

# THEOPOETRY OR THEOPOETICS?

David L. Miller

## Introduction: Theopoetics, Theopoetry, and the Death of God

In what may be the most compelling opening sentence of contemporary fiction, Donald Barthelme, in his short-story “On Angels,” wrote: “The death of God left the angels in a strange position.”<sup>1</sup> To be sure! And one might have thought that the so-called “death of God” would have also created something of an awkwardness for contemporary theology and theologians. But this seems not to have been the case, if one can judge by the trajectory of the movement that has been referred to as theopoetics. At least it seems not to have been the case for all theopoeticians. A quick glance at a website dedicated to theopoetics (<http://theopoetics.net>) makes the point that for some thinkers identifying themselves with a theopoetics perspective the “death of God” is not at issue while for others it is very much at issue.

The names associated with theopoetics on the Theopoetics.net website prior to 1995 (Rubem Alves, Stanley Hopper, David Miller, Amos Wilder), as well as those associated with theopoetics after 1995 (John Caputo, Thomas Dailey, Jason Derr, Roland Faber, Matt Guynn, Scott Holland, Jean Janzen, L. B. C. Keefe-Perry, Catherine Keller, Melanie May, Travis Poling), by no means make up a uniform group.<sup>2</sup> Radically different discourses, it would seem, parade under the name and aegis of the term “theopoetics.” There are doubtless many ways to distinguish the thinking and writing of these various scholars of religion, but one way is to place them in relation to the “death of God” that Barthelme’s angels

find understandably awkward. For some theopoeticians, the phrase “death of God” seems unimportant and not awkward, and for others the “death of God” is crucial, even if awkward, to the significance of “theopoetics.”

This issue of the continuing importance of the “death of God” in religious studies and theology, after its earlier announcement in the 1960s, has recently emerged in reviews of three books by celebrated authors: *Living the Death of God: A Theological Memoir* by Thomas J. J. Altizer, *After the Death of God* by John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, and *After God* by Mark C. Taylor.<sup>3</sup> In her review, Lissa McCullough carefully distinguishes perspectives on the “death of God” represented by these books’ authors. For Caputo, it is the “ongoing work of the critique of idols,” i.e., the death of finite human views of the infinite divine. For Altizer, the “death of God” is a real death, a final and irrevocable transformation of God. For Taylor, the matter is dialectical and complex, neither a positing of something positive as it is for Caputo nor the positing of something unambiguously negative as it is for Altizer. For Vattimo it is Christendom that has failed (i.e., died) in its lack of charity and love.<sup>4</sup> These differences matter because they imply different functions for the word “after” in two of the books’ titles, as Jeffrey Kosky has noted in his review. For example, for Vattimo, and presumably also for Altizer and Taylor, “after the death of God” means “living on in the wake of God,” whereas for Caputo “after the death of God” means “we can put the death of God behind us and be nourished anew by the name of ‘God.’”<sup>5</sup>

These thinkers do have something in common, according to McCullough. They all may be viewed as “apologists for the vocation of straying toward an infinite nothing, or erring ‘after God,’ or waiting for the Messiah who never comes, or loving one’s neighbor in the void as the only alternative to the bad faith of arbitrarily declared absolutes.”<sup>6</sup> But the significant difference is that Caputo, according to Kosky, thinks that “postmodernism is and should be done with the death of God.”<sup>7</sup> Whereas Altizer, on the other hand, according to McCullough, believes that “we live in an era when it is thinkable to discuss a ‘religion’ without rituals and beliefs, a ‘faith’ purged of religion, a ‘theology’ without God, and an atheism that is ‘an expression of faith itself.’”<sup>8</sup>

The term “theopoetics” will have a different function depending on which significance one gives to the phrase “after the death of God.” If

one thinks that we should be done with the death of God (or never have entertained the Nietzschean notion in the first place), then theoetics can refer to an artful, imaginative, creative, beautiful, and rhetorically compelling manner of speaking and thinking concerning a theological knowledge that is and always has been in our possession and a part of our faith. I should like to refer to this perspective as “theoetry,” i.e., as the poetizing of an extant religious faith or theological knowledge. But if one thinks that “after the death of God” signifies the continuing impact of an understanding of the times as severed from any dependencies on transcendental referents, then theoetics will have to refer to strategies of human signification in the absence of fixed and ultimate meanings accessible to knowledge or faith. I should like to refer to this perspective as “theoetics,” as it involves a poetics and not a poetry, i.e., a reflection on *poiesis*, a formal thinking about the nature of the making of meaning, which subverts the *-ology*, the nature of the logic, of theology.

