

The Birth of a Book

CHAPTER I

An old photograph provides a glimpse into a dismal cell at a Nazi prison called Tegel. Wan light falls in from a tiny window that is too high for a prisoner to use to take in a landscape, but one who is alert and sensitive might glimpse the upper branches of a high tree or a low hanging cloud, and through that opening, hear a thrush. A standard-issue plank bed with a blanket drawn tight over it takes up most of the small space in the cell and in the picture, and a board to which one could attach notices is on the unadorned wall. Other furnishings are sparse. We know from other sources than the photograph of the presence of a nearby stool and a bucket, positioned for we-all-know-what. Guards, who were forbidden to talk to prisoners, could peer in through a slot in the door to view the inmate, who could not see out. Visitors today can still imagine something of what it must have been like for a captive to squirm or pace in its ten-foot by seven-foot floor space.

All the senses can come into play during such imagining. For instance, the odor of the whole third floor in which this cell 92 stood, the prisoner's pen for a year and a half, was barely endurable. No smell of fresh soap offered a contrast that could render the atmosphere slightly bearable, because there was not any soap available that could have helped make living with one's own odors less than dreadful.

The Birthplace of the Book

From that cramped space designed to kill creativity and bury hope, however, there issued letters and papers that became the substance of one of the great testimonial books of the twentieth century. Since there is so little to observe in the shadowed picture of this room, we are left other reminders and, later, his words written there, to fill it in with a human portrait, that of the author. He was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the best-known German Protestant pastor, who resisted Hitler and paid for his actions and expressions with his life. He was a man of many paradoxes: a long-time pacifist, something that Lutherans were not supposed to be; an *inconsistent* pacifist who became a conspirator in an assassination plot against Adolf Hitler; a thinker who took citizenship seriously but technically was guilty of treason; a still young world traveler who did his most memorable work in this cramping cell.

Many who view the photo of this enclosure do so knowing in advance from his writing and that of his friends something of what was occurring in his mind and in the cell. His letters tell us, but in any case it is not difficult to conjure up a sense of what his aloneness meant to the confined man, who was a naturally gregarious and friendly sort. For a time he was unspoken to, even by guards. In his first days there they tossed in his meager breakfasts. They were forbidden to recognize the humanity of such a locked-in person. We learn from a letter that succumbing to despair was tempting to the prisoner and that at a low moment suicide was even an option, because he considered himself to be “basically” dead.¹ We learn that, instead of killing himself, he began to write, especially as his material circumstances eventually, if only slightly, improved. Many of his notes, of course, were personal letters, some passed on through authorities and some smuggled out and then transmitted to his best friend, Pastor Eberhard Bethge, who saved them. No publisher would have seen a potentially attractive book in the letters or his other various jottings, musings, and poems written in prison.

During the dark nights of loneliness and in the bleak mornings there cannot have been much incentive for the letter-writer to greet the day from amid the sounds of silence at times and, at others, from the din of noises made by prisoners and guards. Yet, against all odds, a book was being drafted. After World War II, Eberhard Bethge, who had hidden the scraps and scribbles in the days of danger, evaluated and

organized them. This meant deciphering scripts and arranging pages to fashion the book that the English-speaking world knows as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Issuing from that seventy-square-foot cell, this little work came to be known, read, and used around the world well into a new century. While the physical setting of its letters and papers was a place capable of inducing claustrophobia, spiritually these contents served readers everywhere as a testimony to openness, possibility, and hope.

Many letters and thus many pages of the eventual book dealt with rather ordinary matters. But surrounding the chatty items that make the letters personally attractive were theological reflections that, Bethge was to decide, might appeal to and serve the church, the university, and the traumatized but recovering nation. After Bonhoeffer's execution as the European war was ending, Bethge did some tentative and exploratory disseminating of some of the writings. The positive reaction, at first from a close circle of friends, turned out to be part of a test that taught Bethge to observe that many readers *were* welcoming this genre. They were becoming involved at second hand with the life and witness of this different kind of theologian, Bonhoeffer.

