to wake up those who have not yet found God, to create joy and beauty wherever you go, to find God in everything and everyone.'<sup>2</sup> This description makes plain the essential aspects of her philosophy; opposition to war ('stop war'), speaking out for justice ('purify the world'), working for social justice ('get it saved from poverty and riches, to heal the sick, to comfort the sad'), the spiritual and personal roots of peace ('wake up those who have not yet found God'), the artistic element of activism ('to create joy and beauty wherever you go'), and universal brotherhood ('to find God in everything and everyone').

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<sup>2</sup> Muriel Lester, *Training* (London: Independent Press Ltd., 1942), p.3.

What is so essential in this description is the way in which very different elements sit alongside one another; you have the acutely practical 'get it saved from poverty and riches, to heal the sick, to comfort the sad', alongside questions of ideology 'purify the world', 'wake up those who have not yet found God', and, what we might identify as the ***ephemeral, 'to create joy and beauty wherever you go'.***

For Muriel, then, the activist herself was the change, and all else flowed from this. In moving through the world, acting on these multiple levels, the activist became a kind of incarnation in the life of the world of the ideas she upheld. Following her faith, Muriel saw the ultimate example of this approach in the life of Jesus, who, in the Christian tradition, is considered an 'incarnation' of God on earth. In gospel accounts Jesus both performs specific acts of social justice, and also points beyond himself, through his life, through his day to day actions and choices (transgression of norms, telling of stories), to greater truths about the nature of God and life. It is this presence and action, rather than statements of belief or purity customs, which characterise the 'incarnate' activist in Muriel's philosophy.

'Christianity is a materialist religion, claiming as it does that the Incarnation is the key to our existence and purpose'<sup>3</sup> (Cannon L John Collins); Muriel's philosophy was similarly materialist, manifest in the interplay between the world of ideas and the physical world. Thoreau went even further, writing that as a person 'advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavours to live the life which he has imagined . . . new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him'<sup>4</sup>. This is the power of the incarnate activist; impressing into being new paths of thought, and even new realities, just as the feet impress paths into the earth.

As a part of this incarnate activism, Muriel saw that there was power in creativity, that art and activism were connected. She wrote that (slide) 'ours is to keep sensitive enough to be in contact with God daily, to practice life as an art.'<sup>5</sup> For Muriel there was no space between

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<sup>3</sup> Cannon L John Collins, *Faith Under Fire* (London: Leslie Frewin, 1966), p129

<sup>4</sup> Henry David Thoreau, 'Walden', in *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. by John Seelye (New York: Penguin, 1984), p.372

<sup>5</sup> Muriel Lester, *Training*, p.10

the personal and the political; there was no difference between the dance and the protest. She saw her life as a kind of art, a kind of storytelling of possibility, with every day a chance to deepen and expand the narrative, and the story she was writing with her life was itself the means by which she would change the world. She was determined to enact her convictions in her life, rather than merely stating her beliefs, in both ordinary interactions and, in those more charged with political context. Consider, for example, the following interaction.

On the 19th August 1941 she was taken from a boat in Trinidad and interred by the British Government in a camp outside the capital, Port of Spain. She was accused, as she put it, of ‘an offence against Colonial Regulation X.Y.Z.’<sup>6</sup>. The government offered several of her alleged statements as proof that ‘Miss Lester’s activities abroad are more likely to hinder than advance Great Britain’s war effort’<sup>7</sup>. Although she was released in November 1941, after much lobbying by friends, family, IFOR and a range of public figures, on the condition that she return to Britain, her account of this period illustrates her approach. After sailing back to the UK she was detained a second time in Glasgow, and was to end up in Holloway prison for several days. The following exchange between Muriel and an immigration officer is typical, coming towards the end of a longer conversation (slide):

‘He looked at me rather searchingly, "Don’t you resent my detaining you?" he asked.

I considered a little. "I don’t think I do. Evidently you think you’ve got to do it. So I suppose you must."

