

Phenomenology of Theological Practice: Modelling Enquiry and Poesis
A Report

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Introduction

‘Do you see yourself as a writer?’ When we put this question to our academic colleagues — theologians and philosophers — we received surprisingly varied responses. Though they had all authored books and numerous articles and chapters, many hesitated to answer with a straightforward ‘yes.’ ‘I don’t see myself as a writer. Other people are writers,’ said one colleague. ‘I struggle to think of myself as a writer,’ said another. Others worried that claiming to be a writer sounded ‘elevated’ or ‘grandiose’ or ‘pretentious.’ ‘Writer’ seemed to signify not simply someone who writes, but an aspirational identity that academics could not confidently claim for themselves. Beneath this uncertainty lay a complex relationship to writing and a rich experience of literary work.

With the support of the Widening Horizons in Philosophical Theology project, run by Judith Wolfe at St Andrews, we set out to investigate the practice of academic writing in our field. Widening Horizons provided intellectual as well as financial support, especially in shaping our research methods. Our method was informed by two principles embedded in the project’s vision for the discipline: phenomenology and ressourcement. Taking a phenomenological approach meant drawing our data from writers’ experience and doing our best to set aside both theoretical speculation and normative ideas or expectations about ‘good practice’ in theological writing. Ressourcement, for us, meant a recovery of spiritual practices, in particular practices of silence drawn from monastic life.

These two principles underpinned a research programme consisting of a series of writing retreats. We organised one pilot retreat for ourselves, three retreats for established theologians and philosophers at different career stages, and one retreat for researchers at the PhD or postdoctoral stage. The retreats had a simple structure. Retreatants would spend most of the day writing, then the group would gather for 90 minutes each afternoon to talk about the process of writing as it had manifested to them that day. This method helped to maintain a phenomenological orientation to practice and experience.

With one exception, the retreats were held at Douai Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in Berkshire. Medieval monasteries were the precursor to universities, designed as secluded sites for philosophical study alongside prayer and worship. Yet Douai Abbey felt very different from our usual work settings. We were invited but not expected to join the small community of monks in the Abbey church for their daily office: Matins, Mass,

Vespers and Compline. Communal silence is integral to Benedictine life, and we made this practice the core of our retreats. We followed a rule of silence for most of the day, including at breakfast and lunch in the dining hall. Each day the silence was lifted for dinner and for after-dinner social time. For our group reflections, we gradually developed a facilitation method inspired by Karen's work with the Sisters of La Retraite: as each writer described their experience, the rest of the group listened without comment. This could also be construed as a practice of silence, with an emphasis on attentive, receptive listening rather than discussion. We invited one of the Douai monks to accompany us on two retreats, by leading the group in a contemplative exercise (which he called a 'centering prayer') a couple of times during the retreat. For the whole of our final retreat, we were accompanied by two female religious, one from a contemplative and one from an apostolic congregation.

One of the most striking aspects of our project was its novelty. Many participants remarked that opportunities to talk about the practice of writing were rare. 'We talk so much about language, but not about us as using the language,' observed one. The retreats felt significantly different from familiar forms of academic life, such as the conference, the seminar, and the workshop. We found that our collective reflections on writing raised a series of further questions — ethical and existential questions, as well as theoretical questions — about such matters as truth, vocation, confidence, and intellectual community. At the end of one communal reflection, a writer noted that our conversation had ranged between 'the ethics of writing, the politics of writing, and the piety of writing.' In these afternoon sessions we often returned to the question of why writing was such a struggle, emotionally as well as intellectually.

We initially conceived the retreats as laboratories in which raw data — in this case, the experience of writing — could be gathered, described and documented. However, we increasingly came to view our retreats as an end in themselves, and, finally, as the project's most significant 'output.' Over the course of the project, through a process of trial and error, we devised a retreat model that facilitated novel forms of theological reflection, and enabled participants to envisage and experience new forms of intellectual community.

Project Findings

We started out with a provisional framework organised around two concepts: “enquiry” and “poesis”, or “finding” and “making”, conceived as intertwined elements of theological practice. We also devised six investigative categories: (1) desire, (2) resistance, (3) agency, (4) relationship, (5) temporality, and (6) forms of life. Both the initial “finding” and “making” framework, and the proposed six categories, proved useful to the project.

We noted that in the world of creative writing where “making” is primary, significant attention goes to the process of writing and to the experience of writers. In academic contexts, by contrast, there is often a default to a science-influenced understanding of research as “finding” (cf. the language of “outputs” and “writing up research” commonly adopted in the UK’s Higher Education sector). This prevailing academic culture seems to give little attention to writing itself as a practice.

Below we introduce each of our six categories together with their initial framing questions, and then provide our research findings. During the course of the project, however, one theme emerged which we had not anticipated, and which we came to see as central: the importance of maturing into self-understanding as a writer.

Maturing towards greater self-understanding emerged as a theme for several reasons. A literature review of dissertation writing manuals revealed that while a range of experts provide clear and definite programmes for how to manage the writing process, the advice in any one manual often conflicts quite sharply with that of others. Similarly, a series of interviews with literary writers, conducted early in our project, revealed a rich and wide variety of practice and experience. We realised we were in no position to promote a single model of how to organise a writing life. On the other hand, we noted that more senior academic writers on our retreats tended to anticipate and manage the emotional turmoil of their writing process, and to understand what they could do to support their writing, in a way that was not always the case with scholars earlier in their careers. We concluded that writing is in some way or other a difficult process for almost everyone, and that writers gradually learn to understand, accept and navigate their difficulties.¹ Cultivating greater awareness of the range of dimensions along which we differ as writers can be useful, perhaps especially as a tool for conversations between

¹ “Nearly all”, because on one of the four retreats we did have a participant who felt no special challenges attaching to academic writing, but saw it as simply another dimension of her professional life.

students and their supervisors. Appendix 3, “How to run a writing workshop”, includes an indicative list.

(1) Desire: why write?

How is our theological practice animated by desire? The plurality of desire may encompass desire for God; desire for truth; desire for recognition; and desire for connection with readers. How do concepts of vocation and ambition reflect the nature of our desire to pursue theological enquiry? Does theological practice presuppose, and make manifest, a distinctively theological desire?

One theologian described writing as a ‘high stakes activity,’ while another remarked that it was ‘hard to see its purpose.’

Not surprisingly, **seeking truth** emerged as a core motivation for writing. Several participants conceived writing as a medium or method for intellectual enquiry. ‘It is hard but satisfying to try to make sense of the world in the writing,’ said one participant. For another, ‘the world is full of puzzlement; questions that I can neither answer nor escape. Writing is a way of grappling with these.’

Distinct from the intellectual pursuit of truth is the search for **self-knowledge** through writing. One theologian told us that he writes ‘to find out what I really want,’ so that writing could be a substitute for conversation or therapy in this respect. He then voiced the concern that his remark sounded selfish.