The Inner Life of the Book

Readers indicated that they wanted to read more examples of the informal, personal, and concrete witness

written from within the prison contexts. They longed to have revealed to them the yearnings and hopes of the still young author. For an example: whoever knew Bonhoeffer personally was aware of his esthetic interests. He would write about music even when he was not able to hear much of it. He even used musical metaphors to describe his life: at base was the *cantus firmus* that faith provided, so he was able to live life polyphonically.² This short reference has often been picked up on by others who were emotionally far removed from his prison experiences, and it became a theme in their spiritual disciplines.

Along with music, to the end Bonhoeffer wrote and read poetry, but he won no points from his young fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer, who received a letter in which he dismissed Rainer Maria von Rilke, the major poet of the times, whom she cherished. Mention of a fiancée leads to the topic of Bonhoeffer's yearnings, reflected in the amorous longings, expressed discreetly, by a passionate author who could restrain only some of his ardor. Naturally, evidences of all this were treated fondly by his friend, editor Bethge. Reports of one instance in which the imprisoned Bonhoeffer and his fiancée stole an embrace during her rare, brief, and guarded visit at Tegel prison are moving, but one can find such stories in the celebrity press, and the Bonhoeffer letters do not provide titillation. Their author did tend to his romance, writing that he hoped that he and his Maria would stay on the same wavelength, but he did admit to some friction, which

was quite natural, given the couple's circumstances. Maria made clear in her letters that physical presence was something for which she yearned. Moving as the stories of the romance are, they would not have been distinctive enough to warrant publication in isolation. It was not until decades had passed and after Maria's death that her own letters were published.

The letters and papers from prison reveal much about Bonhoeffer's spiritual life and vocation, and these served a new generation of collegians and seminarians who were looking for models of witness and courage. They tell of his spiritual life and vocation, as for instance in the first letter, when Bonhoeffer asked his friend, who had served as his pastor back when they were studying theology and pastoral practice together, now, through letters, again to be his pastor, since he had not been allowed to see one in prison. He pleaded to his friend: "After so many long months without worship, confession and the Lord's Supper and without *consolation fratrum*—[be] my pastor once more, as you have so often been in the past, and listen to me." Then came a revelation about Bonhoeffer's psyche: "You are the only person who knows that '*acedia*,' '*tristitia*' [sadness in the face of spiritual good, medievalists called it] with all its ominous consequences, has often haunted me." But, he resolved, "neither human beings nor the devil" would prevail.³

The voice of conscience was also whispered in the letters. At first, wrote Bonhoeffer, he had wondered "whether it was really for the cause of Christ" that he

was leading Eberhard and all the others to experience so much grief. And we hear the language of resolve: “I soon put that out of my head as a temptation, as I became certain that the duty had been laid on me to hold out in this boundary situation with all its problems; I became quite content to do this, and have remained so ever since (I Peter 2:20; 3:14).”⁴

Sometimes personal events mentioned in the letters help one understand the whole ensuing editorial venture. Thus, back on April 4, 1943, the spring of the engagements of Bonhoeffer to Maria and of Bethge to Bonhoeffer’s niece, the Gestapo arrested Hans von Dohnanyi, Bonhoeffer’s uncle and a conspirator against Hitler, and, only a day later, they took Bonhoeffer, on whom the enforcers had gained plenty of incriminating evidence. Through several of the first months Bonhoeffer and Bethge exchanged letters that are not part of *Letters and Papers from Prison* and therefore are not part of this biography of the book. The first preserved letter to Bethge is dated November 18, six months after the imprisonment began. It included not only the comment on *tristitia* but also, more happily, reflection on Bethge’s marriage. Bonhoeffer followed this with one on Christmas Eve in which he thanked God that his niece Renate would be there to “stand by” Eberhard. A softer familial touch appeared: he had to instruct Renate no longer to call him “Uncle.”⁵

The topics of the letters seem to be generated at random and some make up a grab bag of informative data. Bonhoeffer discussed how he had wished to be

present at the Bethge wedding and that he had later also hoped to be able to baptize the couple's first child. Meanwhile, he announced, he was undertaking a bold enterprise. He was to spend prison time writing a novel, which he subsequently did. And he reported on his reading more than twice through the Old Testament while, in order to relax his mind, devouring the books of the middle-level German novelist Adalbert Stifter, whose writings somehow spoke to him in the prison years. At the end, reflecting a shadow that had to be part of prison existence, we read a plea for and a pledge of friendship with the man who would produce this book. "And if it should be determined that we never see each other again, then let us think of each other to the end with gratitude and forgiveness, and may God grant to us then that we one day stand praying for each other and praising and giving thanks with each other before God's throne."⁶

