[A] Reading the Magnificat in a Time of Crisis: Taking and Giving Life

Anne Elvey
Monash University and University of Divinity

[B] Introduction

The Anthropocene is a name for the age in which we are living, a time in which human activity is having effects on a geological and global scale.¹ For around fifty years, probably longer, what we have been facing has been described as a crisis, an ecological crisis, and we have heard and been distressed by talk of environmental destruction and ecocide.² Such is the critical time in which we live, where on average the climate is warming and will continue to do so, where we are in the sixth major extinction period, where there are unimaginable losses of biodiversity and suitable habitats, both human and other-than-human, where overpopulation and overconsumption have become jointly problematic, where our children and grandchildren and their children and their children’s children, will likely bear the cost, where we have made some responses in tackling pollution, in conservation, and in divestment from fossil fuels, where there is much more to be done. How might a song such as the Magnificat, sung or recited daily in monasteries and convents, churches and private homes, be prayed effectively in this time?

I will take what might seem a strange route to address this question. My path takes me through a brief survey of the way the Magnificat has been referenced especially in creative writing in the press in Australia in the first half of the twentieth

¹ See Chakrabarty, “Climate of History.”
² At least since Lynn White’s oft cited 1967 article this has been described as an ecological crisis: White, “Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis.”
century, to a particular focus on a story entitled “Magnificat” by Australian writer H. (Henrietta) Drake-Brockman (1901–1968).\(^3\) The story appeared in *The West Australian* in January 1939.\(^4\) Written as the Second World War approached, Drake Brockman’s short story “Magnificat” raised serious questions concerning giving and taking life, with direct reference to Mary’s song in the Gospel of Luke. I will draw some threads of interpretation from Drake-Brockman’s story before turning to the Gospel of Luke and asking about the threads of death and life in the Magnificat. Finally, I will suggest one way in which the widely-used song-poem-prayer that is the Magnificat might suggest prayers for our time.

**[B] The Magnificat in Australia**

As part of both the biblical and liturgical tradition of Christianity, and the European cultural tradition of choral composition and performance, the Magnificat came to Australia with British colonization. In addition to the many references to nineteenth and twentieth century performances of the Magnificat, Handel’s or Bach’s for example, the Magnificat is mentioned in the daily press as early as 1860, in an article in *The Argus* entitled “Church of England Mission to the Aborigine,” where Mr Goodwin reports on his visit to “the Native Training Institution at Poonindie, which lies 10 miles to the north of the town of Port Lincoln”: “… The Rev. O. Hammond read service, the whole congregation joining in the responses, in a devout and intelligent manner, … reading in audible yet subdued voice the alternate verses of the

---

\(^3\) The Benedictus and Nunc Dimittis also prayed daily appear in the Australian press, in various forms, with the Nunc Dimittis occasioning creative writing, but mostly with reference to a final farewell in the face of age or approaching death, and not with quite the variety of reference that the Magnificat seems to occasion.

\(^4\) Drake Brockmann, “Magnificat.”
psalms, the ‘Magnificat’ and ‘Deus Misereatur’…”⁵ In 1875, *The Argus*’ “special correspondent” reports on “A Visit to the Melanesian Mission Station,” where “The congregation led by the Rev. Mr Brooke at the harmonium, chanted the Magnificat, the Nunc Dimitis, and the psalms, in excellent style.”⁶

In the 20th century, across the country, creative writings themed on the Magnificat were published from time to time. Arthur Symons’ 1909 “Magnificat” in the Adelaide *Quiz*, “A satirical, social and sporting journal,” praises God for the speaker’s erotic love of a woman.⁷ A more pious version appears in an article on The Magnificat in 1915 in the *Prahran Chronicle*, shifting the subject of the song to its traditional speaker Mary, so that “Daily at the vesper hour, / Mary’s name is praised,” and she is “Great in her magnificence.”⁸ The biblical Magnificat is printed in full in the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* on Christmas Day 1915 alongside other Christian religious material.⁹ In January 1917, *The Register*, Adelaide, publishes Frederic Warner’s poem “Earth’s Magnificat” which lists what the speaker cannot know compared with the little he does, for example:

I may not know the story of the earth
The sea with all its secrets, wide and deep
I may not know what is beyond death’s sleep
Or all the strange sweet mystery of birth

But he praises nonetheless:

---

⁵ Goodwin, “Church of England Mission to the Aborigine.”
⁶ Special Correspondent, “Visit to the Melanesian Mission Station.”
⁷ Symons, “Magnificat.” See also, “SA Newspapers.”
⁸ From “The Parish Supplement.”
⁹ “Religious Topics.”
Although my mind may question this or that,
I gladly join in earth’s magnificat.¹⁰