This concern reflected widespread normative attitudes towards **self-interest** contrasted with **servicing others**, which emerged into sharper focus during a discussion of **ambition and vocation** on one of our retreats. Most participants tended to see vocation as “good” desire and ambition as “bad” desire. One suggested that human beings have a vocation to bring some new form into the world; making form is a good in itself, she explained, inspiring delight and affirmation. By contrast, people struggled to admit to being ambitious. We reflected that our culture (both broadly, and more specifically within our discipline) stigmatises ambition along both religious and gendered lines, as if being ambitious is both unchristian or unspiritual and unfeminine. We asked ourselves whether we should distinguish “good” ambition, where its benefits accrue to other people, from “bad” ambition, which desires benefits for oneself. One participant proposed a distinction between intrinsic (good) motivations, and extrinsic (bad) motivations: according to an intrinsic model, success can be regarded as a “fruit” of following one’s vocation, but not as an end in itself. Related to this was a distinction between a job, a career, and a vocation, with “career” being connected to reputation, recognition and affirmation: the desire to be seen. If ambition seeks recognition and respect — especially from those we respect — isn’t this a natural and legitimate desire?

Finally, we articulated a more positive sense of ambition as rising to a challenge, in the sense of attempting an “ambitious” project that stretches us.

Ambition can be framed inversely as a **fear of failure**, rather than a striving for success. One participant felt motivated to work hard by her desire ‘not to be humiliated.’

In cases where writers felt a strong desire to change an intellectual status quo that they perceived as in need of reform, they were less timid about expressing their intellectual ambitions. These writers had a **radical, field-changing, polemical** approach to their writing, fuelled by emotions such as frustration and fury. One writer expressed dissatisfaction with an entire way of doing theology, while others wanted to reform more localised aspects of the field, such as a tendency to frame or approach ~~in~~ a specific topic in a certain way.

These reformist desires belong within a **service-oriented approach** to academic work. One writer described her work as ‘trying to give people tools to do things a little differently [and] helping people see that they are not alone in the world.’ There were more conservative versions of this approach too. A theologian expressed his desire to leave behind at least one or two examples of work that ‘keeps the flame alive’ in an environment where Christianity is often travestied, derided and distrusted. He wants his writing to exhibit the Christian tradition’s intellectual seriousness, plausibility, value and ‘life-giving quality.’

Our retreats shed light on the struggle to write, which will be discussed in the next section, on ‘Resistance.’ This struggle was perhaps the most prominent theme that emerged during our group reflections. However, writers also experienced **joy and excitement** in their writing. Under retreat conditions, several participants felt able to connect (or reconnect) with a deep intellectual enjoyment that clarified their desire and sense of purpose as writers. At the end of retreats, they spoke of renewal, gratitude, pleasure, greater confidence, and a sense of adventure (see Appendix 1)

(2) Resistance: the struggle to write

How is our desire to write resisted or hindered, by either internal or external factors (e.g. divided attention; egotism; fear of failure; fatigue; lack of motivation)? Do theologians confront distinctive challenges or obstacles in their practice, arising from the subject-matter and/or the orientation of their enquiry? How might the concept of sin illuminate experiences of resistance to theological practice?

The difficulty of writing was perhaps the most prominent theme emerging from our retreats. Of course, the experience of writing fluctuates. Most of our participants experienced the writing process as an **intellectual, emotional or spiritual struggle**, at least some of the time. This difficulty was disclosed in the metaphors chosen to describe writing: a wall; a swamp; a labyrinth; a marathon; rabbit-holes; getting buried in detail; tiptoeing through a minefield; lifting a heavy weight; trying to see through fog; trying to climb a flat marble wall with no hand-holds; being 'lost'. During a group session on a retreat, one writer said he'd had 'a coal face kind of day.'

One obvious reason for this difficulty is the **scale and complexity of the subject-matter**, which requires an intense effort of concentration for an extended period of time. Humanities academics usually feel an expectation to read widely, if not comprehensively, generating a lot of material that needs to be digested and organised. These materials are themselves frequently dense, obscure, ambiguous, and/or conceptually complex.

Some of the challenges posed by subject-matter were **specific to theological and philosophical writing**. One writer worried that his topic was not 'morally significant' enough to justify the time spent on it, compared to a) other people's topics, and (b) his other vocational tasks, such as teaching and pastoral work. Conversely, another writer felt burdened by her topic's moral seriousness; she sensed 'a desperation for healing and solutions' and worried that her answer was insufficient, 'too weak.'

On an **emotional** level, writers described a **fear** of exposure, embarrassment and humiliation. They experienced **frustration** with a perceived slowness of pace or lack of progress. During our retreat with PhD and early-career writers, almost all participants described a profound **lack of confidence** in their writing. More established academics also described **self-doubt**, sometimes coupled with confusion about the doubt: should a doubting inner voice be heeded as a legitimate warning, a reality check? Or should doubts be distrusted and overcome? **Perfectionism, anxiety and living up to expectations** was a recurrent theme across all the retreats. A strong norm of

correctness in academic culture intensifies individuals' perfectionist tendencies. One writer reported a self-doubting mood summed up as 'all my work is trivia; why squander time?' While these difficulties belong in the category of resistance, they are closely related to desire and aspiration. Anxiety and perfectionism can be motivating. One writer said that her aim was 'to generate exactly the right balance of anxiety and excitement that generates the perfect brew.'

Bodily and environmental factors were commonly perceived as causes of resistance: physical pain, restlessness, poor sleep, effects of the menstrual cycle, weak coffee, emotional turbulence, low mood, and environmental distractions were all cited as hindrances to writing during our retreats.

We frequently discussed **distraction**, especially digital distractions. Writing on a computer that is itself a source of distraction can be challenging: the device is 'calling you in many different directions,' remarked one writer. Retreat participants were encouraged to put an 'out of office' auto response on their emails. At the end of one retreat, a writer said that she had previously associated writing with being exhausted, but had learned from the retreat that moving back and forth between writing and different kinds of activity, such as emails and meetings, was what she found most tiring.

During one retreat we asked writers whether **sin** was an appropriate way to conceptualise resistance. No one used the language of sin, or found it helpful, in thinking of their own writing. However, alternative concepts were suggested, all of which might be classed as literary 'vices': **ego**, a constant presence that is unattractive and causes suffering; **self-deception**, such as the tendency to under- or over-estimate one's abilities; and **temptation**, especially the tendency to let one's attention slide, or to give up. The conversation then turned to **dishonesty and hypocrisy**, which, it was suggested, can be incentivised in academic life. Examples included a ritualistic invocation of one's privilege, or confession of one's complicity in systemic injustice.

(3) Agency: who writes?

How do we experience the agency at work in our practice? How do we choose or discern the subject-matter of theological enquiry? What is the balance of finding and making in our enquiry, and how do we experience their phenomenal quality? To what extent do we feel in control of our work; to what extent is our agency centred in ourselves, and to what extent is it collaborative and cooperative? Does our theological practice yield a phenomenology of freedom and/or of grace?

In the course of our project we learned that **agency cannot be taken for granted**.

What looks like agency from the outside may feel very different to the writer herself.