Coloring expressions in the letters are varieties of displays of emotion. As confined people will do, in this opening sequence of letters he praised his fiancée and voiced a longing for her and their eventual marriage. Just as quickly he had to turn, to mourn the deaths in action on the eastern front of students with whom he had shared life at the clandestine "preacher seminary" at remote Finkenwalde. On that front, these former students gave their lives for a cause in which they could not believe or at least that they could not understand. In later letters Bonhoeffer, having heard of the death of one or the other of these, would mourn

and inquire for details about memorials. Little news of action on that eastern front where they died could reach Bonhoeffer, who was not allowed access to newspapers or radio.

During the months in which the early letters were written, while Bethge still was able to perform tasks for the Gossner Mission during his assignments in Switzerland and Germany, the threats to Bonhoeffer's future kept growing. First he merely awaited trial. Readers of the book receive little detail about what this involved, since it was too dangerous for him to write explicitly about any of it. Instead, the letters from this period repeatedly celebrated the friendship of these two writers, along with mentions of friends and family in general. While the letters show Bonhoeffer hoping for an early trial and, against all hope, one must say, picturing eventual freedom, a dark future loomed much of the time, as was evident in the letters.

A New World to Enter

Despite the threat to his future as a conspirator against Hitler, Bonhoeffer continued to ponder marriage, a subject he did not handle well. He envisioned and dreamed of a postwar visit to Italy by the two Bethges and the future couple, Dietrich and Maria. But he lost credibility among some readers when, in one of his letters, he suggested that the two men should complete such a trip by going on to Israel without wife and

bride.⁷ It also does not take an agitated feminist to read Bonhoeffer as a patriarchal sort in the wedding sermon he wrote from prison in May 1943. It was mainly a several page homily on wifely submission.⁸ In any case, thoughts of honeymoons and future friendship were deferred when it was learned that Bethge could no longer evade the call to service. The published letters suggest something of his world. From July 1943 until early 1944 he was in training in Poland. Then he was sent to the scene of military action in Italy.

The purchaser and reader of Bethge's achievement in the form of *Letters and Papers from Prison* did not have to read more than the first couple of pages in order to enter a world that is at the same time beckoning and forbidding. The first letter speaks of a birthday party, a blanket and vest, dry bread, cigarettes, and then, abruptly, of "the considerable internal adjustment demanded by . . . an unexpected arrest and having to come to terms and put up with a completely new situation" that led him to a mix of emotions, including enrichment and possible torment.⁹

If the genre and tone of *Letters and Papers from Prison* were different from most books of the time sold as theology, the character of personal faith was almost immediately apparent. The author and his correspondents went back to basics, as one learns while reading the fifth letter included in the collection. It was from Hans von Dohnanyi, the prisoner's brother-in-law, who was arrested when Bonhoeffer had been

and was to be executed on the same day as Bonhoeffer was, April 9, 1945. "I now read the Bible a lot; it is the only book that prevents my thoughts from drifting off all the time."¹⁰

Those readers who are moved by the agonized, yearning, but also often celebratory tone of the correspondence can better understand all this when they learn that during the months of imprisonment editor but then still soldier Bethge, on leave on November 26, 1943, was allowed to see Bonhoeffer. Even Maria was permitted to visit, but the engaged couple were not permitted to be alone together and certainly were not supposed to touch. On one of the very rare visits she impulsively did lunge toward and embrace her fiancé. One suspects that this breach of prison conduct occurred because some guards were at least slightly sympathetic—and Maria's family, the Wedemeyers, were privileged and had enough connections to make possible the occasional slight relaxing of prison rules.

I have not made much mention of additional items that Bethge bound with the letters; writings that became the "papers" of "Letters and Papers." The last one among them, a piece that was of help to scholars as it had been to Bethge, was "An Outline for a Book." One could tell from it and from what Bonhoeffer wrote about it that the curtain was closing on the life of Bonhoeffer. Bethge wrote a final letter September 30, 1944, as concerns for security had to take precedence over everything else. The end was still months off, but

from Bonhoeffer there could only be silence. We have no more letters or papers or outlines.