It is theoetics and not theoetry when Altizer writes: “In modernity, it is writers and artists rather than theologians who teach this difficult truth,” that “to say Yes to absolute nothingness is to discover plenitude in the void. This fullness in no way represses or forgets the emptiness in the midst of life but allows us to live with an abandon that embraces loss and lack as the very condition of our existence.... Theology ends with the death of God,” and Altizer affirms that theoetics begins when theology ends, even if he does not use the term “theoetics.” Altizer writes<sup>9</sup>: “How ironic that our imaginative vision [i.e., Dante, Milton, Blake, Joyce] should be so richly theological, whereas our theological thinking is so constricted and confined.”<sup>10</sup> The philosopher, Simon Critchley, has recently made a point very similar to that of Altizer: “After the death of God, it is in and as literature that the issue of life’s possible redemption is played out.”<sup>11</sup> And, again, Critchley writes concerning the poet Wallace Stevens: “After one had abandoned a belief in God, poetry is that essence that takes its place as life’s redemption.”<sup>12</sup> In theoetry, as opposed to theoetics, theology does not end with the death of God, because there is no death of God. Theoetry is just another way of expressing theology’s eternal truth. But the initial use of the term “theoetics” had a different force and function, as can be seen by reference to the discourse concerning theoetics in the 1960s,

not incidentally at the same period of time that witnessed the mid-century “death of God” movement.

### **History: Stanley Romaine Hopper and the Drew Years (1962–1968)**

Amos Wilder, in a book from 1976 whose title is *Theopoetic*, observed: “I believe that I had picked up the term ‘theopoetic’ and ‘theopoiesis’ from Stanley Hopper and his students, no doubt in one or another of the remarkable consultations on hermeneutics and language, which he had organized at Drew and at Syracuse to which many of us are indebted.”<sup>13</sup> Wilder is alluding to conferences at Drew University in 1962,<sup>14</sup> 1964 and 1966,<sup>15</sup> and a fourth conference at Syracuse University in 1970.<sup>16</sup> These consultations were located intellectually at the intersection of left-wing Bultmannian Biblical interpretation, the thought of the late period of Heidegger’s existential philosophy, and the Religion and Literature movement. The first one focused on hermeneutics and Biblical interpretation and featured Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs. The second, a follow-up to the first, was more theological, and Fritz Buri and Heinrich Ott made presentations. In the third conference, literary and philosophical perspectives were added and the speakers included Beda Allemann, Owen Barfield, Norman O. Brown, Kenneth Burke, and Julián Marías. And the fourth, following upon the third in theme and perspectives, featured Beda Allemann, Henry Bugbee, Richard DiMartino, Hans Georg Gadamer, Keiji Nishitani, and Wolfgang Zucker.

Because of the centrality of Heidegger’s perspective on language and poetry (citing Hölderlin, Heidegger had written, “poetically human beings dwell upon the earth”), Stanley Hopper and Karfried Froelich visited with Heidegger prior to the second consultation and they invited him to be in attendance. He agreed. But because of illness he could not attend. Instead, he sent a letter in which he urged three questions upon the deliberations: (1) what is the nature of the referent of theological utterance; (2) what is the nature of thinking that is objectifying; and (3) is a non-objectivizing thinking and speaking possible?<sup>17</sup>

The problematic of objectivizing discourse is theologically the problem of idolatry and it may well be that all speech reifies its subject in some manner. But it does not follow—or so it was the experiment of these consultations to probe—that language may not be able to perform an entirely different function, namely, to use Heideggerian language, to

bring Being to appearance, to allow the unveiling of Truth (*a-letheia*), and to let that which *is* appear *as* that which it is.

The “as” is crucial. Already in *Being and Time*, Heidegger had argued that all language has an *as*-structure. In the third Drew consultation, this led to the implication that theology is not a the-ology, but is ineluctably *theo-poetic*, where poetry is interpreted as radical metaphor. Beda Allemann referred to such radical metaphor as “anti-metaphor” or “absolute metaphor,”<sup>18</sup> and Hopper, following Philip Wheelwright, called it “diaphor” as opposed to “epiphor.”<sup>19</sup> That is, one is not viewing poetry as mere metaphor, simile without the word “like,” which would be the expression of the likeness of like things, ignoring difference. Such a weak reading of the notion of metaphor would constitute a reinscription of objectivization and of the onto-metaphysical tradition in which Being is viewed as *a* being or God as an idol.