One writer who is an influential academic in her field told us, ‘I don’t think of myself as having any effect on anybody; I don’t imagine myself as any force in the world. I don’t think about persuasion. Rather, these are the questions I am trying to figure out, together with whoever wants to bother.’

We also learned to distinguish different aspects of literary agency. It was common for writers to inhabit a series of **different roles**, even different selves. Most frequently cited were the composer or drafter, and the editor. One writer identified four characters: the composer, the editor, the research associate and the scrap-book maker.

Some writers separate the **drafting and editing phases** of their work; others alternated rapidly between these roles. This alternation was described as follows: ‘I write a sentence that expresses my thought as I currently feel it, and then I read it as if it is someone else’s sentence to see how it needs editing... There is the “expressive” moment of getting at something that is within, and then the judging or criticising or honing moment, where one makes sure that one is happy to present oneself this way to the wider world.’

Few writers felt straightforwardly **in control** of their writing. One expressed a ‘fear of irrevocability’: she catches an idea in flight, but meanwhile others are gone, and she can’t go back to them; once writing is on the page it can appear to determine the course of the whole piece. Words and sentences do not generally feel chosen at first, though **choice and deliberation** often enter into the editorial phase. Agency may lie more in ‘creating the conditions of possibility of writing’ than in direct control. During a retreat, one writer described her experience of ‘walking through mud days’ when she felt out of control, or struggled in an effort to assert control. Another writer used explicitly **theological language** to reflect on her varying experience of control; over time, she

had learned to ‘not panic, hope and trust’; sometimes, writing would appear to come unbidden, ‘as a gift.’

Several theologians on our retreats connected the question of agency and control as writers with their knowledge of **spiritual practices**. Silent prayer, for example, offers the possibility of ‘letting go of ego’, or being ‘carried along by the divine office.’ One writer reflected that while these practices could be very passive, his writing involved intention and invention. He felt that his ‘conscious self’ was at work in his writing, though ‘not fully in control.’ His own agency was, he concluded, a ‘mystery’ that seemed to involve ‘co-inhabiting agencies, neither simply active or simply passive.’ Another writer described how certain types of writing are close to ‘feeling “in the Spirit.”’ In such cases writing ‘takes over, it is elating.’ He often found that what he ‘wanted to say’ arrived in the night, and this did not feel like his own agency. His job was ‘to prepare the ground,’ and when he failed to do this, the work seemed ‘least in the Spirit’ because it was ‘artificial’; he was writing to cover up that he hasn’t done the work properly.

A stronger sense of agency emerged in some academics’ emphasis on their **responsibility** as writers. They felt responsible to various others: their readers, their ethnographic subjects, or other authors with whom their writing engaged.

(4) Relationship: writers and readers

How do we see ourselves as practitioners in our multiple relations with different readers? What are our affective experiences of theological enquiry – and what does this reveal about our relationship to its sources and purposes? Who are our readers, and how do our expectations or hopes about their responses inform our practice? How do institutions shape our relationships – both actual and imagined – with different kinds of reader (e.g. academic peers, students, REF assessors, reviewers, non-academic readers)? How does our relation to God shape our theological practice?

One of the most striking discoveries of our project was the **intimacy** that characterises discussion about writing. This was apparent both in our one-to-one interviews and in group discussions during retreats. Interviewing academics about their experiences of writing felt comparable to asking them about their personal relationships: these conversations had an intimate quality unusual within academic discourse, and seemed to cross customary boundaries between the personal and the professional. This highlighted how our relationships to writing can be bound up with our **relationships to ourselves** at a deep psychological, emotional and/or spiritual level — and academic writing is no exception. We uncovered various aspects of writers’ relationships to themselves: self-discipline, self-blame, self-critique, self-exploration and self-expression.

Writing often **externalises — shares, exposes — something inward**. It can be the medium for a deep relationship both to oneself and to the world. This may have theological consequences, since theology is a discipline concerned with the nature of relationality. On a more practical level, conducting interviews and running retreats made us aware of the need for delicacy and sensitivity when discussing writing.

Many writers on our retreats do their theological or philosophical work in relation to one or more **canonical authors**. Often this relationship is a deep, sustained and evolving engagement lasting many years: a ‘long-term relationship,’ often with all the commitment, complexity and ambivalence this entails. The devotional setting of our retreats encouraged us to reflect on the **devotional quality** of our relationship with source authors. These authors might be our teachers, our role models, our dialogue partners or even our spiritual directors. To say that we ‘live with’ these figures, as opposed to ‘think about’ them, captures the deep, holistic and existential character of such relationships.

Not surprisingly, writers' **relationships to their readers** was a recurring theme throughout our reflections. Readers can be actual or imagined, specific or unknown, hoped-for or feared. We discovered considerable diversity in the extent to which writers feel aware of the reader during the writing process. Some writers thought very little about the reader while they were writing; others were constantly aware of their readers.

The writer–reader relationship turned out to be entangled with the category of **desire**. 'If I can't sense the reader, I have no motivation to write at all,' one writer told us. Awareness of readers takes a variety of forms, all of them involving desire: wanting the reader to understand something; wanted the reader to be persuaded; wanting the reader to feel something; wanting to give pleasure to the reader; and wanting to be recognised (heard or seen) by the reader as capable, knowledgeable, insightful, significant, etc.

While many writers are coy about **seeking recognition** from readers, one interviewee was very open about her desire to be respected and admired, especially by readers who are also writers whom she respects and admires. 'No writer is not showing off a little bit,' she told us. Another writer eschewed the idea that his writing is any kind of performance: he likes to think of himself as 'just half a step ahead of his reader, pointing out something that they can now see in the landscape, not something fundamentally hidden'; nor was he 'impressing [the reader] by dancing.'

The **diversity of readers** poses a distinct challenge to the writing process. A single text must communicate with a range of readers with different levels of knowledge and expertise, different interests and attitudes, and different expectation. One writer described her efforts to 'satisfy different readers who want different levels of detail.'

Writers' relationship to their readers are **emotional** as well as intellectual and professional. A wide range of affects was cited, including anxiety, anger, patience and competitiveness. During a reflective conversation, an experienced writer realised that he was trying to control readers' responses to his writing (for example, by anticipating their possible objections), motivated by 'fear of conflict' and 'will to power.' He perceived this negatively, and aspired to have more 'hope and trust' and more willingness 'to annoy and irritate.' This example highlights the issue of **confidence**, which was especially prominent during our retreat with PhD students. Long practice (and proven success) in writing may improve confidence, or it may simply improve writers' ability to cope with low confidence or crises of confidence. The emotions in play in writing, encompassing writers' relationships to themselves as well as to their readers, complicate the ethical dimension to the writer-reader relationship, evoked by the concepts of vocation and service that emerged under the category of desire.

(5) Temporality: the life of a text

How do we inhabit the temporality of the writing process, from conception and planning, to successive phases of writing and editing, to production, publication and reception? How does this temporality structure the desires and relationships that shape our practice? What is our affective experience of the different temporal phases (anticipation, recollection, repetition, being-in-the-moment) of the writing process? How does the socialised temporality of academic research – e.g. invitations or commissions, abstracts, deadlines, production processes – help, hinder or otherwise inform our theological practice?

