

The Function of Form, Fiction, and Faith in Elisabeth Elliot's Life Writing

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the role of form, fiction, and faith in the formulation of the self in the life writing of U.S.-American writer and missionary Elisabeth Elliot. Her novel *No Graven Image* (1966) depicts the experiences of an unmarried female missionary who encounters personal and professional difficulties in Ecuador. Parallels between the novel's content and Elliot's past experiences as recorded in her journals and her memoir *These Strange Ashes* (1975) raise the question whether the fictional genre can fulfill an autobiographical function. In this regard, the article investigates the influence of the writer's present circumstances on the writing process and asks whether Elliot's writer's block, which she outlines in her journal, plays into the composition and language of the novel. The literary examination reveals the impact of Elliot's faith in negotiating her self in different genres.

KEYWORDS: life writing, fiction, author, faith, Elisabeth Elliot

Introduction

Thou shalt not make unto thee
any graven image.
King James Version, Ex. 20.4

From the early outset, life narratives have been connected to themes of faith. Thus, Augustine's *Confessions*—often mentioned as the first autobiography—is an account of Augustine's life and conversion to Christianity.¹ The Puritan conversion narrative, the first written literature of the New England colonies, is of a religious² kind and tied to the beliefs of human sinfulness and God's grace. This form, which revolved around a turning-point in the narrator's lives and presented the narrator as spiritually matured from his or her old self,

¹ For a detailed survey of American autobiography with its connection to spirituality, see Peter Abbs, "Christianity and Life Writing," *Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, edited by Margaretta Jolly, Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001, pp. 211-13, and G. Thomas Couser, *American Autobiography: The Prophetic Mode*, U of Massachusetts P, 1979.

² The article distinguishes between 'religion,' 'belief,' 'faith,' and 'spirituality.' While religion is always connected to a community of believers, including its traditions and rituals, faith and spirituality are much more personal (Fowler 9). Belief mediates between structures and personal viewpoints by "translat[ing] experiences of and relation[s] to transcendence into concepts and propositions" (11). While spirituality refers to a *state* of transcendence outside of religious structures, faith is more active. Faith is trust and loyalty put *in* or *toward* someone or something (16).

became constitutive for American life writing.³ During the Enlightenment period, Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, the epitome of American life writing, applied this spiritual form of self-narrative on a secular level. His conversion took him from a simple laborer to a successful, enlightened man. Later, women as well as African American and Native American writers would use spiritual tropes to justify their activism in the fight against social injustice. Slave narratives, for example, employed the spiritual language of the Puritan conversion narrative to symbolically underscore their journey from bondage to freedom as providentially establishing a connection with their white Christian audience and America's Puritan forefathers.⁴ Modernist black writers continued to stress the centrality of faith in the black community as a stronghold against injustice and suffering as seen, for example, in Maya Angelou's and James McBride's writings.⁵ Their faith gave them a safe space in which race does not matter and solidarity is celebrated.⁶ Feeling accepted on grounds that they were all spiritual beings made in the image of the same God, they found their worth restored and regained energy to insist on their right to be treated as equal. Christian spirituality and faith thus significantly shaped the formation of the genre of life writing in Europe and North America (see Abbs 211).

³ 'Life writing' emerges as a broader term encompassing autobiography, biography, memoirs, letters, diaries, and online blogs; namely all writerly activity that involves the story of the author's self (Hornung, "American Lives" x). The term life writing was first used to make up for the lack of women's writers and ordinary people in traditional canons of autobiography, including unpublished documents, such as letters and diaries (Kadar 196-97). While autobiography describes the published story of a known person, memoir has often become a synonym for the more popular version of the autobiography of the less known, ordinary person (Couser 5). Moreover, memoir can mean to cover not the entire story of one person's life but rather a snapshot, several years of personal development. (5)

⁴ Frederick Douglass, for example, uses spiritual language when talking about "a kind Providence" in the coming about of events in his *Narrative* (57). See Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 1845, The Modern Library, 2004. Slave narratives were political texts designed to advocate abolition. Thus, their veracity was often backed up by the preface of a white person attesting to the truth of the account (xi). See Kwame Anthony Appiah, Introduction, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, by Frederick Douglass, 1845, The Modern Library, 2004, pp. xi-xvi.

⁵ See James McBride, *The Color of Water*, 1996, Riverhead Books, 2006, and Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1969, Ballantine Books, 2015.