He swung round on me menacingly again. "Does that mean that you don’t blame Hitler for doing things *he* thinks right?"<sup>8</sup>

Even if we take into account that this exchange is self-reported, we can learn a lot from the scene. First, that Muriel makes no attempt to convert him to her ideas or position (as far as we know). Secondly that she recognizes this space, in which she would be quite

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<sup>6</sup> Muriel Lester, *It So Happened* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1947), p.180

<sup>7</sup> Jill Wallis, *Mother of World Peace; The life of Muriel Lester* (Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1993), p 201

<sup>8</sup> Lester, *It So Happened*, p195

justified in focusing on her frustration, or concerns about shaming her family, (which we know she felt, as she reports on this elsewhere), as an opportunity to embody a different story, and chooses to retell it as such. *(Perhaps she chooses to tell this story in her autobiography to highlight the contradictions inherent (and seen in this man's attitude) in trying to separate personal and political. Perhaps she wants to draw a comparison with her experience in Trinidad, or perhaps she wants to respect or sympathise with this man's perspective and represent it –)* we can't be sure why she shares this story, because she doesn't feel the need to explain its inclusion, but we can be certain it is an attempt on her part to make her ideas incarnate. The story is there for us to do with as we wish, and in this way embraces its own ephemerality.

It is also, thirdly, a demonstration of her commitment to truth – by way of Gandhi's 'vow of truth' – to see and hear all sides of the story. To be open, at all times, to the experience and view of the other (and I'll return to this later). Here, she is acknowledging that the position of her antagonist has its own internal logic and integrity, even whilst she might also see a broader lack of logic that we are invited to observe in the man comparing himself to Hitler while accusing her of harbouring German sympathies. She does not descend to stereotypes, slander, or speculation on the man's character. In fact, I would argue, she works hard to avoid this.

The story also shows that her choices had impact. The man looks at her 'searchingly' and then 'menacingly'. He is perhaps confused, annoyed, suspicious, perhaps feeling somewhat ashamed – but in this account it's clear that her presence and approach is creating tangible impact, is fostering meaning, connection, albeit in a fleeting moment.

Finally, the way she tells this story is FUNNY - it's part of a longer exchange in which the same officer tries to suggest she is a German speaker based on the word 'zeitgeist' appearing in her diary. It is a strikingly affectionate humour, given the situation she was in. Muriel's keen eye for these details, for humour, for contradiction, for pathos, show the value she places on the ephemeral as a tool for resistance. Her writing and speeches are often funny. Even in moments that can be seen as dark or scary, she is determined to

transgress the narratives which seek to bind her to the status quo. For Muriel, activism is a process of double incarnation: first in life, and then in the way that life is retold.

Eric Auerbach considered the Judeo-Christian scriptures, by way of incarnation, to be a foundational model for the concept of realism in fiction, and perhaps even for fiction itself, identifying that these books are essentially ‘a history of personality’<sup>9</sup>, showing highly flawed characters, often acting in ways that are complex and changeable, sometimes inspiring and sometimes repulsive, sometimes raging against misfortune and humiliation, sometimes filled with hope, but seldom offering a clear role model or interpretation. The characters of the Old and New Testament, including Jesus himself, are, Auerbach thought, dynamic, open to change, and ‘fraught with background’<sup>10</sup>.

So if activism is incarnation, if activism is to be found in the activist’s performance of their very life and in the ways in which we retell that performance, and if incarnation is the very business of story – the making concrete of ideas and feelings and impulses - then activism is also story. And story is activism. But only, I would argue, when both embody the full ephemerality of incarnation as conceived by Muriel.

Continuing our examination of incarnation in scripture; tethering incarnation to realism in the way Auerbach does risks a sort of ‘fundamentalist’ reading of story. John Caputo describes this mode as the traditional theo-logos of theology on the one hand, and advocates for a more ephemeral approach, what he terms ‘theo-poetics’. Caputo asserts that theo-logos, and traditional criticism, seeks to place an authoritative reading onto a text, supplanting any and all former readings, to claim ultimate truth. Whereas, Caputo’s idea of ‘theo-poetics’ ‘admits of . . . endless reading and rereading’<sup>11</sup> of scripture. In Caputo’s view reading incarnation is a dynamic relationship, not a passive mode of reception. Such an approach leaves room for the subjectivity of multiple interpretations which nevertheless may coexist. In fact, Caputo’s approach likens scriptural story to language itself, and invites creative translation. This approach to incarnation, and indeed

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<sup>9</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans by Willard R Trask (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974), p.18

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.12

<sup>11</sup> John D Caputo, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), p100

narrative and language, invites us to tell and retell, to interpret and reinterpret, to render and re-render, to always keep open and on the move.

