

Denham Grierson, *Uluru Journey: An Exploration into Narrative Theology* (Melbourne: The Joint Board of Christian Education, 1996). 166 pp., including select bibliography.

By Wesley J. Wildman, Assistant Professor of Theology, Boston University, July 16, 1996 [1400 words]

*Uluru Journey* has two sections. The first narrates a story about modern Australians on pilgrimage to the Rock. When rain prevents exploration of the Rock, the group falls to telling stories about their lives. Each pilgrim's story is woven into the larger narrative, just as in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which was Grierson's inspiration for the structural device of a narrative "container" for stories (147).

These stories and the story containing them are beautifully written. Grierson's deft hand discloses the emotional and conceptual distinctiveness of his characters' life-worlds. He avoids many temptations: he neither reveals too much, nor rushes his characters into risky openness; he neither fails to exhibit their self-deceptions, nor renders them facile translations of predetermined figurines. He might assume more by way of linguistic facility and self-awareness on the part of his characters than we might reasonably expect to find in the average group of Australians—even Uluru pilgrims—but this is a minor excess, and a time-honored device to increase narrative interest. I found the differences between the characters delightful, the internal consistency of each life-world fascinating, and the whole enjoyable and moving. The enclosing pilgrimage narrative was suffused by a subtle mood of celebration that resonated with my own reaction to Grierson's character portraits.

To what end, all these words? There is something to be said for pointless narratives, for stories that neither celebrate nor attest, neither evaluate nor critique nor praise. Such narratives are akin to acts of worship, which in some essential way remain pointless through being untouched by the motivations and purposes that condition them. While Grierson's tapestry of stories can be read in this way, he intends it to be an act of inquiry in narrative form. An inquiry into what? The term of this inquiry is the ineffable wonder at the agonizing heart of human life,

the indeterminate ground of existence, the mystery into which our experience and insight fade at their horizons—which is to say, for Christians and many others, God. Each of Grierson's pilgrims is a reflexive interpreter of this mystery, each one a living transcription of its murmurings, each one reading off its traces for us as they tell their stories. But this inquiry produces no explicit results, and seems incapable of doing so. Why then does Grierson call it inquiry at all? I would say that most of Grierson's readers hear not only these pilgrimage recitations, but also the murmurings of divine mystery as it is encountered in their own lives. Perhaps, then, this kind of narrative approach to God-talk is less a form of inquiry as it is a means of facilitating personal inquiry, both for its author and his readers.

The second section of the book is a discussion of narrative theology. I suffered a twinge of regret to see the author's intentions for the first section so bluntly unmasked—testimony to the quality of the character portraits, I suppose. But the book's purpose cannot be achieved without the turn away from the unconstrained ranging of the human soul licensed in fiction and toward disciplined reflection and argument. In successive chapters, Grierson discusses the motivation for narrative theology, its potential strengths and weakness, and the way he implemented his theological goals in the narrative of the first section.

It is important to note that Grierson does not do narrative theology as such in the second section. He does not even provide a reflective, systematic counterpoint to the narrative exploration of the theological themes of God and pilgrimage in the first section. Rather, he argues for the appropriateness and importance of narrative modes of theological inquiry and reflection. There is some value to this, I suppose, especially because Grierson's argument achieves a degree of judicious poise rarely encountered in advocacy of narrative theology. Those familiar with the pros and cons of narrative theology, however, might have preferred to see the theological investigation continue unbroken throughout the two parts of the book. That would have been a different book, of course, and a significantly harder book to write. The narrative section of the book demonstrates that Grierson's theological imagination is genuinely interesting,

however, and I for one would have loved to see the argument of the second section stay focused on theological themes, rather than devolving into a meta-discussion of theological method.

I wonder what would have happened had Grierson attempted to maintain the theological focus by engaging in a systematic, conceptually abstract and disciplined inquiry into God throughout the second section. But wait, you might say, narrative theology is explicitly opposed to systematic, conceptually abstract and disciplined inquiry into God; its critique is that such inquiry is bankrupt through being too optimistic about human reason, and too prone to absolutist distortions. Many do say this about system in theology, but Grierson explicitly distances himself from such a view:

If the rational-metaphysical mode of doing theology was too much a reflection of the Enlightenment and led to obstruction and scepticism, so too the narrative-symbolic is easily co-opted to contemporary fashion and illusion. Even more, it can give birth to a form of subjectivism which is self indulgent and dishonest. A proper relationship, therefore, is...to maintain a dialectical relationship between them. (126)

I could not agree more. But Grierson nowhere in this book describes how this dialectical relationship might work. And, as I have already said, he does not demonstrate it either.

While I can hope that other of Grierson's books are more helpful in this regard, this one does too little to convince the reader that he has a conception of "the rational-metaphysical mode of doing theology" that can match his rhetoric, one that really does permit a healthily balanced dialectic with the "narrative-symbolic" mode. At times, in fact, Grierson betrays a bias against the rational-metaphysical mode that suggests he does not really believe that it is more than a second rate mode of theological discourse. For example, he refutes the charge of absolutism (in the sense of illegitimate claims to immunity from criticism) sometimes leveled against narrative theology first by rightly pointing out that the rational-metaphysical mode is also susceptible to absolutist distortions, but then by celebrating the way that the narrative-symbolic mode sometimes "breaks free from this bondage by its recurrent suspicion of all totalist claims" (138). This is to portray the rational-metaphysical mode as the weak off-horse in the yoked dialectic

between systematic and narrative modes of theology, with narrative theology the reliable lead-horse. On the contrary, however, it is systematic thought of all kinds, including in theology, that is preeminently capable of detecting ideological bias, rendering theological proposals vulnerable to valuable tests of intelligibility and consistency, and forging sound syntheses between competing points of view. Narrative theology, as Grierson himself implicitly demonstrates, is ill-equipped to secure these virtues of systematic thought, even as it is so well-adapted for generating insights and challenging comfortable or destructive assumptions.

What I have said here presupposes some other view of systematic, rational metaphysics than the over-confident rationalisms that always shatter on the mystery of things; it must be one that is profoundly sensitive to metaphysical ambiguity. But the very fact that there is no shortage of candidates for that role is an indication that Grierson's characterization of the Enlightenment and the modern period as relatively sterile and insensitive to narrative is overdrawn. Modernity does have its great story; it is detailed and magnificent, and embraces everything from cosmology and biological evolution to social processes and psychological dynamics. It is told and retold, and almost all of our school children inhale it daily. The problem is not that it is a spiritually sterile story (though the excesses of scientism are real), but that it is a story that is in some respects profoundly dissonant with traditional Christian stories. It is that traditional story that largely defines the terms in which Christians understand the spiritual meaning of their lives, but the modern story that calls all the cultural shots.

Narrative theology is an essential component in the tasks of refuting the spiritual reductionism of scientism, and of cultivating souls. But only systematic theology has what it takes to forge the intellectual-emotional synthesis between these two great but dissonant stories. Judging from this book, I think I may believe in Grierson's rhetoric about a dialectical partnership between systematic-rational-metaphysical theology and narrative-symbolic theology more than he does. But I am glad for his rhetorical support, and we can all celebrate his brilliant theological imagination.