⁶ In *The Color of Water*, James McBride emphasizes that the spiritual realm goes beyond the distinctions of black and white when telling his readers the anecdote of him asking his mother as a little boy which color God had to which his mother responded: "God is the color of water." (51)

American writer Elisabeth Elliot follows in the footsteps of European and North American life writers when penning the story of her life and her spiritual development in several genres. This article illustrates how for Elliot faith is not only a central component in life writing but serves as an active agent in the development of her sense of self throughout different genres. Her memoir *These Strange Ashes* (1975), her novel *No Graven Image* (1966), and her personal journal all demonstrate how the Christian faith serves Elliot as a means to grapple with suffering and crisis on two temporal levels: in processing the past and handling the present. In this context, the article attempts to reveal the role and function of differing forms and genres in life writing.

Elisabeth Elliot's Life

Elisabeth Elliot was born in 1926 to a missionary couple working in Belgium. Soon after her birth, the family moved back to the United States and settled in Philadelphia. Early on, Elliot's parents exposed her to the Christian faith; they sent her first to a Christian boarding school and later to a Christian college. Her father was the editor of *The Sunday School Times* and her family went to the Keswick⁷ meetings each summer, a large assembly of devout Christians. In 1952, Elisabeth Elliot followed her call to the mission field for which she had prepared for several years studying Greek, linguistics, and Spanish. That summer she flew to Ecuador and started working in language translation with the Tsáchila, Quichuas, and Huaorani.⁸ Her letters and journals of that period report of a time of struggles and tribulations. In 1953, she loses her only Tsáchila informant who is killed by another Tsáchila. In 1956, her husband is killed when he enters Huaorani territory. Jim Elliot and four other missionaries set out to the Huaorani with the intention of studying their culture and language in preparation for Bible translation. Unable to communicate with the Huaorani, the group of missionaries cannot explain why they entered Huaorani territory. The Huaorani

⁷ The Keswick movement stresses the sacrificial nature of Christian discipleship and emphasizes the centrality of "[M]issions and witnessing" (Marsden 78).

⁸ The Tsáchila, Quichuas, and Huaorani are diverse indigenous groups of Ecuador. The Tsáchilas live in the Western lowlands ("Tsáchila"). They live from fishing and agriculture ("Tsáchila"). The coloring of their bodies led the Spanish to call them 'Colorados' ("Tsáchila"). The Quichuas (also Kiwchas, or Quechuas in Peru) live in the mountain range of the Andes from Ecuador to Peru and Bolivia living from agriculture ("Quechuas"). The Huaorani live in the Eastern jungle of Ecuador. Some families still live isolated and refuse contact with outsiders. Huaorani used to live as nomads hunting with spears and blowguns, but many have settled in to permanent housing in the last decades (cf. Fesner 30-43).

perceive them as a threat to their lives and kill them in self-defense. Elliot's personal work is also stricken with sorrow: Numerous babies are stillborn during deliveries to which Elliot was called to assist, and some adults die despite Elliot's medical treatment and help. All of her Tsafiki⁹ language files are stolen, and because she has made no copies, the work of an entire year is undone. She at times encounters disagreements with other missionaries. After ten years in the jungles, she decides that it is time to return home. In the years that follow, Elliot dedicates a large amount of time to reflect on her work in Ecuador and her first novel *No Graven Image* (1966) appears as her third publication after two previous works that are based on her husband's experiences in Ecuador. In this novel the boundaries between life writing and fiction begin to blur. Like Elliot herself, the protagonist of the novel, Margaret Sparhawk, sets out as a single missionary to Ecuador working in language translation and struggles to accept her own powerlessness: she cannot help a Quichua mother who is dying in childbirth, and her own informant dies.

While many critical discussions on life writing are concerned with memory and narrative construction¹⁰—that is, while they are interested in the transformation of *past* events into a narrative—the *present* situation of the writers as they are writing memoir often figures only marginally. This article, however, takes Elliot's present circumstances during the composition and their impact on the writing into focus by interrogating her journal. It not only asks whether the act of writing the fictionalized memoir *No Graven Image* has an autobiographical function for Elliot in which she processes her past, it also examines the impact of Elliot's present situation as a writer on the form and language of the novel and through a fictional protagonist. Accordingly, this article conducts three investigations concerning the novel's role in writing Elliot's life: First, the article explores the autobiographical function of the novel in regard to past experiences. It compares the genre's literary possibilities as a work of life writing with Elliot's memoir and her journal. Second, the article examines the impact of the author's present situation and its relevance for the novel's form and content. Here, the article is interested in the relationship between the

⁹ Tsafiki is the language of the Tsáchila.