Muriel understood the value of this more ephemeral approach too, advising(slide): ‘Patiently seek the truth. Certainly one of your most cherished convictions may be threatened if this new line of thought is true, but why have you been cherishing this conviction? This new idea may lead to something nobler; it looks promising.’<sup>12</sup> Her work, and her life, were engaged in constantly casting themselves into question. Not for lack of ambition, or lack of conviction, but precisely out of ‘a passionate desire to save my victim from the consequences of my anger.’<sup>13</sup> She reminds us that ‘it is far easier to love enemies whom we have never seen, who live hundreds of miles away, than our next-door neighbour, whose dog or wireless irritates us.’<sup>14</sup> (tricky for us)

So for our stories to be ‘non-violent’ in the spirit of Muriel, to be activist in the spirit of Muriel, they must cast themselves into question. By this I don’t mean that our stories should prevaricate – certainly not. They should exalt in the beauty and pain, the joy and magic and deviance, the fear and love and loss of the world – but also in the truth, or multiple truths, as Muriel saw it. Perhaps our human relationship to stories has always been a search for truth, unavoidably bound to our moment and context. For a story to move us, just like the activist, it must remain open, always, to the new, the other, the real.

This, I think, is the power of the archetypal story; the traditional story, the foundational story, the fairy or folk story (or should be, in a world where such stories are not co-opted by Disney and frozen in time, posed, unnaturally, like taxidermy animals). Marina Warner argues that fairytales are the closest thing we have to a cultural Esperanto<sup>15</sup> – across cultures and spaces these stories have travelled and entwined themselves with our lives. There is something about how such stories work, ‘by dealing in archetypes and bass note

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<sup>12</sup> Muriel Lester, *Ways of Praying* (London: Independent Press, July 1948, first published 1931), p.63

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.62

<sup>14</sup> Muriel Lester, *Training* (London: Independent Press, 1942), p.8

<sup>15</sup> Katherine Rundell, *Why You Should Read Children’s Books Even Though You Are So Old and Wise* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p.23

human desires, and in metaphors with bite'<sup>16</sup> that has the power and potential to bind together people from a vast array of places and perspectives, to 'yoke together people of every age and background, luring us all, witch-like, into the same imaginative space'<sup>17</sup>. Yet what is most powerful about these stories is that they proliferate, and twist, and adapt; they are open to being told, re told, adapted, cracked open, undone, re made, challenged and even disguised. They will not break, but they cannot be held. 'These stories have always changed: it would be strange to want to keep them in stasis.'<sup>18</sup> There is a direct line from Homer to the Booker Prize – we are creatures of story, gathered around our campfires for a moment of wonder and imagination, and we change the world through stories.

So, the activist writes a new story with their life, as the writer crafts a story on the page, and both write into possibility a new and different world; 'when we write we feel the earth move . . . it is not frozen . . . there is no status quo.'<sup>19</sup> Our stories, on the page, in our words, or on the street, are ephemeral. They may be unseen, unreported, undocumented; the writer will always eventually be unread. I would argue that our stories *must* be ephemeral. They *must* be replaced and replaceable; they must be the opposite of the kind of power which fixes and oppresses. It is only in the very possibility of retelling that we glimpse the possibility of that other world; it is in their ephemerality that their power of resistance lies.

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p.25

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.25

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.33

<sup>19</sup> David Grossman, 'PEN Freedom to Write Lecture (April 29th 2007)', c-span.org, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?198061-1/freedom-write-lecture> [accessed 20th November 2015].