Our retreats facilitated a four-day period dedicated to writing, and this was welcomed by participants as a rare opportunity. While most participants in our project are contractually obliged to write — typically, 40% of their time is allocated to research — they frequently struggled to find **enough time to write**. But how much time is enough? Some writers feel they need to ‘clear the decks’ in order to begin, while others manage to fit bouts of writing into short periods of time. It was quite common to observe that three or four hours per day was sufficient; time spent ‘not writing’ could be as important (and productive) as active writing time. Indeed, limitation can sometimes be productive; for some people, wide open spaces of time may not be ideal for writing.

Time is intimately bound up with **attention**. One writer described how term time ‘derails writing’ because it is ‘hard to pick up pieces after leaving them.’ He thought the idea of a weekly ‘research day’ was unhelpful, because ‘the six day interruption makes picking up pieces difficult.’ Another writer, however, coped well with intermittency and disruption: she felt that staying ‘connected’ to her writing was more significant than the exact amount of time available for active writing.

Observations about **quality as well as quantity of time** recurred frequently in post-retreat reflections (see Appendix 1). One retreatant noted how the schedule permitted a slow pace that was, paradoxically, more productive: ‘slow and steady pace, without multitasking, enables more writing!’ We received confirmation that the category ‘Temporality’ is closely connected with ‘Form of Life,’ with several writers contrasting the quality of time in the monastery with the quality of time in the university: ‘Time: stretched out in silence; time, ordered liturgically and communally’; ‘Just four days felt expansive, uncluttered by the usual business of emails, meetings and household tasks.’ One writer offered an extended meditation on time at the end of his retreat: ‘the retreat...has unravelled time, and the ways I often fill it, the image of thought I often bring to it: precisely that of “demands” competing for attention. I experience time as something to be managed and filled. For me the retreat has opened up a dimension of

time I know is always there but lies concealed. The time of attention, of delight, of struggling with what matters. This time is uncounted. It lives as a network of roots beneath the canopy of seconds and hours, diaries and projects. It flickers beyond the window, tracing a line of flight. There is always not enough time. There is always enough time. Writing is not to be done when everything else is completed. It can be the first thing.'

We note a disjunction between these subjective, lyrical reflections and the fact that the temporality of academic writing is structured extrinsically, according to **invitations and deadlines**, within the wider timespans of **publishers' production schedules** and the **REF cycle**. Our writing practice involves inhabiting and navigating this disjunction. In academia, periods between commission and deadline (and also between deadline and publication) are typically long, compared to other professions such as journalism or even literary writing. Academic writers often decide to accept an invitation on behalf of a future self whose inclinations and circumstances are to some extent unknown. This means we may begin to write a piece months or even years after deciding to write it. Determining writing commitments so far in advance has the advantage of affording extended time for reading, thinking, planning and scholarly citation practices. It can however mean that writers have lost touch with, or simply moved on from, their initial enthusiasm and interest by the time they begin to write. This temporal structure may exacerbate the widespread tendency to fall behind with writing schedules, and to have stressful relationships to writing deadlines.

Reflection on the many stages in writing can be significant for self-understanding. These might for instance include accepting an invitation, giving a title, talking over ideas with colleagues, writing an outline, drafting and redrafting, editing, digesting feedback and altering one's text, working through proofs, seeing the final publication. Writing is never a single thing, but a whole series of activities and phases, and nearly everyone takes pleasure in at least some of these and has anxiety attached to others.

(6) Forms of life: situating practice

How do different forms of life and institutional contexts shape our practice? What is the relationship between our theological practice and other aspects of our professional life? How does our intellectual work relate to our domestic life, to our religious life? How do digital and material cultures shape theological practice? Do modern universities and the wider culture present specific challenges (or opportunities) to our practice? How might either our practice, or academic culture, be reconfigured in realistic ways to nurture theological enquiry? Which models of theological practice are best suited to the conditions of modernity?

Over the course of our project, ‘form of life’ emerged as our most significant category. The retreat — a small gathering of practitioners sharing a common purpose, setting up a temporary community constituted by a shared schedule, away from ‘normal’ work and family life — is a form of life native to religious or spiritual practice on the one hand, and to art practice on the other. Writing retreats are a familiar fixture of the literary scene. The retreat is more foreign to academic practice. We saw an opportunity here, since theological writing has a proximity to both spiritual practice and art practice. We initially conceived our retreats as sites for generating and gathering data about the processes and experiences of writing. However, we came to see them differently, as experiments in creating a form of life — alternative to the university — that sustains theological practice.

The writing retreats constituted a form of life **combining solitude with community**. Almost all our participants cited ‘community,’ ‘companionship’ or ‘collegiality’ as the most significant benefit of the retreat, and some explicitly noted how they felt different from an academic conference or workshop. It is interesting to compare our second, third and fourth retreats, all held at Douai Abbey, largely in silence, and all incorporating contemplative practices, with our first retreat held at Gladstone’s Library. Gladstone’s Library is open to the public, with a similar atmosphere to an Oxbridge College — the sort of place familiar to anyone who attends academic conferences or workshops. While retreatants were encouraged to work in silence during writing hours, mealtimes were social. Social dynamics included an awareness of academic hierarchy throughout this retreat. These dynamics were notably absent from the retreats held at Douai. One participant noted ‘a sense of common life and friendly fellowship.’ Participants were able to loosen their professional identities, and to let themselves be simply writers. We encouraged this in various ways: for example, by modelling this ourselves; by asking participants to refrain from conversations about institutional matters (admin, the REF,

university management, etc); and by instituting forms of discussion different from conventional academic practice. Participants shared their experiences of writing — often with an emphasis on struggle and vulnerability — and listened to one another without analysis or critique. A few writers were resistant to ‘sharing’ in this way, with a small number saying that they found it very difficult (exposing, tiring), although even these mostly found it beneficial as well as challenging.

One distinctive feature of this form of life was, therefore, **a foregrounding of the writing self**, combined with a deep sense of **collegiality** which developed quickly over the course of retreats. At the end of one retreat, a writer was grateful for ‘permission to inhabit and breathe in that part of me that is reader, and a thinker, and a writer.’

Another described how ‘I get a glimpse of myself as someone who can gradually bring something into existence, that this is part of my identity.’ Our retreats were similar in this respect to a writing retreat for amateur authors (attended by Clare early in the project), where a key benefit was not just time to write and make progress, but also the rare opportunity to fully inhabit the identity of writer, facilitated by the creation of an ephemeral community of writers.