¹⁰ See, for example, James Olney, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life Writing*, The U of Chicago P, 1998; Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, Cornell UP, 1999; Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*, Cornell UP, 2008.

narrating I, the experiencing I, and a third category the article refers to as ‘authoring I.’¹¹ It asks how certain conditions of Elliot’s present state play into the language and tone of the novel. Finally, the article analyzes the implications of faith for connecting past and present through the fictional format. In order to show the agency of faith in relating past and present to each other, the following sections lays the groundwork by examining the relationship between the novel and other genres of life writing.

The Function of Fiction in Elliot’s Life Writing

In *No Graven Image*, the fictional genre allows Elliot new ways of processing her autobiographical past. To understand the impact of the form for life writing, it is important to explore the scholarly discussions around life writing and fiction. When autobiography became an established field in literary studies between the 1950s and 70s, scholars such as George Gusdorf, James Olney, and Phillippe Lejeune emphasized the importance of the author figure to underscore the legitimacy of the genre (Anderson 5). This is important because there had been a countermovement in poststructuralism that had undermined the importance of the author. Paul de Man, for example, declared the end of autobiography when he argued that all writing is fictional and thus the author is dissembled through language into a fictional subject (Anderson 13).

Several cases, however, have proven the importance of distinguishing between the genres of autobiography and novel. After de Man’s death, for instance, it was discovered that he had written an anti-Semitic article in a Belgian collaborationist newspaper (15). Questions arose whether he had been trying to hide his guilt by deconstructing the author’s importance thereby trying to disconnect his writing from his historical self (15). Similarly, James Frey’s memoir *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) was discovered to include invented facts. It was immediately declared a fraud. The aftermath had dire legal and economic consequences for Frey (Couser 16-17, Eakin 22), which demonstrated that autobiography and fiction remain different genres in public discourse. Cases of de Man and Frey show that the reference to an author outside the text matters. But how do we distinguish between fictional life writing and

¹¹ This category is based on Wayne C. Booth’s ‘implied author.’ However, it goes beyond this concept in that it examines not the ‘constructed author’ within the text but traces evidence to references concerning the author outside of the text. In Elliot’s case this evidence is taken from her journal.

autobiography? One is fictional and the other 'real'? This simple binary hardly does justice to the complexity of the intertwining of fact and fiction. So what are the alternatives?

French literary scholar Philippe Lejeune differentiates between autobiography and autobiographical novel from the reader's perspective: In an autobiography, the "autobiographical pact" between author and reader demands that author, narrator, and protagonist must carry the same name and thereby assure the accuracy of the account to the reader. The autobiographical novel, however, is free from this requirement (14) and plays with reader expectations: "one cannot always determine whether a given narrative is a novel or a memoir by examining the text itself. But we invest in them differently. [. . .] Once we have determined that a narrative is a memoir rather than a novel—usually on the basis of extra-textual clues—our response toggles to a different mode" (Couser 13). In fact, literary scholar Fredric Jameson sees genre as an instrument to ensure the desired reception (Anderson 9-10). Autobiography and memoirs elicit specific reader responses which imply obligations on the part of the author "to make certain kinds of truth claims" (Couser 10): Readers of autobiographies expect references to external 'reality' while fictional life narratives are granted space for fabrication. However, authors of autobiographical fiction cannot avoid betraying the functionality of their fictional characters and reveal their actual lived experiences between the lines. The autobiographical novel thus irrefutably reveals the nature of the author in a fictionalized form, a phantasm, or shadow, of his 'true' self. Lejeune refers to the reader's participation in decoding the personal traces of the author's signature in his or her fictional writing as the "phantasmatic pact" (27). Still, Lejeune acknowledges that the autobiographical novel gains strength by its complexity and ambiguity (27). Life writing can be understood as the "autobiographical space" which Lejeune describes as the "space in which the two categories of texts [autobiography and autobiographical novel] are inscribed, and which is reducible to neither of the two." (27)

In this sense, the article contends that the novel *No Graven Image* can be subsumed under the heading of life writing as it shows autobiographical features, i.e., it exhibits parallels between the events of the fictional world and Elliot's past activities as a missionary. This article, then, argues that the fictional form of life writing offers access to literary devices that create emotional complexity and distance at the cost of factual accuracy (cf. Lejeune 25).

Elliot's novel creates emotions that her memoir does not transmit and allows the reader to partake in feelings Elliot might have had during her work in Ecuador on a different plane than her memoir does. Comparing Elliot's memoir *These Strange Ashes* (1975) to her novel *No Graven Image* shows how Elliot's autobiographical novel can emphasize her spiritual journey in ways different to her memoir. The analysis highlights the novel's affinity to the language of Elliot's journal by examining the journal's literary devices.