Hopper saw this move in the direction of a radical poetic consciousness as “theo-poetical,” and he wrote, in his introduction to the third consultation: “What *theo-poiesis* does is to effect disclosure through the crucial nexus of events, thereby making the crux of knowing, both morally and esthetically, radically decisive in time.”<sup>20</sup> Amos Wilder’s reference to Stanley Hopper and the Drew hermeneutics conferences in relation to the early uses of the term “theo-poetics” was surely on the mark, and Wilder himself carried on the theo-poetical perspective in religious discourse, de-nominalizing, and de-objectivizing theological referents in a manner consistent with apophatic intentionality, i.e., a “speaking away.”<sup>21</sup>

But for Hopper de-objectivization of theological discourse is not merely the longstanding and traditional critique of idolatry, though it is that, too. It much more radically marks what others in this period were calling the death of God (e.g., Altizer, Vahanian, Rubenstein, Hamilton). Poetry is no help if the unconscious poetics that accompanies it imagines poetizing to be an adornment, a prettification, a rhetorical strategy that obscures what Hopper already in 1944 had called a “crisis of faith.”<sup>22</sup> In his Eranos lecture of 1965, he drew upon the following lines of Wallace Stevens to make his radical point: “The heaven of Europe is empty, like a Schloss/Abandoned because of taxes”; “The steeples are empty and so are the people”; and “It was when I said/There is no such

thing as the truth, / That the grapes seemed fatter, / The fox ran out of his hole.”<sup>23</sup> The problem requires not a turn to uses of poetry and the other arts to bring to expression a traditional theology; rather, the “crisis” of the death of God<sup>24</sup> requires a radicalized poetics in the face of nothingness, i.e., the no-thing-ness of ultimate reality.<sup>25</sup> I should like to attempt to identify four markers of what one might mean by a “radicalized poetics.”<sup>26</sup>

### Radical Poetics: Four Marks

1. *No Author.* In ancient times when a Muse was given credit for the poetry and when other persons’ names were attached to the writing (e.g., *Homeric Hymns*, *Gospel of Matthew*), and again in modernity in the 1968 essay by Roland Barthes, “Death of the Author,” there seems to be a nervousness or suspicion (Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” and “clinamen”) concerning the real source of poetic texts. Barthes saw the notion of an author, or authorial authority, as the claim of a human intention that comes to be imagined as the meaning of the text. Others called this an “intentional fallacy.” But the multiplicity of possible meanings of any poetic text, as well as the inability for anyone to know for certain the state of an author’s mind (least of all the author himself or herself) makes this claim untenable.<sup>27</sup> It is difficult to know finally what is the true source of signification in a poem, not least because the signification itself is finally unknown and unknowable. A proper poetics needs to bracket the question of author and authority.

Poets have themselves noted this. For example, this is in part the force of John Keats’ notion of the “negative capability” of a good poet. In a letter to his brothers in December of 1817, Keats wrote: “It at once struck me what quality went to form a Person of Achievement, especially in literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is when a person is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”<sup>28</sup> A modest “negative capability” will also be reflected in the fact, as I. A. Richards has observed, that “the great writer seldom regards him [or her] self as a personality with something to say; his [or her] mind is simply a place where something happens to words.” And Richards adds: “Whatever the author may think that he or she is entitled to do to a poem, the poem has the last word.”<sup>29</sup>

That the ego-consciousness of the poet is not in the final analysis authorial is reflected humorously by Oscar Wilde, who wrote, "All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling,"<sup>30</sup> i.e., from the sensibilities of a personal ego. More recently John Ashberry quipped: "There is a view that poetry should improve your life. I think people confuse it with the Salvation Army."<sup>31</sup> Not only is the ego-personality of the author eclipsed by the poem; so also is the ego-personality of the auditor or reader.

Poetry leads to the death of the ego and ego's attitudes, standpoints and beliefs. Or perhaps, more radically, it points to the fact that ego and its cherished notions were illusory (dead) to begin with. Philosophers have talked this way about philosophy for some time. For example, Montaigne wrote that "... to philosophize is to learn how to die. ... It is uncertain where death awaits us; let us await it everywhere. Premeditation of death is premeditation of freedom. The one who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave. ... The constant work of life is to build death."<sup>32</sup> And, as is well known, Socrates (according to Plato) believed that "those who do philosophy correctly are preparing themselves for death."<sup>33</sup> So it is also with poetry, according to a radical poetics.<sup>34</sup>

2. *No Meaning.* It is a commonplace that poets do not like critics to tell people what their poems mean. The poet's complaint not only has as its rationale that poems have multiple meanings and cannot be limited to singular signification. It may also be linked to the sentiment of Archibald MacLeish in his "*Ars Poetica*": "A poem should not mean/But be."<sup>35</sup> Poetry and its poetics calls into question the meaning of "meaning," and could be said to have no meaning.<sup>36</sup>

Two depth psychologists have expressed this sensibility. C. G. Jung wrote: "We have talked so much about the meaning of works of art that one can hardly suppress a doubt as to whether art really 'means' anything at all. Perhaps art has no 'meaning,' at least not as we understand meaning. Perhaps it is like nature, which simply *is* and 'means' nothing beyond that.... It needs no meaning, for meaning has nothing to do with art."<sup>37</sup> And more recently, Wolfgang Giegerich, a contemporary Jungian psychologist, extends Jung's psychological point about poetics to the realms of myth and religion. He writes: "There is no need for 'meaning' ... for myth or religion as a present reality. On the contrary, we can, now that the gods have become memories, devote ourselves to all the

riches of Mnemosyne freely without having to hold our breath in awe.... The feeling that there should be a higher meaning of life and it is missing is the illness."<sup>38</sup>