The Life of a Book

In the next chapter I will tell the story of how the book came to be, largely because of the work of its author's friend, Bethge. Here, instead, we pick up the finished product and see it launched. *Letters and Papers from Prison*, like other books, has a life. This one, begotten in Germany at midcentury, has traveled to all continents and spoken to readers through almost twenty languages. One student, years later, reported finding a new Spanish copy of it, *Resistencia y sumisión*, in Buchholtz's grand bookstore in Bogota, Colombia. Such a find was replicated thousands of times around the world. Through the years other students and friends who knew of my interest in the author alerted me and others to their discovery of works like *Yu Zhong shu jian* in Japan along with other translations purchasable in Korea, Taiwan, as well as many points in the West. Not many German works with topics like this one make their way into Serbo-Croatian, but a Zagreb publisher in 1974 offered it as *Otpor I predanje*, while Czech, Polish, Finnish, and other publishing companies also found a market and a readership for it.

The shortened version of the German original title was *Widerstand und Ergebung*, meaning "Resistance and Submission." That unrevealing and not very beck-

oning title needs and will receive comment later. The book in its infancy, as we learn from early responses to the collection, was not favorably greeted everywhere. Old-school and academically straight-laced theologians for the most part considered the whole project to be something almost subversive and scorned it. The first American edition and the source of my own original encounter with the book, in 1954, did not serve the letters well, for it was unfortunately titled *Prisoner for God*.¹¹ Its publisher later and more appropriately scuttled that name and soon substituted for it *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and so it has been known in English ever since. Given such titles, this mysterious stranger among theology books, reposed at home on bookshelves in many cultures, will not have revealed much about itself to those who accidentally have come upon it. The German title could suggest in the minds of new readers the theme of resistance and submission but gave no clues to the context of the experience that needed resistance or demanded submission. Such a title could connote, for instance, anything from reaction to arrests by police, to sexual encounters, to full-scale war.

“Letters” by many notables abound simply as collections in books, and from them historians and voyeurs draw most of their knowledge about people long dead. “Papers” can include birth and death certificates along with manuscripts and other rich sources for biographers. That word, nondescript in essence, by itself points nowhere and gives no indication as to why

Polish or Swedish readerships should be attracted to the book or could know what they were getting if they bought it or checked it out of the library. The first word in the title that might tantalize and attract readers is “Prison.”

Prison letters, with their own honored place in history, and books collecting them make up a genre that can be counted on as being revealing and even alluring among biographers, prison reformers, psychologists, trial lawyers, and sympathetic citizens, depending upon the cause and character of particular imprisonments. One can picture a reader in this varied company who, while making a regular stop to scan used books in junk bins at stores from Berkeley to Boston or from Cape Town to London, eyes a well-worn and tattered dust jacket wrapped around a book that some graduate student has overused or thinks she has outgrown. This browser soon becomes another buyer, and this *Letters and Papers from Prison* has found a new home. That evening the owner, we imagine, takes time to examine his loot from the day and moves emotionally a bit closer to the life of his purchase. He considers the author’s name, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, which is German, but Germans live not only in Germany, so that name by itself offers few clues to the contents and suggests to him nothing exotic.

Odds are that the reader has picked up the edition read by most English-speakers through the years, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison: New Greatly Enlarged Edition*, published by Macmillan in

New York in 1978. It included so much more material than had the original that its translator, British bibliographical scholar Reginald Fuller, later joined by other translators and editors, would certainly have advised the owners of the old *Prisoner for God* to send it to the book recyclers. Editions followed editions, culminating in the German volume of 1998 and in English translation in 2010—the edition on which I draw.

To speak, as I have just done, of how “editions followed editions” is to overpass crucial elements in the life of almost any book but certainly does an injustice to the part these successive editions have played in the life of *Letters and Papers from Prison*. While publishers adorn new products with fresh dust jackets, the changes represent far more than what a change of clothes means for a biographical subject. Year after year since 1951 new materials kept being unearthed, while fresh insights offered by conference-goers and long-needed reference materials came to be available. The version which, whether adorned with a jacket or being bare in paperback form, is destined to dominate research for years to come is the 1998 (German) and 2010 (English) publication.