In her memoir *These Strange Ashes*, Elisabeth Elliot writes about her first missionary year in Ecuador, in which she lived with the Tsáchila and transcribed their language with the help of the Tsáchila informant Macario. The climax of the memoir is constituted when Macario is killed by a gunshot.

The events of the preceding day stayed vividly in my mind for a long time. It had been, I wrote to my parents, "the most nightmarish day of my life." As we walked home in the rain from the graveyard, it seemed to me that everything was over. Although I could, by no stretch of the imagination, hold myself responsible for Macario's murder, the enormity of it weighed me down almost as heavily as if I were guilty. It was another failure, somehow, a judgement on us and our work. [. . .] I had promised to obey God, and I had known that that promise might lead to "tribulation." I had prayed also for holiness, but this—this kind of "answer"—was startling and repugnant to me. I had desired God Himself and He had not only not given me what I asked for, He had snatched away what I had. I came to nothing, to emptiness. (124; 126)

This event appears in Elliot's novel in fictionalized form. Elliot lets Margaret's Quichua language informant Pedro die in response to Margaret's medical injection¹² to emphasize the feeling of despair and guilt that Elliot had felt after her informant Macario was killed. The self-inflicted misery of Margaret triggers stronger responses than the haphazard death of Macario¹³ in *These Strange Ashes*, and the fictional form transports Elliot's emotional reaction more intensely. Changing Macario's murder into the medically incurred death of Pedro caused by Margaret is completely acceptable in a fictional work while it would violate the ethical codes of the autobiographical pact in the memoir. In *No Graven Image*,

¹² Margaret has no medical training and does not fully understand what consequences her shot would have. Pedro's death might be the result of an allergic reaction to the shot. It could also be speculated whether he dies of an overdose of penicillin as he has had various shots before. However, it remains unclear.

¹³ Macario was shot one morning in 1953 by another Tsáchila. His murder came as a surprise to Elliot who had not known of any conflicts between Macario and the other Tsáchila.

Margaret's lamentation after Pedro has died captures Elliot's pain over the loss over her informant on a more complex level than her memoir:

O ineffable, sardonic God who toys with our sacrifices and smashes to earth the humble, hopeful altars we have built for a place to put Your name! Do you mock me? Why did you let him die? Why did You let me kill him? O God! I came to bring him life—*Your* life—and I destroyed him in Your name. (237-38)

Margaret's prayer to God in the face of Pedro's death reveals her deepest motivations. This passage resembles Job's lamentation in face of losing property, family, and health (*King James Version*, Job 1-3).¹⁴ Margaret's missionary work is marked by a Keswick spirit that sees missionary service as a sacrifice and offering to God. However, her sacrifice comes with expectations. She wants to earn God's favor and be in control of the situation. But as soon as an offering expects anything it is no longer a sacrifice but a price paid in exchange for something better. Moreover, she has to confess the hubris that let her assume the role of a savior who brings life. This goes against the gospels, which teach that discipleship comes with a cost rather than with earthly blessings and power.¹⁵

The passage from *These Strange Ashes* seems like a paraphrase of the events described in *No Graven Image* with slightly different circumstances and other actors. The emotions that are so tangible in *No Graven Image* through immediate direct discourse are condensed in the phrase "the most nightmarish day of my life." Instead of developing the growing despair through a climax as in *No Graven Image*, *These Strange Ashes* starts the chapter with the description of how Elliot heard of Macario's death. The questions and doubts are recounted from a more distanced position in *These Strange Ashes* through the use of past tense while in *No Graven Image* present tense prevails through inner monologue. God is not directly addressed in *These Strange Ashes*, but Elliot describes her relationship to Him from the outside. In the novel, the characters are given room to express themselves directly and put the reader in the middle of the events while the memoir stays at a greater distance taking

¹⁴ Elliot was, in fact, inspired by Job's story after she had seen a performance of Archibald MacLeish's "J.B.," a modern play of the Biblical Job, on Feb 15, 1964 (Letter to P.E. and K. Howard, Feb. 25, 1964). In March of the same year, she gave a talk at a conference at Barrington College using Job as an opening to talk about missions (Letter to P.E. and K. Howard, Mar. 9, 1964), which was followed by a discussion of "Job + his charging God with evil—and God said he'd be honest" (Journal 11, Mar. 6, 1964).