Joseph Campbell dwelt on the issue of the meaning of meaning and meaninglessness in his 1957 lecture at the Eranos Conference in Switzerland. He said: "The world, the entire universe, its god and all, has become a symbol—signifying nothing: a symbol without meaning. For to attribute meaning to any part of it would be to relax its force as a bow, and the arrow of the soul then would lodge only in the sphere of meaning.... The bow, to function as a bow and not as a snare, must have no meaning whatsoever in itself—or in any part of itself—beyond that of being an agent for disengagement—from itself: no more meaning than the impact of the doctor's little hammer when it hits your knee, to make it jerk."<sup>39</sup> Then, to the point, Campbell cited Christian scripture: "Consider the lilies of the fields, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin!"<sup>40</sup> And Campbell commented: "What—I ask—is the meaning of a flower? And having no meaning, should the flower then not be?"<sup>41</sup> Campbell ended his lecture in a celebrative mode: "Our meaning is now the meaning that is no meaning.... And if we are to participate joyfully in the world without meaning, we must allow our spirits to become ... wild ganders, and fly in timeless, spaceless flight ... not into any fixed heaven beyond the firmament (for there is no heaven out there), but to that seat of experience simultaneously without and within, where ... the meaninglessness of the sense of existence and the meaninglessness of the meanings of the world are one."<sup>42</sup>

In a lecture at Drew University in the 1960s, I heard the Roman Catholic theologian, William O. Lynch, make a similar point. He was reflecting on the line by T. S. Eliot in *The Four Quartets*: "We had the experience but missed the meaning."<sup>43</sup> Father Lynch countered by suggesting that it may be that we have had so many meanings projected upon us over the years—political, social, religious, and ideological meanings—and that meanwhile we missed the experience of life. This revision by Father Lynch, and the reasoning of Jung, Giegerich, and Campbell, are perhaps not unlike the line of the seventeenth-century mystic, Angelus Silesius: "The rose was without why; it blooms because it blooms. Forgetful of itself, oblivious to our vision."<sup>44</sup> So it is with a blooming poetics: a lot of depth of experience in the poetry; and no meaning,



which in the final analysis is the concern of ego. A poem—like a poetic life—must not mean, but be.

3. *No Order (Complexity)*. That poetry does not have single or fixed meaning has led some to argue that the logic of poetry is best understood under the aegis of complexity theory. For example, both Adalaide Morris and Thomas Weissert argue this in a book edited by Katherine Hayles entitled *Chaos and Order: Complexity in Literature and Science*.<sup>45</sup> Weissert notes that the narrative poetics of Jorge Luis Borges in “The Garden of Forking Paths” describes the logic of bifurcation theory thirty years before mathematicians formulated it.

“The Garden of Forking Paths” is a narrative that is labyrinthine, and it is about a man who constructs a narrative (a novel) about a labyrinth which is itself labyrinthine. In the story a man named Albert comments that “in all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others,” but in the narrative being considered in Borges’ narrative the author “chooses simultaneously all of the alternatives.”<sup>46</sup> The narrative plot, its movement through the story’s time, thus produces “an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times. This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or was unaware of one another ..., embraces *all* possibilities of time.”<sup>47</sup> Weissert notes the similarity of this presentation of time and motion to that aspect of complexity theory referred to as bifurcation.

Bifurcation theory, for example, traces the logic of a leaf that comes to rest on a stone while floating in a stream. The leaf goes down the stream according to Newtonian laws and its path can be precisely predicted if one knows all of the variables of the stream’s motion. But when it comes to rest on a stone, which way it will go next is unpredictable on linear models of cause and effect. So now the theory that applies to its movement is chaos theory. But once the leaf goes one way or the other, it returns to Newtonian orderliness. So, bifurcation theory—one aspect of complexity theory—depicts a logic that is neither completely chaotic nor completely orderly. It shares both characteristics in a single event.<sup>48</sup>

Complexity theory has recently pervaded network theory, meteorology, thermodynamics, quantum mechanics, epidemiology, and now poetics and religious studies. It has been utilized in analyses of traffic jams,

terrorism, stock market fluctuation, outbreaks of measles, and growth of cancerous tumors. It is a way of thinking about and imagining any system that is non-linear and difficult to model.<sup>49</sup>

An example of a complex phenomenon is the double pendulum. A normal pendulum has one end fixed and the other end swinging free. When the amount of oscillation is not too large, the pendulum's motion and where it will come to rest (the attractor) can be calculated using linear differential equations. But if a second pendulum is attached at the swinging end of the first pendulum, thus producing a double-jointed structure, the double pendulum still follows Newtonian laws of motion, but in such a fashion that the movement cannot be predicted in linear terms. The phenomenon is now complex.<sup>50</sup> This sort of phenomenon interests complexity theorists. As Ilye Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers wrote: "It is no longer stable situations or permanency that interest us, but rather evolutions, crises, and instabilities."<sup>51</sup> Unpredictability is to be expected.