The fact that the title page lists twelve translators and editors is one indication of what it takes to do justice to what was born on manuscript pages in the Tegel prison cell. Most responsible for this contribution to the seventeen-volume and certainly definitive work in English, building on the German original, are the International Bonhoeffer Society, the general

editor Victoria J. Barnett, and John de Gruchy, editor of the English edition.

Books, like authors, live and eventually die. To their publishers and writers, this dying is represented by a book going out of print, as some do in their infancy, within months. Others survive until overcrowded libraries deaccession and pulp them to make room for fresh publications. Today many books are likely to experience a second life on the Internet, in cyberspace. Books as we have known them also “die on the vine,” say booksellers when they cannot move them. Their vital life is gone when agents cannot interest media to nurture their reputations with publicity. They linger and then expire when reviewers pass them by and then pass them off to used-book shops that bury them in recycling bins. Some, alas, are stillborn and never attract sales and notice. Think of them as reposing in paupers’ graves. R.I.P.

More happily, chroniclers speak of the career of a living book just as they write of authors. Conception occurs in the mind of a writer who brings it to birth, after which it attracts attention, gets read, exerts influence, and may enter the canon of a particular culture. Most will simply suffer neglect and meet with indifference. On occasion someone will rediscover a book and put out a new edition, having made the argument that “there is still life” in the book or that “it deserves to be resurrected.” Historians and historically informed literary critics subsequently assess and locate the book, and in so doing they enhance and extend its life.

While we can have no death date for Bonhoeffer's book, nor would we want one, we can trace its birth. The last letter in this book of *Letters and Papers from Prison* was written as a Christmas greeting in 1944, twenty weeks before the Second World War ended in Europe. That end came twenty-nine days after its author had been executed by the Nazis for his role in the resistance to Hitler and an aborted attempt to assassinate him. Were it not for the fact that the author's best friend had saved the letters from and to the conspirator's family, fiancée, and this friend himself, there would never have been the book. Without wanting to stretch the metaphor too far, it is proper to say that without Bethge the book would never have been conceived, or that it would have been aborted.

Instead, the book took on the proverbial life of its own and, given the attention it receives in the new millennium, we can say that it thrives in midcareer. Most letters by German religious scholars and others who attracted any public interest at all did not survive the bombings, fires, chaos, and neglect that were part of the war and so are lost. There are welcome exceptions, but most letters that were saved and have since been found did not receive the custodial care and editing that friend Bethge gave to these. Those few that did find a new home have seldom received the worldwide attention given this one and may be thought of as dead letters. *Letters and Papers from Prison*, however, ages well and deserves that "life of . . ." just as notable humans deserve biographies.

Reincarnations

On those grounds and with such understandings, this work appears in the Princeton University Press series, “Lives of Great Religious Books.” To speak of the treatment of a never-animate subject as a biography is to court mishaps and misfortune. A biography is a “bio-,” a life, picking up on the beginning of the word in the Greek-rooted *bios*. The root indicates something animate, for example, as human. To talk about writing or reading a biography of a book is to rely on analogy and metaphor, both of which can be extended to the absurd point that they distract rather than inform. These literary forms can busy the reader with the task of observing the performance of the author rather than engaging the career of the book. In analogy, there is a difference within every element of sameness and some kind of sameness in every difference. When analogy can carry the story forward and help make it memorable, it will be put to service here. When it does not or might not, I shall, untroubled, suppress it and not trouble the reader with comparisons and metaphors.

We are picturing the physical object, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, as the book picked up almost randomly by someone who has an interest in prison literature and the Hitler years in Germany, but not necessarily in the philosophy of existence or theology. A dust jacket would certainly have identified the main author as a theologian, but this turns out to have been a theologian of a different sort, one who did not

match the stereotypes—and there *are* stereotypes!—or at least one who underwent circumstances that differed vastly from the usual. Many books by professors like Bonhoeffer and scholarly pastors like Bethge would be well-researched, learned, formidable, perhaps turgid, full of allusions to authors and subjects that hold interest only for other theologians. Such a book would include footnotes so long and complex that they would have bred their own footnotes. That is the conventional picture, though one could point to many twentieth-century exceptions, even in theology, such as a commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans* by Swiss theologian Karl Barth, which served as a wake-up call immediately after the First World War.¹² (Barth far exceeded all other theologians as an influence on Bonhoeffer.) Their authors became public figures whose existential mold and personal experience helped break the ordinary scholastic and academic patterns.