This is Job joined with Luke’s Mary, but with the focus shifted to Earth as prompt for and agent of praise. Only at the close does the speaker turn explicitly toward the divine: “And at the feet of God adoring fall.”¹¹ Clearly, the verse does not match the quality of the poetics of either Job or the Magnificat, but it suggests an interesting shift of emphasis, one which has resonance with Lola Gornall’s sonnet, “Magnificat,” published in *The Australian Worker*, Sydney, 1919. Here the speaker’s (seaside?) garden is locus of the sacred:

> The sea’s High Mass, the Psalms the wind forsook.
> The rosary of Morn, the fugue of Night,
> The holy vespers that the flowers keep—
> …
> I need no priest to pray with lowered eyes
> For me: God feels the thrill of my delight …

and in the final line God looks on her with evident fondness.¹²


---

¹⁰ Warner, “Earth’s Magnificat.”
¹¹ Warner, “Earth’s Magnificat.”
¹² Gornall, “Magnificat.”
of joy such that for the psalmists: “God’s statutes have become their songs” and “by God’s grace our hearts can sing the Magnificat through everything.”

This seems to me a good way of describing song in relation to country, such that for traditional owners the laws of country are their song. Can the statutes of Earth or, if one prefers, the statutes of a godly Creation become our song?

In 1926, the *Freeman’s Journal* (Sydney) presents a more traditional verse entitled “Magnificat” by Charles O’Donnell, C.S.C, which narrates Mary’s visit to Elizabeth. While “rivers” are “not so strong and sweet” as Mary, nonetheless the song allows the Earth and its weather, sun and moon, to interact as agents with the travelling woman, leading to the intimacy of the two cousins and the telling lines toward the end: “And then the traveller, full of grace, / Sang, or her heart had died.” Amidst the piety and sentimentality of the verse O’Donnell picks up something true about the song, the way it stands on the side of life at a critical point where an unnamed (in his verse) oppression might occasion despair and where human life and action is always more-than-human. This more-than-human agency also appears in an unattributed verse “Wind and Wave” published in 1933 on the “Matrons and Maids” page of the *Catholic Freeman’s Journal* (Sydney), formerly the *Freeman’s Journal*, where the wind seems to sing “Mary’s deathless hymn” and the waves murmur “Our Lady’s Rosary.”

What these examples suggest is not only that the Magnificat, recited or sung daily, captured the imaginations of settler Australians as an important part of their colonial and religious heritage, but that it formed a kind of template for exploring experiences of the sacred sometimes in a more-than-human frame. The instances also

---

13 Jowett, “Life’s Magnificat.”
14 O’Donnell, “Magnificat.”
15 On more-than-human and material agency, see, for example, Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Knappett and Malafouris, *Material Agency*; Elvey, *Matter of the Text*.
16 “Wind and Wave.”
pick up on the issues of death and life central to the Lukan Magnificat, and the way
the song itself, in its performance, can be empowering for life. In this tradition, H.
Drake-Brockman’s short story “Magnificat” poignantly juxtaposes the song with the
horror of war.

[B] H. Drake-Brockman’s “Magnificat”

Henrietta Drake-Brockman’s husband Geoffrey born in 1885 was a civil engineer.
Part of the Drake-Brockman family, descendants of Geoffrey’s great grandfather
William Locke Brockman’s nephew James Groves were Western Australian
establishment and held property, kept Aboriginal people parochially, and featured
contentiously in Sally Morgan’s *My Place*. Geoffrey Drake-Brockman had fought in
World War I. Henrietta was born in 1901 and married Geoffrey in 1921. Her two
children were born around 1924 and 1927, so by the time she is writing “Magnificat”
she is herself a mother of growing children.¹⁷ Drake-Brockman’s “Magnificat”
appears in January 1939 on the same page of *The West Australian* as a reprint of an
article by Winston Churchill, P.C., M.P., “Dangers in Eastern Europe: Poland and the
Balkans,” where he writes “All Eastern Europe spends the Christmas in deep fear.
Against whom will the next blow be directed?”¹⁸ Beside the threat of Nazism and
Churchill’s hope that Eastern European states will unite against it, and in so doing
engage the support of Western democracies, Drake-Brockman tells a story of a
mother and son whose apartment is bombed in an air strike. The precise location