¹⁵ Lk. 14.27

the position of an observer. This effect of distance and immediacy is brought about by the relationship between 'narrating I' and 'experiencing I' that differs in both works in accordance with their specific genre. Both genres are important and together show different facets of Elliot's life. While the memoir aims to depict events accurately, the novel foregrounds emotions. Additionally, it should be kept in mind that Elliot's memoir was written over twenty years after she experienced the confrontation with her informant's death, while the novel was written closer to Elliot's time in Ecuador, but still over ten years after Macario's murder. The novel, therefore, attempts to reconstruct the feelings of a personal diary, while the memoir targets primarily the reconstruction of factual events. *These Strange Ashes* may have also been an attempt to clarify for her audience the factual autobiographical references in *No Graven Image*.

Elliot's choice to let Pedro die at the protagonist's hand does not only intensify the emotional reading experience; Pedro's death can be read as a symbol for the problems that accompany the presence of missionaries like Elliot among the indigenous people of Ecuador; it thereby underlines Elliot's doubt and questions about her motivation on an emotional plane. Pedro's death triggers uncomfortable questions concerning Elliot's conscience that surface in Margaret's thoughts: "But here was another cross, with a name and a date, to mark where a dead man lay—because I, Margaret Sparhawk, had come" (244). Through Pedro's death, Elliot is able to critically reflect on her own work, in which death and struggles prevailed, and she can come to terms with her own involvement. This example reveals a second function of the novel format: It creates a certain distance between author and protagonist. This distance serves as a safe-guard, which allows Elliot to voice taboos and a critical viewpoint. Thus, Margaret's intense doubt and anger at God and her criticism of certain missionary practices are acceptable for the targeted reader, a contemporary Christian believer and supporter of foreign missions. Elliot thus manages to articulate her thoughts publicly and is at the same time safe from criticism because it is a fictional character who voices them. Moreover, Margaret eyes the other missionaries at the missionary conference comparing herself to them and assessing their attitudes and behavior. The criticism of certain missionaries in *No Graven Image* cannot be traced to specific individuals and thereby can be articulated without anyone feeling attacked. Elliot might have seen this as her chance to show her own humanity in the face of suffering and to

highlight problems in missions without condemning specific people. *These Strange Ashes* also raises questions about the motivation of missionary work, but it lacks its emotional intensity. Individual missionaries are also concealed in the memoir by changed names; however, Elliot cannot deny their reference to real persons and it can be assumed that she was aware of that.

Pedro's death in *No Graven Image* subsumes and fictionalizes Elliot's spiritual response to Macario's death and exhibits fiction's technique of complication. The choice of genre defines how Elliot describes her feelings. While it is impossible to detect Elliot's actual emotions and spiritual struggles at the moment of Macario's death since the past is not directly accessible and always mediated through word or thought, the closest access to Elliot's emotions are given in her journals.¹⁶ These were written closer to the actual event than any published books, which are distanced in time and have been mediated by editing. Elliot's reactions as purveyed in her journals are more immediate and unordered than in her publications. Unfortunately, the journals of 1952, the year of Macario's death, are not available to the public. Instead, the article has to depend on a journal entry of Elliot from 1957 to demonstrate the literary style of Elliot's journal. It is the most immediate account of Elisabeth Elliot's commemoration of her husband found in a journal entry shortly after the first anniversary of his death.¹⁷

Tonight—an evening stretches before me. What to do? Translate Scripture[?]. No heart for it. Only wish time would pass, pass, pass—more quickly. Wondered, as I walked thro' high grass this afternoon if I were bitten by a snake—would I refuse serum injection? Would I just go ahead + die? Oh, I want to. I want Jim. . . . He is gone—'Break, break, break—[my heart]'¹⁸

*But he is in the grave, and oh,
the difference to me.*

¹⁶ The genre of the journal is difficult to define as it is marked by diversity and often challenges genre boundaries (Cottam 268). In fact, it "lies on the border of life and its representation" often being used as historical "source material" (268). It is marked by its unordered account of life, its immediacy, and its absence of addressee (268).

¹⁷ Kathryn Deering, Elisabeth Elliot's newsletter and book editor, made photographs of a selection of Elisabeth Elliot's journals which she donated to the Billy Graham Center Archives in Wheaton, Illinois in 2013.

¹⁸ Square brackets in original.

Loneliness stalks me day + night. A word, a look at the end of the airstrip, where his bachelor house stood, the things his hands made—all speak to me of him.