We found that our retreats nurtured **a sense of freedom from a specifically academic form of life**. One participant noted that this was ‘a community where people share their experiences of the “life of the mind” in a way that doesn’t happen too often in academic gatherings’; another described the retreat as a ‘mix of private and common life that created a unique experience.’ Writers enjoyed their freedom not only from their institutional roles, but also from the hierarchical social dynamics embedded in academic life. As one professorial theologian put it, ‘I retreat from constant availability, from the tug at the arm, from being called on. I cease to be the adult in the room. I become dependent. I rest. I listen. I wonder if I could be a writer.’ An early career academic described her experience of retreat as follows: ‘Communion – not being alone in writing/working; feeling the support of a community of scholars, of conversation; being able to laugh together. Growing courage to “hold my own”, that is, to feel the unusualness of myself as precious, as valuable in this context; not just a misfit or perhaps we all are misfits. The shared silence gradually built an underlying sense of acceptance of not just my own “unusualness” but of each person’s; a shift from (self)judgment to welcome.’

Of course a retreat is, by definition, a form of life defined in contrast to an established norm: one retreats *from* one’s ordinary practices, commitments and routines. It is easy to critique academic institutions and practices. Indeed, such critique is habitual to this form of life, perhaps especially among Humanities scholars who receive a sophisticated

training in critique. While our project created a new mode of critical distance from academia, it also facilitated reflection on its positive aspects. Participants arrived at retreats with a wealth of knowledge and expertise, and familiarity with shared or overlapping intellectual traditions, which provided fertile ground for the communal life that rapidly emerged within a few days. Our group reflections generated the recognition that, since academic writing is not generally commercial, we are paid by our institutions to produce work that would not be financially rewarding in an open market. This means that financial need can be disconnected from the writing process, allowing writing to be rooted in other desires, whether for truth or for professional recognition. Reflective distance from university life therefore cultivated gratitude alongside critique. Our institutions provide permission to write as well as pressure to write, just as they both generate and hinder intellectual work.

Concluding comments

1. The specificity of our findings

How far are our findings specific to the discipline of theology? We suspect that many aspects of the experience of academic writing touched on above will be familiar to researchers in other Humanities and some of the Social Sciences. However, the reflections and insights generated by our retreats were in some ways inflected by the fact most participants were theologians.

We have not done enough research to draw any very concrete conclusions, but we did ask writers, on some of the retreats, to reflect on this question: what difference does their research topic make to their experience of writing? Some writers spoke of the impossibility of doing theology. Some felt an extra pressure, a weightiness, attached to the subject matter, or a fear of going too far from their home tradition and “falling into heresy.” Others suffered from the “tribalistic emotional tone” of some theological works. But writers also spoke of a sense of freedom or “peaceful insignificance in relation to the immensity of the task”; they described “being held” or “meeting joy” in their writing. Some readily understood writing itself as “spiritual practice,” while others were hesitant to use this language.

2. Directions for the future

Most, though not quite all, of the participants on our retreats worked in some way in relation to the Christian tradition. How would the project findings, and the atmosphere of the retreats, differ if we were able to bring in a wider variety of colleagues? How much would remain the same if we were to invite philosophers, or literary scholars, or art historians, or social anthropologists, into such retreats? This would be interesting to explore.

Whether or not there is a formal second phase to our own project, we believe we have identified a real appreciation, amongst academic writers, for the possibilities of the writing retreat. For those who might be interested in organising their own, we include a brief guide (Appendix 3) setting out the pattern which we landed upon.

We also participated in a number of workshops in connection with the project, and again found a great hunger for opportunities to discuss the experience of writing. Appendix 4 therefore sets out a model for running a writing workshop.

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Finally, thanks to all our retreat participants for co-creating the writing retreats which formed the core of this project.

Appendix 1: Writers' reflections on retreats

“This week has probably been the most significantly fruitful week for writing, for me, for two years. **It has enabled a completely focused, very calm and companionable experience of writing.** The removal of distraction, the situation of the week at the heart of contemplative monastic rhythm of life, the largely silent companionship of a lovely group of people, the formal group discussions, listening to the insights of others in the group, and the provision of excellent food all set in a beautiful built and natural environment have all enabled this. I would never normally allow myself to start term with a concentrated block of writing days, and tend to end up with writing days (if I am lucky) when I am exhausted at the end of a term. This is a demoralising experience often as I achieve much less than I hope, and come to associate writing with being in a state of exhaustion. Beginning the term with writing has meant I have had **energy and focus.** The availability of the library as an intimate but public space has been invaluable. Different activities have taken place in different spaces and this has worked well for me. I have achieved everything I set out to this week, and one small extra thing. This is unprecedented for me in time I have set aside during term for writing. The style of the retreat and location have facilitated long spells of concentrated work and the **slow pace** necessary for thoughts to germinate; which paradoxically means I have managed to ‘achieve’ far more: slow and steady pace, without multitasking, enables more writing! I have much preferred the writing retreat to the dynamic of a conference (a fact I feel a little guilty about) and hope very much to find a way to build something like this into my routine in the future.”

“Rhythms mark all my experiences of writing: periods of precipitation of thought, periods in which materials are laid out and ordered, periods in which tension builds, periods in which close work is done on a section or detail, periods of standing back and judging larger flows and coherences, periods of what Italian Renaissance painters called *facilità*, periods of stuckness. These are often accompanied by peaks and troughs of mood, including self-doubt, guilt at what I lose by writing in terms of life beyond my writing, the energy that follows breakthrough moments of connection or insight.

What this retreat has added is another set of **rhythms**, of prayer, silence, and conversation; and of a more ordered sleeping, eating, and walking. These have helped my own rhythms feel **less solitary and less isolating**, and given them context and correction. Above all, the retreat has reminded me of how much more richly and rapidly my ideas (and thus my writing) can develop when held in the frame of a **collegial**

sharing of ideas and wisdom over a period of days, in which breathing (including intellectual breathing) becomes slower and deeper.”

“At Douai Abbey the doors spring open as you approach them, and the toaster has a life of its own. I started to wonder if it’s been designed that way, to make a point about grace. You have to show up, but then some other momentum carries things along. That’s how it felt going into the library to write. Not that it was always easy to find the right words; nevertheless, something was being given to me. **Space, time, companionship.** These conditions made it possible to concentrate on one thing at a time, and meant I could devote most of my energy to writing. Such **clarity and simplicity of purpose** tends to make me feel free and happy. I also enjoyed seeing other people writing, self-contained, immersed in their own work. My **confidence in silence** has grown, and this makes me wonder about the connection between writing and silence.”

“I ask myself why I can’t do this everywhere.

The writing fits into a small space, the circle of me and the machine. Sometimes I jump up and pace the floor. Sometimes the restlessness seizes and I run away. But the work fits into a small space.

You would think I could take this anywhere. Pick it up and carry it on my back, get it out on a train, fit it into any corner of my life.

But then I could take silence anywhere, and sometimes I do.

Normally I churn out words as required. They tell me I’m good at it, that you would almost think I did this for a living. I word emails carefully. Persuade, cover over, nudge, document. But that’s not writing.

I retreat to make something.

I retreat from constant availability, from the tug at the arm, from being called on.

I cease to be the adult in the room. I become dependent. I rest. I listen.

I wonder if I could be a writer. It’s hard work.”