Neil Johnson itemized eight characteristics of complex phenomena.

1. The system contains a collection of many interacting objects or agents.
2. The behavior of these objects is affected by memory and feedback.
3. They adapt their strategies according to their history.
4. The system is typically open.
5. It appears to be alive.
6. It exhibits emergent phenomena which are generally surprising and may be extreme and self-generated.
7. The emergent phenomena typically arise in the absence of any sort of invisible hand or central controller.
8. The system shows a complicated mix of ordered and disordered behavior, but it tends to move between different arrangements in such a way that pockets of order are created.<sup>52</sup>

This list of characteristics together implies that complex phenomena not only are in a complex that is both orderly and chaotic at once, but also that as the phenomena emerge autonomously they constantly adapt in relation to the lively interaction of the constitutive elements.

Mark C. Taylor has noted that it may be useful to recall the etymology of the word "complexity" in an attempt to understand complexity

theory. The term comes from the Latin word *complectere* (also *complexus*), which means “to entwine together,” i.e., *com-* (“together”) + *plectere* (“to twine or braid”). The stem, *plek* (“to plait”), forms the Latin suffix, *-plex* (“to fold”).<sup>53</sup> The point implied by this etymology—as Taylor points out—is that complex systems are not just complicated systems. A snowflake is complicated, but the rules for generating it are simple. The structure of a snowflake, moreover, persists unchanged and crystalline from the first moment of its existence until it melts, while complex systems change over time. It is true that a turbulent river rushing through a narrow channel of rapids changes over time too, but it changes chaotically. The kind of change characteristic of complex systems lies somewhere between the pure order of crystalline snowflakes and the disorder of chaotic or turbulent flow.”<sup>54</sup> Complicated is the opposite of simple, whereas complexity is the opposite of independent,<sup>55</sup> because emergent adaptive phenomena autonomously configure in relation to memory and feedback of the elements in the complex.

Complex adaptive systems, being neither completely chaotic nor completely orderly, are unpredictable but not without moments of emerging signification and order. They dwell at the edge of chaos, but not in chaos.<sup>56</sup> Always on an edge, like great poetry. Or as Taylor puts it: “Awareness is always incomplete and hence must forever be refigured. As emergence is aleatory, life is always surprising, plans are frustrated, schemata shattered—who would want it otherwise.”<sup>57</sup>

4. *No End (Enjambment)*. The argument about a poetics of complexity leads finally to a fourth point about a radical poetics, a point explored in detail by the Italian postmodern critical theorist Giorgio Agamben: namely, enjambment.<sup>58</sup> What is “enjambment”? The word is from the French term *enjamber*, and is related to the French words *jambe* (“leg”) and *jambon* (“ham” or “thigh”). The French verb *enjamber* means “to stride.” So enjambment has something to do with the stride or meter of poetry.

Actually “enjambment” is the most common answer to the question of what constitutes the difference between prose and poetry. An obvious difference is that the lines of prose continue to the right margin of the page and the lines of poetry often end before getting to the right margin. Put more technically, enjambment is the opposition of a metrical limit to a syntactical limit, i.e., the rhyme or meter ends without the

meaning of the sentence having been completed. Agamben thinks that this is most fundamental and most significant to the poetic function. He notes that Dante, in *De vulgari eloquentia*, already identified this as the basic mark of poetry. Dante was speaking about the notion of *stanza* or “verse” (*versure*), the Latin form of which indicates the point at which a plow turns around at the end of a furrow.<sup>59</sup> Paul Valéry’s manner of expressing this poetic distinction was to call poetry “a prolonged hesitation between sound and sense.”<sup>60</sup>

If enjambment is the defining characteristic of poetry, then the final line of a poem presents a problem to the author, which is why some poets do not end their final lines with a period (e.g., W. S. Merwin). The problem is that if the last line in a poem is taken to be “final,” it is the one line in the poem that is not poetic, i.e., is not enjambed. It does not go on. This is why the last line of a poem is so difficult to construct poetically and to read poetically.

The function of enjambment is to force the eye to the next line. It makes the reader feel a sense of movement and urgency, even disorder. It delays the intention of the line and plays on a reader’s expectation. It keeps things going on, often presenting surprise and unpredictability in the turn to the next line of the poem. It prevents fixed and prosaic meanings. It requires the reader to relinquish ego-control and fixations. For example, here is a case of enjambment from a recent poem by W. S. Merwin:

...I cherish  
 only now a joy I was not aware of  
 when it was here although it remains  
 out of reach and will not be caught or named  
 or called back and if I could I make it stay  
 as I want to it would turn into pain<sup>61</sup>

The enjambments turn (*versure*) a joy, when present, into being absent from awareness, and which though it remains, is not within reach, and, while being called back in the poem, cannot be called back, and if it were staying with me now would not be joy at all, but pain. And though we are looking at the last line of “One of the Butterflies,” there is no end to the poem. No period. Enjambment keeps things

emergent, adaptive, and open. There is not finality or fixity. Nothing is positivized or objectivized, not even the notion of emergent adaptive and open complexity!