Letters and Papers from Prison presents itself as a manufactured object, a book like other books, whose career can be marked and measured as such. This one, in its English-language versions alone, has through the decades been reincarnated, clothed in various dust jackets, bindings, and fonts, each of which will provide hints about the provenances and milieus of its travels. Those of us who love books pay much attention to all these. Thus my own most cherished German copy is a chaste black-bound book published in Munich in 1955. Most tattered in the collection are

two copies “Printed in Great Britain” on brittle paper that has now turned yellow-brown and may before long turn to dust. This sorry condition resulted from their exposure to elements that beset them at summer retreats and conferences or on flights where their pocket size commended itself. I retain visual images, as readers of favored books do, of where—meaning on which part of a page—this or that memorable quotation appears. Similarly, one recalls perceptions and memories of friends known through the years.

If we would speak of the physical object as the body of a book, a biography of a book will specially focus on its soul, the content and message it emits, and then the human responses to it. Such a biography is its own kind of narrative and analysis. It treats book reviews as events and is therefore not to be conceived of as an overlong book review or a collection of reviews. It will, of course, draw on some of them, because they help serve as dialogue-partners with a variety of readers during the life of a book and for historical recall after its decline. A biography of a book is also not in any essential way a work of literary or theological criticism, though critics cited here do make their contribution to this life. At root, biographies are stories. This, then, is the story of *Letters and Papers from Prison* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Though, of course, the author had a life of *his* own, in the form of experiences that reach far beyond the margins and covers in this book, it is his letters that give life to the biography and merit notice in new generations.

To this point we have conjured up a reader who came across the book and took it home because she was at least mildly interested in prison literature. We further picture that, if she is patient after opening her purchase and the book is compelling, she finds it speaking to her out of a world unfamiliar to her. After the fifth line of the 1978 edition she finds the editor speaking of “theological meditations” along with “personal relationships,” both of which, she quickly learns, relate to the author’s confinement in a Nazi prison during World War II. What will soon become clear is that many references in the book may not quicken curiosity or at first glance have much prospect of luring her to these interests.

As an experiment, one might sample the “L’s” in the bibliography and ask whoever in the mainstream culture ever heard of people named Lapede, Latmiral, Leber, Lehmann, Leibholtz, Lilje, Lübeck, Lukens (whom we now know from the title page). In that catalog, I skipped only Leibniz and Luther, whose names will be familiar. The subject index in the 1978 version is even more forbidding. It begins “*Abwehr, Accidie, Act, Accustomed, Acquiescence*”—words that are not promising candidates for the A-lists of any but a few specialists. If our purchaser of that book persists in reading, she—and let’s also imagine “he”—will soon find a context for such words. So it is with subjects in the biographies of most people with whom we have not previously been on intimate terms. The letter-writer Bonhoeffer and the editors of his papers

do place them in context and briefly identify each in footnotes, so the going is easy.

By now it should be clear that the issue of genre is here a topic about which I am concerned, for the reader's protection as well as my own. These letters come from their author's final two years and cannot begin to represent a balanced story of his whole life, even when references to them occasion some footnotes or explain themselves in the course of the page. Similarly, stress on the biography of the book, not the author, protects me from suggesting with hubris that I could improve on or supplement the great biography by Bethge. The eleven-hundred-page English version of that book is only a sample of the Bonhoeffer bibliography, which runs into thousands of items in many languages. With such a background and context, the only way to discipline me as its author and to force some constraints has been to limit, as much as possible, comment on other books written earlier by Bonhoeffer. Incidents and writings from outside those temporal boundaries will receive explanation if they must be mentioned as they throw particular lights on what is in the book whose biography this is.