To go on living seems so outrageous—I ask myself. ‘Why do you do it?’ Can there be life from this death—the death I live daily? *O God* (Journal 7, 29 Jan. 1957)

This passage illustrates the intensity of the author’s pain. The journal account of mourning shortly after the anniversary of Jim Elliot’s death is immediate because it was written down close to the point of experience, and without mediation from a publisher or temporal distance. It can be difficult to carry across such intense emotions in a memoir or autobiography, which is usually written at a temporal distance, creating a gap between ‘narrating I’ and ‘experiencing I.’ In a diary, in contrast, the ‘narrating I’ and ‘experiencing I’ almost coincide temporally. The passage abounds in poetic language and literary devices: Rhetorical questions, repetitions, ellipses, as well as literary quotations and allusions. “Break, break, break” references Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s 1842 poem by the same title and “*But he is in the grave, and oh, / the difference to me*” alludes to William Wordsworth’s poem “*She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways*” (1799). Both poems deal with the loss through death and would thus have provided Elliot with a viable channel to express her grief. It seems as if Elliot experienced speechlessness in response to her loss. No words can describe her pain. Elliot’s literary repertoire, however, bestowed words on her speechlessness. In the end of Elliot’s entry, the invocation to God remains: “*O God*”. The emotional burden finds expression in this outcry and prayer. The missing punctuation mark underlines that she has not found closure in her mourning. Further, Elliot’s faith serves as a medium to articulate her suffering through the form of the prayer.

When comparing the passage from the novel to the journal entry of 1957, the analysis reveals that the passage has a similar immediacy as the journal excerpt. The immediacy of the fictional passage is evoked by the direct invocation of God through questions. Both fictional passage and diary excerpt emphasize Christian faith as a channel to voice despair because both contain prayers in the face of suffering. In a memoir like *These Strange Ashes*, such a passage would seem out of place and would disrupt the narrative flow that is mostly dominated by the ‘narrating I.’¹⁹ What happens to the ‘experiencing I’ is often paraphrased

¹⁹ This is not true for all memoirs in general but rather describes the specific case of Elliot’s writing.

and commented on from retrospect. In the novel, however, this passage serves the narrative development that emphasizes the climax. The narrator vanishes behind the immediacy of the protagonist's outcry. The 'experiencing I' dominates the story and invites a greater identification on the part of the reader. While *These Strange Ashes* is more accurate with regard to the events of Elliot's journal excerpts, her novel corresponds more intimately with the emotions expressed in her journal.

Temporality in Elliot's Life Writing

After having established the function of fiction for life writing, this section discusses the coexistence of two temporal planes when it comes to life writing: the past that is contained in the content and the present that surfaces in the literary form. *No Graven Image* is a complex negotiation of Elliot's past *and* an outlet for Elliot's present crisis as a writer. The retrospective mode creates a distance between 'narrating I' and 'experiencing I,' between narrator and protagonist. The 'narrating I' comments on and organizes the events of the 'experiencing I.' This distance is minimal in journal entries which are incoherent episodes of immediate experiences (cf. Shea x). In studies on life writing, a good amount of research has been focused on the relation between 'narrating I' and 'experiencing I.' Questions like 'Is the account of the narrator accurate?,' or 'What does he or she leave out, what does he or she report?' are well-known queries. Recently, literary theorists Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have added further 'I'-levels, such as the 'ideological I' and the 'reading I,' both instances within the text (76-79). However, the role of the writer in the text has been under continuous contestation ever since authorial intent has been undermined by the New Critics and poststructuralism (Anderson 2). With the 'cultural turn' the historical background and author of a literary work has regained more attention.

This analysis refers to the 'authorial I' to describe the voice of the author that underlies the 'narrating' and 'experiencing I' influencing the story on a more complex plane. The 'authorial I' attempts to capture the 'real' presence of the author in the text. This 'I' might surface directly in the preface while it stays unnamed (or veiled as 'narrating I') within the main corpus of a literary work. However, when we read pieces of life writing closely we experience the authors in their present situation even when their present self is not explicitly acknowledged. The relationship between the 'narrating I' (and implicitly the

‘experiencing I’) and the ‘authorial I’ is figurative; clues for the author’s state of mind are found in literary devices of the texts. The narrator’s way of telling things, his or her choice of words, and the structure reveal the concerns of the present ‘authorial I.’ There is no question that the ‘authorial I’ is in flux. The written text is always only a snapshot in time. While autobiography records the past, it is at the same time a journal of the present that in turn can only be read and understood in retrospect. In the autobiographical novel, the gap between ‘narrating I’ and ‘authorial I’ widens through the fictive treatment: ‘Narrating I’ and ‘authorial I’ do not necessarily share the same name or experiences. The temporal distance is thus accompanied by the personal distance of author and protagonist, who are no longer the same. This, in turn, allows a more implicit presence of the ‘authorial I’ in the language devices of the text. The impact of the ‘authorial I’ in Elliot’s *No Graven Image* surfaces on the level of tone and theme. In the following section tone and theme are examined to extract the presence of the ‘authorial I’ from the novel.