### **Radical Poetics as Theopoetics: Concluding Suggestions**

These four marks of a radical poetics are being proposed as a base for understanding a theopoetics in the wake of the death of God. They are not really a ground for a theopoetics, or if they be a ground then they are a groundless ground. The ground has cracked and dropped away. Or as Stanley Hopper often put it late in his life, drawing upon a figure of Nietzsche, the ground is more like an abyss, because there is always “a cavern beneath the cave.”<sup>62</sup> The open groundless ground is like Zen’s “bottomless pail” or “bottomless basket” whose point is to break through the bottom of the bottom into openness.<sup>63</sup>

The notion of “no author” in a radical poetics implies in theopoetics the death or letting go of the pretension to authorship and authority of the theologian. “No meaning” implies the end of a pretension to the meaningfulness of posited or objectivized theological meanings. “No order”—complexity theory—in a radical theopoetics views religion as disordering as well as ordering, defamiliarizing, questioning, always perceiving religion and religions as complex adaptive emergent complexes. “No end”—enjambment—implies that a criterion of theopoetics is that it generates a next line, a next line that may be unpredictable and containing surprise. Theopoetics is fundamentally iconoclastic, even regarding iconoclasm and itself. It is not to be confused with theopoetry, however, attractive that may seem. Theopoetics makes a more radical challenge to religious discourse and understanding.

If this makes things difficult for conventional theologians and theologues, it is only to the end of siding with the angels in their awkwardness, not only in the wake of the death of God, as Barthelme indicated, but also in the face of the idolatries projected upon them over the years by theological traditions.

### **Notes**

1. Donald Barthelme, “On Angels,” *The New Yorker* 45 (August 9, 1969): 29.
2. “THEOPOETICS(dot)NET,” <http://theopoetics.net/> (accessed June 26, 2009). See the link named “Who?”

3. The reviews alluded to are: Lissa McCullough, "Death of God Reprise: Altizer, Taylor, Vattimo, Caputo, Vahanian," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 9/3 (2008): 97–109 ([www.jcrt.org](http://www.jcrt.org)); Jeffrey L. Kosky, "Review of After the Death of God by John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, ed. by Jeffrey W. Robbins," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 76/4 (2008): 1021–25; and, John D. Caputo, "Review of After God by Mark C. Taylor," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 77/1 (2009): 162–5.
4. McCullough, "Death of God Reprise," 107.
5. Kosky, "Review," 1024.
6. McCullough, "Death of God Reprise," 108. As Altizer puts it, "As always, our most powerful theology is a negative theology" (Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Living the Death of God: A Theological Memoir* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006], p. 125).
7. Kosky, "Review," 1022.
8. McCullough, "Death of God Reprise," 107. See Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, p. 93.
9. Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, p. xvi, xviii. Altizer grounds this view in antiquity, asking: "Why is it not possible to understand the death of God as occurring in the Crucifixion itself? Is the sacrifice of Christ not finally the sacrifice of God?" (106). A Jungian psychologist, Wolfgang Giegerich, has recently made a similar point while writing on the *kenosis* of Jesus as the Christ. "The complete *kenosis* includes the death of God, the loss of 'having' a God altogether. Without the loss of God it would only be a partial or token 'emptying.' And only if he [Jesus as the Christ has lost his God has he really, unreservedly, become human, nothing but human, and emptied his cup fully." Giegerich adds that this implies that "Christianity is the overcoming of *theism* as such." (Wolfgang Giegerich, "God Must Not Die! Jung's Thesis of the One-Sidedness of Christianity," manuscript, forthcoming in the journal *Spring* in the Fall of 2010, used by permission of the author.) The poet Friedrich Hölderlin expressed succinctly the point of Altizer and Giegerich: *Bis Gottes Fehl hilft*, "Sometimes God's absence helps" (Hölderlin, tr. M. Hamburger [Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961], p. 138).
10. Altizer, *Living the Death of God*, p. 42. Compare McCullough, "Death of God Reprise," 101.
11. Simon Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. xx.
12. Critchley, *Very Little*, p. 115. Critchley recognizes this as a perspective that sounds Romanticist rather than Postmodern and he acknowledges that it represents to some a naïvete. But he urges that one not be naïve about naïvete (pp. 100, 113, 217, 224, 227, and 236).
13. Amos Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. iv.
14. The proceedings of this consultation were published in: James Robinson and John Cobb, eds., *The New Hermeneutic* (New York: Harper & Row), 1964.
15. The proceedings of this consultation were published in: Stanley R. Hopper and David Miller, eds., *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967).
16. For a review of the first three of these consultations, see Stanley R. Hopper, "Introduction," in: Hopper and Miller, eds., *Interpretation*, ix–xxii. Much of what follows in the next paragraphs is indebted to Hopper's account. Cf. David Miller, "Theopoiesis," in: Stanley R. Hopper, *Why Persimmons and Other Poems* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 1–12; "Mythopoesis, Psychopoesis, Theopoiesis: The Poetries of Meaning" (tape), *Panarion Conference 1976* (Jack Burkee, Box 9926, Marina Del Rey, Calif. 90291); *Christ: Meditations on Archetypal Images*