on the “Morgan controversy”, see Drake-Brockman, “Sally Morgan Controversy.” Some family tree
information was derived from the open access part of http://www.brockman.net.au/. For a different
understand of the Drake-Brockman–Sally Morgan conflict, see Probyn-Rapsey, “Kin-fused
Reconciliation.”
¹⁸ Churchill, “Dangers in Eastern Europe.”
remains unspecified. While likely Czeckoslavakia, Poland, or the Balkans is meant, there is a universal theme to the mother-son narrative. A woman rouses herself after the terror of a bombing and thinking her son is dead finds him still breathing but with his legs severed. She decides to spare first herself, and incidentally her son, the pain of wakening as he bleeds to death, and uses a cushion to smother him. While she hopes to avoid the look he will give her—charging her with the betrayal that war is of the life that she gave in his birth—in death his open eyes seem nonetheless to accuse her. The repetitions, short sentences, exclamations, and ellipses work to heighten the drama. The descriptions of her bodily experience, the vivid colours, the trembling of her hand, together situate the experience of the violence of war as embodied—a sensory corporeal experience in which sensation is saturated. The references to birth at this moment of dying evoke the life-death nexus, and place it at the cusp of the maternal. The coda after the asterisks, shifts the focus to a bomber, someone’s equally celebrated son, returning to base, satisfied with his work: “Every bomb a bull’s-eye. Those new carriers worked like a dream.” The story becomes at one level a protest at the impending war, or at least at the inevitability of the harm it will occasion, a harm which undoes a basic trust not only between mother and child, but between creator and creation.

The story is titled “Magnificat” and perhaps this is in part to evoke the religious heritage of the European woman who several times exclaims “Mother of God!” At first when the son, whom she had thought dead is alive (surely an echo of the joy and perhaps also the compassion of the father in the parable of the lost / prodigal son in Luke 15), the woman prays the opening line of the Magnificat. Later when she recalls the child’s birth and her participation in the wondrous life-giving of creation, she prays this line: \textit{Behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me}
<p>blessed. As I have argued elsewhere and will suggest below, these generations open to the multiple more than human genealogies of creation.<sup>19</sup> In the deliberate reference to the Magnificat, Drake-Brockman’s narrative opens a space for interpretative conversation between the story and the song, through: 1) the strong maternal thematic which to some extent gets backgrounded (as does the Earth) in Luke’s song (in favour of human issues of justice and liberation, and a male genealogy); 2) the function of both story and song as protest; and 3) the implication that the Magnificat like the story stands in sight of the cross.<sup>20</sup></p>


I will take up those three threads of the maternal, protest, and the cross for the beginnings of an interpretative conversation with the Magnificat in Luke’s gospel.

**[C] 1. Recovering the Maternal and the Earth at the Nexus of Life and Death**

The maternal, in particular the body in pregnancy, and the Earth, as I have shown previously, share a quality of gift-life givenness, a material givenness, that is necessary for human and other forms of mammalian life.<sup>21</sup> This quality of givenness is in tension with the kinds of hyperseparations, or dualisms, of which Val Plumwood is rightly critical: self-other; heaven-earth; spirit-matter; mind-body; master-slave. The last of these supposed oppositions is at issue in the world of Lukan reversals of rich-poor and oppressor-oppressed, where good news means liberation and forgiveness of the kind of debt that keeps people in slavery not only to sin, but also—

---

<sup>19</sup> Elvey, “Hermeneutics of Retrieval.”

<sup>20</sup> A similar link is made in a verse published in 1941. O’Leary, “Magnificat—Nunc Dimittis.”

and it can be argued primarily—materially to unjust economic, social, and political systems. At the same time, these issues of death and life, are embedded in what Michael Trainor identifies as the underlying biblical story of creation embedded in the infancy narratives of Luke. This creation and birth story for Luke stands in tension with the Roman imperial story (2:1–7) and offers a different kind of peace on and for—and we might want to add in cooperation with—Earth (2:14). The visiting angels bringing a message of peace from the skies (also part of the cosmos in which Earth is itself embedded) are also part of creation for the first century CE writer of Luke. In the Magnificat the issues of life and death are evident not only in the tropes of power and wealth, sustenance and satiation (1:51–53), but also in the divine mercy—both toward the humble or humiliated woman (1:48, 50) and through the covenant with the ancestors toward the people of Israel (1:54–55). This mercy is expressed in Luke in what Brendan Byrne describes as the hospitality of God, evident in the tropes of forgiveness and compassion, the latter of which carries also the thread of the maternal.

[C] 2. Stories and Songs of Protest

Earlier I noted, however, that despite the song’s being sung by a woman—and I accept Mary rather than Elizabeth, as the Lukan singer—unlike the visitation

---

22 Plumwood, Feminism and the Mastery of Nature; Elvey, “Can There Be a Forgiveness That Makes a Difference Ecologically?”