“I made progress, more than I had expected, on a writing task, but that was the least important part of the week. Some **new insights arose for me about mood and writing**, about focus, and about the role of **receptivity** in thinking and writing. The peace of Douai and the **peaceful companionship** of my colleagues gave a context in which new things could emerge, even though I have been writing, and wrestling with writing, for decades.”

“Permission. Not just permission to read, and to think, and to write, but **permission to inhabit and breathe in that part of me that is reader, and a thinker, and a writer.** Permission to pick up all these things, from the deep freeze, and to let them thaw. But, significantly, permission, too, to pause, and to put down, and to divert.

With permission, provision. The conditions for pursuing these tasks: time, space, daily bread. **Time: stretched out in silence; time, ordered liturgically and communally. Space: with room to move, to roam in a more expansive way, to hunker down in enclosure.** Daily bread: the stuff of life, enough. Also – cake.

With permission and provision, possibility. To follow your nose, or a hunch, or a troubling. To follow a path, turn back, go again, without the usual time-pressured second guessing, self-censure, procrastination-regret. **To imagine the writing self more in keeping with the praying self,** and more able to take flight.”

“**Space, time, quiet, a degree of freedom.** The writing didn’t feel rushed or pressed with so much time and space around it. Just four days felt **expansive, uncluttered by the usual business of emails, meetings and household tasks.** In this more open space, I **appreciated the things that were not writing.** Compline each evening was beautiful, intimate, tender, touching, especially when the monks sang to Mary at the end – and I particularly liked being invited to sit in the choir with the monks. They were very welcoming to us. Also the green fields, the lovely skies, the woods, the bluebells. Mealtimes and break times. I looked forward to talking with people in the evenings, though I would have liked more opportunity to hear about the writing and thinking everyone was doing. I will take away some **new reflections not so much on what I am writing, but how I am writing:** deeper, existential questions about what can or should be said in the time given to me. **Who am I speaking to, and what might they need to hear from me?** What is the connection between my own life story and its inner experience, and the philosophical writing I’m doing? Being at the Abbey, among Christian theologians, has naturally made me think afresh about the relation between philosophy and theology, and my own uncertain position on theological terrain.”

“I enjoy writing, I find it fulfilling and I do see it broadly speaking as part of my vocation. But there are always obstacles to writing and, for reasons I won’t go into, I did feel about 18 months ago as though I had completely lost my confidence. The reasons for this were entirely external (to do with a period of illness), but they felt internal and it’s taken me time to get back. So this writing retreat has been for me a significant part

of that journey. When I was thinking about this question the word that kept coming to my mind was **'healing'**. Not healing in the sense of a quick drug, but the kind of healing undertaken in a course of physiotherapy: it has required disciplined attention. A sense of **common life and friendly fellowship** has supported that.

More specifically, this retreat has encouraged me to think about **transitions in relation to writing**. We've talked about the transitions between reading and writing, and about taking contemplative pauses between periods of writing. But I've also been thinking about how I prepared to come on this retreat: I think there are ways in which I could've set myself up better. And now I'm thinking about stopping writing when I still feel in the middle of things. Gregory of Nazianzus talks about coming down off the mountain and I think that's one of the big challenges of being a theological writer – managing those transitions. This retreat has given me a wonderful opportunity to reflect on these and other questions.”

“Two interrelated ways of **focusing**:

1. Concrete experiential focus
2. Conceptual focus

— Is this different from a focus in terms of task?

The effect of **silence**:

1. (How) does it facilitate efficiency?
 - a. at least over lunch and breakfast
2. What is specifically interesting about the juxtaposition of silence and writing? (What is the 'and'? Should there be an 'and'?)
 - a. Does one become more attentive to the experience and phenomenon of writing?
 - i. Is there subject-object divide in writing?
 - between the writer (subject) and the written (object)
 - Perhaps silence helps to recognise the relation between the two
 - b. Is 'writing' itself some kind of silent conversation (cf. what Hannah Arendt calls the 'two-in-one')?
 - i. Is there a reciprocity between the writer and written?
 - Is writing not just expression of the writer, but also some kind of reception (the writer receiving something 'back' from the written)
 - ii. With its aim of publication, is academic writing always already an anticipation of further conversation with its readers?”

“This retreat has been a wonderful experience. I’ve very much appreciated the **warm and trusting collegiality of others** (framed by the daily offices, Benedictine spirituality, and silence through much of the day) in allied areas of theological thinking and research who have helped model for me **a way of understanding myself as a “writer”**. I’ve thought of myself as a reader and thinker who happens to write reasonably well (since I take the craft seriously), but being a “writer” has never been my self-understanding. I just write; other people are “writers.” I now begin to wonder how my relationship to the craft might change were I to try to think of myself as a writer.

This retreat has offered me **new insights concerning “giving myself” to my writing as I might do for other responsibilities.**

The retreat has also offered me **new ideas about (or strategies for) writing** – most importantly, I think I’ve learned that when I get “stuck” it is helpful to find someone willing to listen to me tell them what I hope to accomplish with an essay, and explore with them the arc of the piece, the context, the expository element, and the main argument(s). (Thanks, Clare!)

I have also learned that if in future I have similar retreat opportunities I’d like to do more of my reading in advance of intentional writing times, have my notes assembled already, and then during the retreat itself simply write!”

“From this retreat I take with me **a renewed sense of encounter, communion and *missio*.**

Encounter – small gifts that feel providential: beginning with the deer family in the monastery garden, sparking a mood of wonder, awakening, open to surprise; followed by the quiet of Morning Prayer and the Invitatory in particular (‘O Lord open our lips that our mouths may proclaim thy praise!’) and the recitation of Psalm 94 (?). Contact with the uniqueness of this place - attending to the rhythms of life both within and beyond the monastery walls, and inquiring into the relations between them - is grounding my writing on the meaning of ‘Wild Liturgy’ through direct and concrete experience, not just texts.

Communion – not being alone in writing/working; feeling the support of a community of scholars, of conversation; being able to laugh together. Growing courage to ‘hold my own’, that is, to feel the unusualness of myself as precious, as valuable in this context; not just a misfit or perhaps we all are misfits. The **shared silence gradually built an underlying sense of acceptance of not just my own ‘unusualness’ but of each person’s; a shift from (self)judgment to welcome.**

Missio – the work feels like **an adventure** again. I’m feeling sent on my way – braver, kinder, indebted to a generosity of spirit and care-taking with words that could only arise as a corporate, and corporeal, endeavour.”

“The retreat has been an invitation to **focus and energise** writing in a way I may not have found at home, with all the demands of daily living and work. I have been able to overcome impasses in both my fictional and academic writing. The shape of things is emerging in the thicket of words and distractions. I have **more confidence and a sense of pleasure** that waits for the words to come.

I have a sense that the work of the retreat really starts now. It has **unravelled time, and the ways I often fill it**, the image of thought I often bring to it: precisely that of ‘demands’ competing for attention. I experience time as something to be managed and filled.

For me the retreat has **opened up a dimension of time I know is always there but lies concealed**. The time of attention, of delight, of struggling with what matters. This time is uncouned. It lives as a network of roots beneath the canopy of seconds and hours, diaries and projects. It flickers beyond the window, tracing a line of flight.