in *Christian Theology* (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2005); and *Hells and Holy Ghosts: A Theopoetics of Christian Belief* (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2004).

17. Hopper, "Introduction," in: Hopper and Miller, eds., *Interpretation*, p. xiv. This letter, without attribution of its context, appears in Martin Heidegger, *The Piety of Thinking: Essays by Martin Heidegger*, tr. James G. Hart and John C. Maraldo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).

18. Beda Allemann, "Metaphor and Anti-Metaphor," in: Hopper and Miller, eds., *Interpretation*, pp. 103–24.

19. Stanley R. Hopper, *The Way of Transfiguration*, R. J. Keiser and T. Stoneburner, eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 166, 249, 288–90, 295, 298, 300. See also Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), pp. 85, 88, 91.

20. Hopper, "Introduction," in: Hopper and Miller, eds., *Interpretation*, p. xix. Compare Hopper's other writings on theopoetics, especially those collected in Hopper, *Way of Transfiguration*, pp. viii, 1–4, 9, 12, 169, 298 and passim. For example: "Theo-logoi belong to the realm of mytho-poetic utterance and... theo-logos is not theologic but theopoesis" (225).

21. The phrase is from Michael Sells, *The Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), and it refers to "negative theology" or "apophatic theology," being Sells' translation of the Greek term *apophasis*, which indicates the impossibility of naming something ineffable.

22. Stanley R. Hopper, *The Crisis of Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1944): "The 'midnight hour' in which 'all men must unmask' is an hour of impotence, solitariness, confusion of Spirit—crisis" (27); [citing Matthew Arnold] "Wandering between two worlds, one dead,/The other powerless to be born,/With nowhere yet to rest my head,/Like these, on earth I wait forlorn" (34); [citing Yeats] "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world;/.../The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity" (44); "The critic of culture ... must specify the ambiguities, lay bare the impotence, and beat the bushes of uncertainty until the contradictions everywhere are fully flushed from hiding" (45); etc. Compare Hopper's later work, "The Naming of the Gods in Hölderlin and Rilke," in C. Michalson, ed., *Christianity and the Existentialists* (New York: Charles Scribners and Sons, 1956), which was published twelve years after *The Crisis of Faith*, but still six years before the first Drew conference on hermeneutics, and where the claim is made that the believer (not the unbeliever) must effect that 'willing suspension' not of disbelief but of *belief* in order to let go of a security system that no longer sustains" (154) and where the focus is on the times being defined as *dürftiger Zeit*, "destitute." Concerning this Heideggerian description of the death of God, see Critchley, *Very Little*, pp. 14, 115, 227.

23. Citations are in Stanley R. Hopper, "Symbolic Reality and the Poet's Task," *Eranos-Jahrbuch 34-1965* (Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1967), pp. 171 and in "Myth, Dream and Imagination," J. Campbell, ed., *Myths, Dreams and Religion* (New York: Dutton, 1970), p. 112.

24. This crisis of the "death of God" is at base a postmodern epistemological matter, as is indicated by Paul Kugler's mapping of the demise of "transcendental signifiers." Kugler observes, with Sausurre, that "there is no fixed point outside particular systems of

meaning relations, no transcendental referent ....” (*The Alchemy of Discourse* [Einsiedeln: Daimon Verlag, 2002], p. 105). In another essay, Kugler writes about the “twilight of our god-terms” (e.g., truth, reality, center, self, unconscious, soul, wholeness, unity, origin, wish, energy, etc.), and he says: “The more we attempt linguistically to account for the authority of these ultimates, the more the absoluteness in our god-terms begins to deliteralize, dissolve, and disappear. ... all systems of interpretation gain their authority through a grounding in a god-term, a transcendental ‘ultimate,’ but this ‘ultimate is no longer so absolute, so ultimate’” (*Raids on the Unthinkable* [New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2005], pp. 36, 37). Simon Critchley makes an epistemological point similar to that of Kugler’s: “... the possibility of a belief in God or some God-equivalent, whether vindicable through faith or reason has decisively broken down.... Such a thinking does not only entail the death of God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, but also the death of all those ideals, norms, principles, rules, ends, values that are set above humanity to order to provide human beings with a meaning to life” (*Very Little*, p. 3). Nietzsche referred to “transcendental signifiers” as “the big words” (see Critchley, *Very Little*, p. 11).

