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Book Review

Catherine Michael Chin, *Life: The Natural History of an Early Christian Universe* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2024), 258 pp., $29.95 (pbk), ISBN: 9780520400689.

Life is not what it seems. To understand the book, it is best to read the conclusion first. While this may violate the author's intent, it will do much to give the book a generous read as the artistic experiment it is. *Life* is not aiming to accurately describe in propositional terms the world of late antique Christianity. As Chin says, 'this book was also written as a question about bodily sensation. What did it feel like, I asked, to live in an early Christian universe' (p. 134)?

To accomplish this task, the author aims to turn reading into a somatic process, to make the book itself a bit of theatre (although not as a narrative). Instead, the book acts like something of a focus on the scenery and objects involved in the world of late antiquity, with the notion that there is a kind of knowledge communicated through objects and the process of making. Thus, to understand and potentially appreciate this book, one must evaluate whether it has been successful as an experiment, and analyse it as an experiment in a way of knowing as experiencing, rather than simply through the presentation of facts or through biographical narrative.

This book, taken in the order presented, begins by introducing the Origenist Controversy and the figure of Rufinus of Aquileia, who remains its central figure. The book then proceeds through a few chapters that focus on the objects of the world of Rufinus: mainly papyrus, stone, silver, and to the larger environment. Each of the chapters explores the world through these and other objects that each have a kind of life or relation to life in themselves. Chin desires to explore the echoes of the past through objects that have durations beyond that of human life, so that the past may in some sense be experienced in ways other than through rational knowing. If one reads the conclusion first, this all becomes clear, and, to some extent, is an interesting take on representation of history.

Insofar as the book aims to highlight the interconnection of the world and the physical, embodied way that humans have knowledge is a point appreciated by this ecotheologian. But the main downfall of *Life* seems to be the mistake of a theatrical or performative generation that aims to know the world recreationally, through re-creating experiences.

While I am highly amenable to a conversation about embodied knowledge through making, as I myself have engaged professionally in fabricating bicycle frames out of various materials, each of which has very different qualities, processes, and potentialities, it seems that Chin waxes overly lyrical about this kind

of knowledge. Somatic or kinaesthetic knowing is never isolated from social convention. While there may be a nostalgic renaissance of 'makers' and craftsmanship thanks to YouTube, the transmission of epistemic knowledge through virtual means itself enables a kinaesthetic knowledge removed from the social framework of guilds and apprenticeships. Thus, even our kinaesthetic knowledge is consumeristic, recreational, theatrical, even. And the situation of kinaesthetic knowledge within this larger social framework means that we can never feel the past, we can only simulate it or attempt to appropriate it recreationally. So Chin states:

> If I make a miniature sacred grove illuminated inside a toy theatre, it is to find out what somatic effects the experiences of interiority, wildness, tree reaching, darkness, impossibility of entrance, and the coexistence of many scales of being have on me. (p. 143)

While it is impossible to question Chin's experience through this process, I would suggest that the social framework within which such a miniature sacred grove is a plausible and meaningful activity vastly overshadows and directs any kind of somatic knowledge. The very notion of 'wildness' to a modern urbanite is vastly different to that of someone in late antiquity entering a forest filled with wolves, bandits, and the ever-present potentiality of disease and death. Modern wildness is simulated, recreational, and it is disingenuous to suggest that playing with a toy theatre conveys the visceral fear that by its overcoming produces true somatic courage in an encounter with life-threatening wildness with no safety net. I'd go so far as to argue that the very security of modern society renders impossible somatic understandings of the past. This is why so much modern ecology is recreational and performative—it doesn't seek to inhabit the world it aims to preserve. Like theatre, the removal of risk and consequence involves a fundamental transformation of experience. It is this very security in state structures that transforms religion into recreation, the temple into the theatre.[1]

Chin will respond:

> The falseness must help us do the work of sharing. By *false* I do not mean *deceitful*. I do mean *theatrical*. The theatrical is, of course, the harnessing of obvious artifice and of the false in the service of making visible what is true. (p. 146)

But the social convention of the theatre itself represents an attempt to colonise the past, to re-present the old myths as somehow not about real gods, but about human feelings, about politics, or whatever. Theatre is the simulation of religion, the

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[1] See Seaford, Cosmology and the Polis [2012] for more on the relationship of theatre to religion).

appropriation of old beliefs to lend credence to modern desire. The theatre doesn't reveal, the theatre reinterprets, and reappropriates history, colonizing it, using ancestors to tell one's own story.

Thus, this book ironically feels polemical. The focus on 'life' as something almost undefinable, applied to all manner of objects, ends up in the same place that 'being' does for someone like Heidegger. And like Heidegger, it feels like a secularising work that reappropriates the world of Rufinus, paying scant attention to the ideas he devoted his life to, in order to re-present a theatrical world of universal truth through sharing in presentation and experiences of objects. As a nominalist who finds metaphysics and talk of 'life' or other universal categories as equivocations and arbitrary, the connections presented as truth are the product of *nous*, of mind (a concept strikingly absent from this book), and to pretend otherwise is to conceal an authorial intent that makes claims about truth into disingenuous power-plays.

This book, though a unique, creative, worthy, and well-researched experiment, did less to communicate the world of Rufinus to me than reading primary sources has. *Life* communicated the theatrical world and mind of Chin. I cannot author another reader's response.

References

Seaford, Richard. 2012. *Cosmology and the Polis: The Social Construction of Space and Time in the Tragedies of Aeschylus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Gregory Wagenfuhr
School of Ministry
Flourish Institute of Theology
greg.wagenfuhr@gmail.com