The tone of *No Graven Image* betrays Elisabeth Elliot’s emotional state at the point of writing the novel. Elliot’s journal of the years 1964 and 1965 reveals that she was suffering from a writer’s block. Ironically, Elliot treats her writer’s block by writing. Venting her frustration in written form allowed her to regain her voice as a writer. From September 1964 to September 1965 numerous diary entries report about Elliot’s inability to write. A journal entry of September 22, 1964, a few weeks after she has started writing the novel, pointedly summarizes her struggle: “Tried writing again today. Utter despair at whole book—style, content, message totally unreadable. God pity me! A December deadline, + the prospect of nothing.” This mode of despair surfaces in *No Graven Image* when the narrator Margaret comments on her daily struggles as a missionary. All efforts to identify with the Quichuas, to translate the Bible, to provide medical care seem to run nowhere. Elliot’s inability to write surface in Margaret’s: “I do not write prayer letters any more, for I have nothing to say about my work” (242). Writing about Pedro’s death serves as catharsis for the author who sets free pent-up emotions of pain and despair over writing the novel. Pedro’s death allows Margaret to voice her despair over her situation as a missionary, but it is also an attempt of Elliot to deal with her crisis as a writer. Thus, the thoughts of the ‘narrating I’ serve as a channel to voice the frustration of the ‘authorial I’:

I looked at the Bible on the table in front of me and started to pick it up. My hand dropped again. I could not find answers there any more. Nothing had worked for me as I had thought it would work. God had nothing to say to me now. Where was He, anyway?

The question, which in my mind was tantamount to declaring myself an atheist, found me sitting there at the table waiting for an answer. (*No Graven Image* 238)

Elliot's writer's block is mirrored in Margaret's crisis of faith. Everything that had been fundamental to Margaret is put into question through Pedro's death. She had believed that her work among the Quichuas had been a divine call. However, the death of the only language informant involuntarily puts a stop to her work. Similarly, when consulting Elliot's journal entries, one can see how Elliot reflects on her writing process and struggles with her role as a writer. She wonders whether she does not perhaps undo her past missionary work with writing the novel:

Still nothing [. . .] Many misgivings again—should I pack in on the whole idea? Am I not capable of the novel? Am I terribly mistaken in my view of missionary work? Would it do despite to the grace of God to write what I have in mind? Will it 'undo' what I have already done? If so, should I therefore not write it, or does it need to be undone? And always, the biggest question of all—am I really big [?] enough to do this book? Is it sheer arrogance that prompts me?

Or does God truly guide me into his truth and lay upon me the obligation to state it? (Journal 11, 24 Aug. 1964)

Elliot's questions express frustration. She is at the point of abandoning the idea of writing a novel. The questions posed in Elliot's journal resonate in *No Graven Image* on the level of tone. While the content may differ the frustration stays the same. Margaret is on the brink of relinquishing her faith and her work. However, her questions indicate a 'clinging on' to God. The passage emphasizes that doubt is a part of faith; similar to struggle being a part of writing. Paradoxically, Margaret is not overpowered by her questions, but instead is empowered by them in seeking God. Similarly, Elliot's final question of the journal passage gives her a fresh impetus. In addressing her doubts to God, her spirituality serves as a space of reflection and empowerment.

A central theme of Elliot's diaries is her concern to give a truthful account. She emphasizes her "obligation to state the truth about missions," acknowledging that 'truth'²⁰ is always subjective (Journal 11, 29 Sep 1964; Journal 11, 1 Apr 1964). Elliot's novel addresses this quest for 'truth' when Margaret ponders on how candid she can be towards her supporters back home in the United States. Can she write about her difficulties? Should she simply leave out that the Quichuas do not show the least interest in her presence? Should she lie? In the end, Margaret opts for silence. She confesses that she does not write letters anymore because she does not have anything to say (242). Margaret's inner struggle thus lets Elliot reflect on the responsibility of a writer to commit to 'truth' and the struggle to negotiate and express this 'truth' in writing.