23 Trainor, About Earth’s Child, esp. 64–90.


26 The reference to Hannah’s song, recalling her barrenness, and in particular the humiliation of the speaker have raised the question whether Elizabeth might have been the speaker of the song, but the reference to humiliation accompanies the speaker’s self-description as δούλη (1:48) echoing Mary’s self-description in 1:38. Moreover, the Greek textual tradition supports the acceptance of Mary as speaker. See further, Bovon, Luke I, 60. On translating ταπείνωσιν as “humiliation,” see Fitzmyer,
episode in which it is set, the song appears to make little direct reference to the maternal. Instead, it seems at one level to re-inscribe dualisms of rich and poor, power and weakness, oppressed and oppressor, through the (in some cases) violent reversal of these (1:51). While at one point the song refers to generations generically (1:50), later the reference is to the male ancestral line of Abraham and his sons (1:55). Nonetheless, the reference recalls the covenant with the people (1:55) and the reversals signal that, as several scholars—including Warren Carter and Barbara Reid—have argued, the song is a song of protest.27

In allowing an interpretative conversation between Drake-Brockman’s story and Luke’s Magnificat we might note on the one hand the way the story sets up the shock of the mother’s mercy killing of her child as a protest against the death-dealing of war, however just or otherwise, and the Lukan song sets up the shock of violent reversals as a protest against the underlying oppression they symbolize. On the other hand, there is a stark difference: Drake-Brockman’s story can also be read as a protest against the failures of the God of the song at the point where, in war, creation (human and we can add other-than-human) seems to be betrayed by the creator, as death overtakes life. In Mary’s song God’s promise is spoken as life-giving protest against death-dealing oppression.


Drake-Brockman’s story with its focus on a mother witnessing (and hastening) the dying of her son moves us from the infancy narratives, in which the Magnificat is situated in Luke, to something like the crucifixion narrative. The image of the Pieta

(albeit with a young rather than an adult child) comes to mind. The link between birth narrative and cross is one that appears in Matthew 1–2, especially in the warning of the magi, the slaughter of the children, and the flight to Egypt (Matt 2:1–18), but also in Mary’s encounter with Simeon in Luke (2:33–35). In the birth of the child is the shadow of his death. Both women, the mother in Drake-Brockman’s “Magnificat” and Mary in Luke’s Gospel, will outlive their sons.

In our contemporary context, as Norman Habel has long reminded us, when we face our contemporary ecological crisis, we stand in sight of the cross, with and as part of a crucified Earth, witness to the scorched places human activity has created or decreated. What might be called the contemporary “war” on creation is at this nexus where creation seems to have been betrayed by the creator, because of one part of creation: humankind, and more particularly a large subgroup of humankind that are consciously and unconsciously wreaking havoc, not unlike the bomber.

In our traditions, religious and cultural, the Magnificat, a Lukan song with deep roots in the Jewish scriptures—for example, 1 Sam 2:1–10; and other women’s songs, Exod 15:19–20; Judg 5:1–31; Jdt 16:1–17, and Psalms—offers the possibility of celebrating life and protesting damage. The song is open, then, to the way the gift-like givenness of creation unsettles the death-dealing of oppressive structures based in self-other, master-slave, rich-poor, and culture-nature dualisms.

[B] Praying the Magnificat in a Time of Ecological Crisis

How might praying the Magnificat as part of the hours, or at Evensong, or as a Second Testament psalm, or as a song of protest, inform a culture of care for creation?

The cadences of the Magnificat in any good English translation are such that it is well nigh impossible to write a “Magnificat” that is anywhere near as potent. But just as the song has offered a model for early settler Australians to shape their experiences, it may suggest contemporary prayers to us. In the following, in the form of a prayer rather than a poem, I take up three aspects: generations, mercy and reversal, noting nonetheless that reversal can be problematic in that it can simply reinstate the power relations reversed.

Our souls and our spirits celebrate
Earth enlarges
We breathe Earth’s breath

God has seen the mountaintop removed
and the valley filled with tailings

God knows the shame of kin torn from Country
and has looked on the coral in its reef

On this basis we are called fortunate
and God, holy
whose mercy is from generation to generation

for air and oceans, mercy
for dying species, mercy
for inundated islands, mercy
for displaced islanders, mercy
for asylum seekers, mercy
for our children and grandchildren, mercy
for all species now and to come, mercy

God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts

God has brought down coal magnates
and renewed despoiled habitats

God has sustained endangered species
and summoned to account the shareholders

God has slowed the thundering roadtrain and
from the pouch of the prone roo has lifted the joey

God has shaken the foundations of our comfort
and crawled into the burrow of the endling29

We barely believe this to be true
because God does not do this alone —
reminding us of the promise

Earth is waiting for us to remember

29 An endling is the last surviving individual of a species.
Earth is waiting for us to abide

It is by Earth’s covenant we are bound with God

and our descendants forever

[B] Bibliography


White, Lynn. “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis.” In *This Sacred Earth:*