For a quick illustration, I point to the fact that Bonhoeffer had a twin sister, Sabine, who was very important to him and who appears on twenty pages of Bethge's biography. She would go unmentioned here, had the writer of the letters not referred to her five times and had she not been married to a Jew, a lawyer,

with whom she took refuge in England. Since the reception of *Letters and Papers from Prison* in Great Britain and among Jews is at least a small part of the biography of the book, it is the two or three allusions or slight references to her in the letters from her imprisoned brother that would draw notice. Informed commentators assume that the references were slight because her letter-writing twin needed to protect her from unwanted notice. Friends from his years before 1943 will go unmentioned here unless his letters refer to them, in which case they become part of the biography of this book.

Having evoked a scene in which this book falls almost accidentally into the hands of a browser, it is time to grow purposeful and to take the risk that goes with making the claim that it merits attention among a very diverse public, two-thirds of a century and more after the letters and papers within it were written. Many volumes of prison letters are available; so why read *this* collection? Library shelves are full of books on resistance to Hitler, while on other book stacks there are works by many theologians of the twentieth century. Why, by taking up the reading of this book, add to a new generation of respondents in its biographical train? Without playing games about calling a book the “greatest” this or that and then listing it along with other candidates for such laud, I will venture to call it what so many in its history have called it, a classic.

Conversing with a Modern Classic

The reader will better understand that claim and more helpfully connect it to this twentieth-century book, one that in the eyes of many may not seem aged enough to be a classic, if I say something about what a classic is and what it can do in company with the activity of the reader. Such a discussion can also help illuminate aspects of the book. This one is so full of bizarre turns, apparent betrayals, and incongruities that a reader may ask and seek answers: What is a theological professor doing when taking part in a conspiracy to kill a dictator, practicing deception, lying, breaking the law, and wasting readers' time with apparently trivial matters such as requests for toiletries or passing on gossip? Call a book about all that a classic? Also, in many respects it does not provide a mode or a template for the living of ordinary lives. Mentioning its relative youth, as I have done, may lead the questioning reader to wonder at the use of the term "classic" about a book that is so young. Augustine's *Confessions* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* as classics have weathered the tests of readers for centuries. Now, it is fair to ask, is the reference to classic in relation to the Bonhoeffer book anything more than hyperbole from the author's devotees or comments in blurbs, designed to boost sales and circulation?

What in the life of a book has to happen to it or what does it achieve through its readers in order to deserve the "classic" label? Catholic theologian David

Tracy fussed with that term at considerable length and with subtlety in his *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope*, and I wrestled with his wrestling with the term as on occasion we cotaught graduate students. “On historical grounds,” Tracy wrote, “classics are simply those texts that have helped found or form a particular culture.” Also, he added, “on more explicitly hermeneutical grounds, classics are those texts that bear an excess and permanence of meaning, yet always resist definitive interpretation.” Paradoxically, classic texts, born in particularity, “have the possibility of being universal in their effect.”¹³ In that case, calling this book a classic, as many do, is a bid to the reader to engage the Bonhoeffer text in a particular way. Tracy and other students of what is classical bid that reader to test such a book by conversing with it.

Accustomed as moderns are to thinking of conversation as oral exchange among humans, they may find it awkward or contrived to carry its meaning over to the medium of print. But to conceive of a book as having a life of its own and thus as warranting a biography opens the possibility that the reader will be engaged with that life, as in oral conversation. The conversational mode is easier to adopt with the unfinished-appearing and, indeed, truly unfinished set of letters and papers than it is with books that are apparently seamless, closed, and finished products. Bonhoeffer’s letters are full of invitations, questions, and expectations, some of them met and followed up on in his own short personal life and most of them not. The author

lives on in this book, and the reader converses. Here is Tracy: “We converse with one another. We can also converse with texts. If we read well, then we are conversing with the text. No human being is simply a passive recipient of texts. We inquire. We question. We converse. Just as there is no purely autonomous text, so too there is no purely passive reader. There is only that interaction named conversation.”¹⁴

Before that summary paragraph Tracy offered advice that, if followed, will be of aid to the reader when Bonhoeffer in his letters and papers confronts him or her with difficult, sometimes unclear, often paradoxical themes. Such counsel will come in handy when the reader enters the debates and conversations over the author’s most controversial and chancy discourse concerning faith and life, for instance in what he will call a “world that has come of age.” Variations on this and other admittedly problematic themes become a major part of the aftermath to the publication that a lone reader in her library or a class will confront. The book, the author, and the reader meet:

Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it.