There is always not enough time. There is always enough time. **Writing is not to be done when everything else is completed. It can be the first thing.**

I read something this morning from a Taoist writer: if you wait until you have achieved your ambitions before you begin on the Way you will find your ambitions are endless.”

“I really appreciated the **communal silence**; being silent with a group of friends, all of whom were committed to the same undertaking. The communal meals, the communal study time, when sometimes we were in a shared space, sometimes in more private ones, but all of us seeking to think and write, and think about our writing. The communal worship (on and off), and the communal reflective sessions, led by Clare and Karen; **learning from the thoughts and insights of others**. And the walks (too few undertaken) that the Abbey affords. It was **the mix of private and common life** that created a unique experience, and **a renewed sense that writing can be done**, that I can do the writing that I need and want to do.”

“The retreat has been **an opportunity to face my writing task**, or at least contemplate the need to do so. In that sense, it has returned me to the page with time to wrestle with the jumble of ideas already laid down and begin the first forays into the next blank page. **Writing provokes a number of emotions and those are brought to the surface more obviously in the context of a retreat**. Anticipation and excitement are amongst those emotions. So too are a sense of being overwhelmed and daunted by the sheer

energy and courage required to put expressions and ideas on a page for others. The **responsibility of writing** – the need to get things right, to make the best of my privileged education and professional position, and not to waste the readers’ time with my own interests and predilections – has weighed heavily. At the same time, so too has the need to **relax my grip** on the task. For now, my writing is between me and the page, me and the computer screen. That relationship can be recast and renegotiated many times over before the book takes on a life of its own and confronts the world.”

“My week’s experience was shaped by a providential misunderstanding. I took ‘writing’ in a rather rigid and literal sense as to exclude the preparatory work of ‘reading’, and so separated myself from my books.

On a very basic level, I am profoundly glad to have been here. **The value of gratitude in writing—and the sense of responsibility that comes with it—is the most important lesson for me.** It seems that an essential ingredient in an ecosystem in which my writing thrives is the cultivation of gratitude, so that writing ever remain both obligation and opportunity.

Existentially, I find myself occupying a space quite distinct from a retreat in the classical sense with which I am familiar. It was not really a ‘retreat from’ but a ‘retreat with’: not, in the first place, the opening of a clearing in which to hear the voice of God, but rather an opportunity to bring an element of my work with me into contemplative silence so as to see it in a different—perhaps more spiritual—light. I would normally see a retreat in terms of ‘grounding’ or ‘reconnecting’, but this week involved a kind of disembedding of writing from its usual setting in my life. This enabled me to draw into the foreground things that often lie unspoken in the background: anxieties, resistances, hopes, inner critical voices, and so forth. **I have been struck by the way in which many members of the group have (like me) tended to resist seeing themselves as writers.** It struck me that there is vulnerability not only in admitting our anxieties about writing, but also in stating our hope that we might be and become writers.

I feel strangely certain that the week has had some significance to me, perhaps quite profound. It feels premature to say exactly what that significance is. On a pragmatic level, I have been staggered by how much I managed to produce (about 25% more than I predicted) and that I have felt enlivened by being creative in this way. I wonder if I might be able to take away from this week **a confidence in using small parcels of time more effectively.** The framing of the day by silence certainly gives time a distinctive quality and density, and I wonder if there is some way in which I might existentially ‘bookmark’ the retreat and come back to it in my memory as a way of **renewing my desire to write.**”

“Douai Abbey has been the ideal environment in which to think and write in peace, something I felt very eager (even desperate) to do after a few busy weeks. The retreat’s significance has been twofold. First, **the silence and time to myself, which allowed me to sink deep into thought.** Second, **the group, which has had a delightful life of its own,** unfolding like a flower over the course of these five days. The group has been so warm and supportive, **quickly forming a community where people share their experiences of the ‘life of the mind’ in a way that doesn’t happen too often in academic gatherings.** My sense is that people quickly became comfortable with one another. They have been open and generous in disclosing their thoughts and feelings. I was left with a stronger than ever impression that writing is a struggle, and that writing is joyful. It was such a pleasure to hear about everyone’s love and passion for their subjects. The evening conversations led by Karen enhanced the retreat; though these were different from our afternoon sessions, they likewise provided a valuable opportunity for a kind of reflection that isn’t usually encouraged in academic settings.”

“Looked after by others, distractions at a minimum, I can better see what happens in writing, its own drama. **I am reminded of what I enjoy.** I am reminded that it can be done, that creation is possible, that it doesn’t need the anxious adrenaline of a deadline. **I get a glimpse of myself as someone who can gradually bring something into existence, that this is part of my identity.**

What I want to take away is the need to remember and apply what I learned at the last retreat: that it is right to approach writing with trust and hope, gentle confidence, and in touch with the fact that I enjoy doing it, rather than with anxiety and self-management, too much of an effort of will.

Contemplative interruptions are really valuable, and nearly impossible to make myself do—I haven’t yet figured that one out.

I’m still frustrated that it doesn’t happen faster though, that even under ideal conditions I only make moderate progress.”

Appendix 2: How to run a Writing Retreat

Across the two years of our project, we refined and adjusted the way we ran writing retreats. What follows is an account of what we came to by the end.

Length:

We ran retreats of four and a half days: participants arrived before dinner on Tuesday, and left before or after lunch on Sunday. This allowed four full days of writing as well as a chance to settle in on the Tuesday and to share a final reflection on the Sunday.

Location:

In spite of an initial plan to experiment with different locations we ended up appreciating Douai Abbey so much that we ran all but one retreat there. We benefitted from:

- Hospitality: pleasant guest wing, excellent food, a friendly but relaxed welcome and peaceful atmosphere.
- Location: the availability of walks in beautiful woods and fields nearby.
- Writing space: there were several public spaces in which people could write, including (by kind permission of the monks) a beautiful small library, and each also had a good desk in their bedroom.
- Meeting space: we were able to gather to reflect on writing or to socialise in a conveniently sized room on our own.
- Liturgical life: many participants welcomed the ability to join the monks at one or another of the daily offices, though there was no expectation that anyone had to do so. For some the fact that this rhythm of the daily office was around us was important, even if or when they did not participate.

Silence:

We gradually became more confident about asking writers to remain in silence for much of the day, typically until 4:30. We understood this as something participants do for one another—allowing one another space to write or remain in thought or simply to relax, without needing to follow social conventions around conversation, including at breakfast and lunch. Most found this to be important, though people acknowledged a slight feeling of oddness eating breakfast in silence together. We tried to steer people away from imagining silence as something to be endured, some sort of ascetical achievement, and to hold it in a relaxed way—if there is a need to say something to someone (“pass the salt” etc) this is fine.

Expectations:

- We encouraged people to work on whatever writing project they wished, at whatever stage it might be, and to understand “writing” in its full breadth (to include for instance planning, outlining, editing and thinking, as well as accumulating words on a page).
- We gave advance assurance of at least 5 free hours a day for writing, but did not set any target. We encouraged writers to use their judgment about the benefits of walking, resting, sleeping as well as intellectual engagement during the day.