The Role of Faith for Life Writing

After the previous sections have investigated the function of fiction in *No Graven Image* as a work of life writing and explored the impact of the present, this section focuses on the question to what extent faith binds together the different forms of life writing. Both faith and life writing are concerned with growths, turning-points, and means to achieve coherence in one's life. Likewise, the narrative strand of *No Graven Image* follows Margaret's spiritual development. The climax coincides with Margaret's crisis of faith and is resolved with Margaret's spiritual maturity. This narrative structure thus shows similarities with the format of life writing that describes the maturing process of its subject. This is no coincidence. In fact, the novel plays a crucial role in disclosing Elliot's own personal development—in the past and in the future. The following section examines the influence of faith and its different stages in Elisabeth Elliot's novel and journal.

The 'narrating I's' process of spiritual growth in *No Graven Image* reflects Elliot's spiritual state at the time of writing the novel. To illustrate this claim, the following paragraphs examine textual evidence from the novel and the journal. In the novel, Margaret reflects on the meaning of Pedro's death:

²⁰ This article uses 'truth' in quotation marks to underscore the problematic of defining it as an accessible 'reality.'

It seemed, on the night of Pedro's death, as though *Finis* were written below all I had done. Now, in the clear light of day, I see that I was in part correct. God, if He was merely my accomplice, had betrayed me. If, on the other hand, He was God, He had freed me.

I find that I can no longer arrange my life in an orderly succession of projects with realizable goals and demonstrable effects. I cannot designate this activity as 'useful' and that one as 'useless,' for often I am at a loss to apply either label, for the work, in the end, as well as the labeling, is God's. (242-43)

Margaret's conclusion that she is free from knowing and interpreting events that she does not understand highlights the theme of the novel; the acknowledgement that God is larger than humans' limited understanding. This resonates with Job's acknowledgements that God is just regardless the circumstances. Similarly, Margaret realizes that she is not entitled to see the purpose of her suffering. Elliot's choice of the title of the novel further underscores the inaccessibility of God. The title alludes to the second commandment: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of *any thing* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth" (Ex. 20.4). Selecting this title, Elliot emphasizes that no human idea of God does Him justice. Elliot's faith directs a way out of theodicy without finding definite answers. She sees the only option in waiting on God to provide explanations.

At the time of writing *No Graven Image*, Elliot had a similar epiphany as her character Margaret, which is revealed in her journal. She laments her own limitation by Christian tenets, which she had mistaken for 'truth:' "My whole perspective was bound by the four walls of Christian dogma. I do not say Christian truth. . . . It is truth alone which liberates" (Journal 11, 12 Nov. 1964). In her search for 'Truth,' Elliot realizes that there is a difference between doctrine and spiritual 'truth.' While dogma dictates answers, spiritual 'truth' is abstract and never completely attainable for a human being. While Margaret acknowledges that she cannot understand the workings of God, Elliot recognizes that Christian dogma had imprisoned her. Although the context of Margaret's and Elliot's realization is different—one faces difficulties in mission work, while the other struggles with writing—the development of spiritual growth and liberation resonates in both, the novel and the journal. Margaret and Elliot have an epiphany that leaves them changed. In both instances, faith serves as a means to navigate through the sea of confusion. It is faith that connects Elliot's past and present. Elliot fought a spiritual battle while writing the novel, which surfaces in the novel. Seeking

spiritual ‘truth,’ she traveled on a journey through the past to see her identity in perspective to God, as liberated from preconceived images of God and man-made dogmas. The novel also shows Elliot’s holding on to God in times of struggle, even in the face of death.

Conclusion

Elliot’s *No Graven Image* is an autobiographical novel that deals with the central role of faith in suffering without denying doubt and crisis. The autobiographical mode of the novel allows a more complex treatment of emotions, and it allows Elliot to address taboos and criticism through the distance of protagonist and author. The analysis of *No Graven Image* in combination with its epitexts has shown that there is a relationship not only between ‘experiencing I’ and ‘narrating I,’ but also between ‘narrating I’ and ‘authoring I.’ While the distance of ‘experiencing I’ and ‘narrating I’ is articulated on the surface through comments and structural organization, the ‘authorial I’ surfaces on the figurative level. Elliot’s struggle as a writer is mediated in the protagonist’s despair over her informant’s death. Thus, the autobiographical novel is double-coded. On the immediate level, the novel is fed by Elliot’s past that is veiled in fiction. On another plane, the novel reveals Elliot’s struggle in the present as a writer. In both contexts, faith serves as a medium to negotiate suffering. The ‘narrating I’ and ‘experiencing I’ are knit together by their faith. The protagonist’s spiritual journey to freedom from preconceived notions of God symbolizes the liberty Elliot gained from Christian dogma. Both journeys encompassed a crisis of faith that is resolved through holding on to God.

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