These are merely some generic rules for questioning. As good rules, they are worth keeping in mind in case the questioning does begin to break down. In a sense they are merely variations of the transcendental imperative elegantly articulated by Bernard Lonergan: “Be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, be loving, and, if necessary, change.”¹⁵

When peers meet and talk with each other, or when a generous mentor and an assertive student engage each other, something goes on that has the chance of altering worldviews. So it can be with the Bonhoeffer book. Every time I read Augustine’s *Confessions*, I come away looking at myself and the world in a different way. My friend the late Jaroslav Pelikan said that annually he reread *The Divine Comedy* in the original. He cannot each time have learned many new things about the poem he had read so often. He did it in the spirit of its author, in words that Goethe voiced in *Faust*: “What you have as heritage, Take now as task; For thus you will make it your own!” He was each time reckoning with a tradition and, in a way, becoming part of it. Similarly, many readers all over the world have testified to the changes they experienced after having “conversed” with Bonhoeffer’s letters and papers.

The conversation with a classic also offers readers a chance to hold up the mirror to themselves. For example, the reader of *The Brothers Karamazov* does not in it seek a road map of Russia or information about the land. He stands the potential of learning more

about himself and his world through the reading and conversation. In this case the biography of a book can serve where face-to-face encounters are not possible. On Bonhoeffer's pages one does not learn how to conspire against the life of a dictator or how to survive in prison, but one might learn more about the world in which one lives today. In the case of this posthumous work the author cannot be available as a living person, but he writes his letters and papers in such a way that revelations and "aha!" moments can occur.

Letters and Papers from Prison is highly personal, including raw material that might have been in use had Bonhoeffer written a memoir. As it turns out, it is as if he and his compiling editor Bethge had heard the advice by American publisher William Sloan, who told writers of autobiographical pieces that the reader is not saying of any such book something like: "Tell me about you." Instead it is, "Tell me about me; as I use your book and life as a mirror." The details of the life of a reader in a cozy study or a library will not begin to match those of Bonhoeffer, but this book, which has its own life, can serve the reader, who brings her own life to the reading, to experience change. Were it a "how-to" book, the reader could take lessons, close it, and live and think as before, simply making use of forgettable technical directions. *Letters and Papers from Prison* opens a conversation and, with it, a different world.

In a liberal arts curriculum, *Letters and Papers from Prison* would be classified among the humanities, and

now I as its biographer invite readers to think of it as a contribution in that genre, one that can offer a changed view of existence. As the introduction to a report on *The Humanities in American Life* suggests, “through the humanities we reflect on the fundamental question: what does it mean to be human? The humanities offer clues but never a complete answer.” They have their limits, “but by awakening a sense of what it might be like to be someone else or to live in another time or culture, they tell us about ourselves, stretch our imagination, and enrich our experience. They increase our distinctively human potential.”¹⁶ Many readers report that some such enrichment and increase happened to them when they read *Letters and Papers from Prison*. One hopes that a biography of this book will lead to further “awakenings.”

Biographers know how to outline books on human lives. The familiar stops along the way typically include references to ancestry, birth, the stages of life, marriages or not, achievements, perceptions by others, accidents, and death. Biographers of books will appeal to certain readerships, for example, bibliophiles, by discussing the bindings, the papers used, the fonts, the editions, and sales. Here there will be casual references to a few of them, but our humanistic (in the sense of the “humanities” as just referenced) interests call for different accents. Some analogies between lives and books work well, as when one writes about the antecedents, conception, birth, and some of the passages of the lives of books like Bonhoeffer’s. Equally to the

point here will be reference to the reception of the book, its travels to various cultures, and its relation to major events of the time.

To keep the book within the boundaries set for this series, I shall concentrate on materials—“secondary sources,” in academic lingo—that manifest a certain landmark quality because they appeared as books or as substantial chapters in books. Wandering into the vastness of periodical literature, news stories, or the Internet would be illuminating, but the temptation to do so has to be resisted. Bibliographers note that there are hundreds of thousands of references to the life and works of Bonhoeffer, many of them concentrating on this one book.¹⁷ This biography of a book is about books that served as conversation partners to author Bonhoeffer and editor Bethge, in a conversation that is now being taken up by a new generation of readers.