- We encouraged people to leave behind other tasks and concerns to whatever degree work and family circumstance allowed. As a minimum we requested all put an out-of-office response on their email. We did not impose anything about internet/phones/email checking, but encouraged people to reflect on what approach they would find possible and beneficial. Some of this was communicated before the retreat itself, to enable people to prepare themselves for it.
- We asked people to refrain from introducing office politics or discussion of institutional affairs (e.g. complaints about university management and the like) into conversations during the retreats. This was based on the judgment that very able and interesting people fritter away too much of their conversational time on these matters in other academic contexts, and we wanted to encourage a different conversational atmosphere.

Discussion period: the experience of the day's writing

We drew people together, usually at 4:30 each day, for an hour and a quarter, to reflect on some aspect of that day's writing. Initially we did this in order to gather data, but we came to think this session, when done well, formed a valuable part of the retreat itself—at least for most participants.

- After the first retreat, we abandoned free-for-all seminar style conversations. These contrasted too much with the silence of the day. Instead, we asked people to speak individually, with all listening to (but not responding to) each in turn.
- The first question was often about how the writing experience had gone for each person in general terms. Hearing about the ups and downs of each other's writing was an important part, across a retreat, of the sense of having a kind of journey through the week together.
- A follow up question was asked about some more particular aspect of the experience. At times we requested people to allow a question to sit for 15 minutes before bringing their thoughts to the group.
- NB: While the majority enjoyed these sessions, a couple of participants did not. It is possible that for people who are introverts and quite private, this kind of discussion focused on experience is simply unpleasant.

Social evenings:

Socialising in the evening was always optional, but most took it up. We tended to provide some cookies or cakes, and we brought—and encouraged others to bring—wine or other drinks.

We experimented with the shaping of this segment of the day more than anything else. Would people read their writing out loud? Would they like to discuss some particular problem they were facing? (We tried this and it felt a little forced and complex.) Would it be better to have an undirected conversation? (Sometimes this went well, sometimes not as well.) Part way through our final retreat we found what we think worked best overall, at least with that cohort (PhD student/early career scholars).

We called this a “salon”. Everyone is invited, no one obliged to come. The focus is turned to one person at a time, and they are asked about their research. They can only be asked “baby” questions, very simple questions. We found this allowed (a) everyone to learn a bit about the topics of the others, and to get a sense of their enthusiasm, while (b) no one was under pressure to “perform” in the way they might be at a conference, to show that they had something sophisticated or original to say. One of us played the role of the leader, determining when it was time to take a break, refill glasses, move on to

another person etc. Ideally both the start and the end time of the salon should be announced in advance, so that everyone can come, but people who wish to go to bed relatively earlier can decide whether to stay for the whole or not.

Leadership:

It was useful to have two of us leading the retreats. We were able to do some of our own writing, but the responsibility for the experience as a whole meant we were not as fully given over to writing as others. Our role was:

- Offer an orientation session including a reflection on the concept of “retreat”, explain the pattern of the days, set the tone of the retreat, and model a non-hierarchical style of engagement.
- Lead the afternoon discussions and, at times, the evening salons.
- Have a prior relationship with the monastic community (at least the Guest Master) and familiarity with the locale; manage any issues coming up in relationship of writers to monastery.
- Be available for conversation if anyone is finding the silence too difficult (though we were not taken up on this).
- Offer individual conversation slots after lunch, if participants want to discuss specific writing-related issues with another person.

Book table:

We asked established scholars to bring copies of a book or books they had written, ideally more popularly facing books. On the evening of the arrival day, we led an informal session where writers spoke about their book, for example by saying one thing they were proud of and one thing they found challenging in writing it. This helped to foreground participants’ identity as writers and began to establish a community of reflection on writing. The following morning we laid the books on a table in the corridor leading from the monastery to the Abbey Church, where the monks walked several times each day. The monks could glance at them as they walked past, or stop and look more closely if they wished. This helped to strengthen the relationship between the writing community and the monastic community.

Appendix 3: How to run a writing workshop

Across the course of the project we ran workshops in a variety of contexts, sometimes for a mixed group of colleagues and postgraduates, sometimes for postgraduates only. The appreciation of the participants suggests that there is an unmet need for spaces in which the experience of (theological) writing can be discussed. We found people were consistently more interested to discuss their own experience of writing than to hear if we had drawn any conclusions from our project.

In our workshops we did nevertheless draw on some of the specific framing and findings of the project, but we do not believe the value of the workshops was dependent on this. We propose the three-part schema below as a basic pattern for a writing workshop.

It was useful for participants in our workshops to know that we ourselves were getting something out of the workshop—testing ideas from our project, continuing to learn from people’s experience. Though this cannot be entirely replicated in other contexts, it may be useful to find some way to strike a similar tone. A workshop leader who is also a PhD supervisor, for instance, might indicate the usefulness of the workshop for the development of their own supervisory practice.

Part I: Introduction, scene setting

The leader here introduces the workshop, strives to set the tone, and introduces three basic premises.

Tone: As far as possible it is valuable to encourage participants to move away from the competitive anxieties and need to perform that often mar academic conversation for the duration of the workshop. Partly this can be done by modelling something different: the leader might for instance acknowledge their own difficulties with writing (if they have any) and the range of different experiences of writing they have encountered among established scholars.

We suggest the following three hypotheses together set a good basis for a writing workshop:

- For most people, writing is hard, intellectually and/or emotionally.
- People’s experience of writing and relationship to writing differ significantly, and these differences are interesting.
- For many of us it is useful to become more clearly aware of our relationship to writing.

Part II: Group Discussion

Depending on the number of those present, this might be a single conversation or managed in small groups. We suggest choosing between two and four of the following questions, according to how much time is available, and allowing the group(s) to discuss them in either one or two rounds of conversation.

- a) Is being a writer part of your identity? Do you think of yourself as “a writer”?
- b) If you find writing hard, what makes it hard? Is the difficulty intellectual or emotional?
- c) How far do you see writing as a way of expressing yourself, and how far a way of being in service to others?
- d) What is your relationship to deadlines?
- e) Which stages of writing do you enjoy, and which do you dislike?

- f) Do you write best when you have nothing else to do, or when your time is broken up by other obligations?
- g) Do you write best at a particular time of day, and if so, when? What kind of physical arrangements or routines are best for your writing?
- h) Do you write with readers consciously in mind? If you do, are they particular readers (teachers or former teachers, friends, spouse, etc) or generic readers?
- i) Do you like to bring other people into the writing process before it is finished, to give feedback and suggestions?
- j) Do you edit as you compose, or do you tend to separate these stages?

Part III: Conclusion

If people have been discussing in small groups, some form of feedback to the whole will be valuable. Finally, the leader can conclude by summarising some of what they have heard, and indicate, if possible, some way in which they have learned something new, or had their understanding deepened, by the process.