25. It is just this distinction between theopoetry as an apologetic for theology and theopoeitics grounded in the death of God that marks a principle difference in the Chicago school of Theology and Literature and the Drew school of Religion and Literature. For an instantiation of this division see the engagement of Stanley R. Hopper by Nathan A. Scott, Jr., in the *American Academy of Religion*, 42/2 (1974): 203–31; and Stanley R. Hopper’s response, “W. H. Auden and the Circumstance of Praise,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 43/2 (1975): 135–52.

26. These in many ways resemble, but are not precisely the same as the markers of a post-modern consciousness, according to the argument of Mark C. Taylor in *Erring: A Postmodern Al/ theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), Part One. Taylor’s marks are: 1. The death of God; 2. The Disappearance of the Self; 3. The End of History; and 4. The Closure of the Book.

27. See the Wikipedia article on Roland Barthes at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roland\\_Barthes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roland_Barthes) (accessed June 30, 2009).

28. John Keats, *Letters* (December 21, 1817), ed. M. Forman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 72.

29. I. A. Richards, “How Does a Poem Know When It Is Finished? In: Daniel Lerner, ed., *Parts and Wholes* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), p. 169 (Richards is quoting Northrop Frye). The perspective that the force of the poem comes out of the language rather than out of a person is also expressed by Martin Heidegger, when he writes: *Der Sprache spricht. Der Mensch spricht, insofern er der Sprache entspricht*, i.e., “Language speaks. Man speaks in that he responds to language.” (Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* [Pfullingen: Verlag Neske, 1975], pp. 32–33; Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. A. Hofstadter [New York: Harper and Row, 1971], p. 210).

30. Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” *The Complete Works*, vol. 4, ed. J. Guy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 195.

31. Cited by Francis X. Clines, “Inaugural Poetry: The Ode Not Taken,” *New York Times*, editorial section (January 19, 1997), p. 5.



32. Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, tr. D. Frame (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1960), vol. I, pp. 74, 81, 88.
33. Plato, *The Great Dialogues of Plato: Phaedo*, tr. W. H. D. Rouse (New York: New American Library, 1956), pp. 466–67, 485 (64a4-6, 81a11).
34. One could argue the same for depth psychology (as opposed to ego- or humanistic-psychology). Jung, for example, quite late in his life, wrote: “Every advance for the Self is experienced as a defeat [he could have said death] for the ego” (C. G. Jung, *Collected Works*, 14.778), and Wolfgang Giegerich has more recently insisted on the same: “Psychological discourse ... has to be as the negation of the ego, and the psychologist ... has to speak as one who has long died as ego personality. The art of psychological discourse is to speak as someone already deceased” (*The Soul’s Logical Life* [Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1998], p. 24, compare pp. 17, 19, 31).
35. Archibald MacLeish, “Ars Poetica,” in: John Ciardi, *How Does a Poem Mean?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), p. 909.
36. On this issue, see David L. Miller, “Prometheus, St. Peter, and the Rock: Identity and Difference in Modern Literature,” *Eranos 57-1988* (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1990), 75–124.
37. C. G. Jung, *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature* (*Collected Works*, vol. 15), (New York: Pantheon, 1966), paragraph 121.
38. Wolfgang Giegerich, “The End of Meaning and the Birth of Man,” *Journal of Jungian Theory and Practice*, 6/1 (2004): 28.
39. Joseph Campbell, “The Symbol without Meaning,” *The Flight of the Wild Gander* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2002), p. 143.
40. Joseph Campbell, “Symbol without Meaning,” p. 148.
41. Joseph Campbell, “Symbol without Meaning,” p. 152.
42. Joseph Campbell, “Symbol without Meaning,” pp. 154–55.
43. T. S. Eliot, “Four Quartets: The Dry Salvages,” *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), p. 133.
44. Angelus Silesius, *Cherubic Wanderer*, 1.289. See Angelus Silesius, *The Cherubic Wanderer*, tr. M. Shradly (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), p. 54. I have modified the translation. The key phrase, *sonder waeromme*, “without why,” was a common motif of Medieval mysticism, as Shradly points out in her footnote.
45. Katherine Hayles, ed., *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
46. Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*, tr. D. Yates (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 26.
47. Borges, “Garden,” p. 28.
48. Thomas Weissert, “Representation and Bifurcation: Borges’ Garden of Chaos Dynamics,” in Hayles, ed., *Chaos and Order*, pp. 223–243.
49. Two useful sources introducing complexity theory are: Neil Johnson, *Two’s Company, Three Is Complexity* (Oxford: One World, 2007); and Mark C. Taylor, *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
50. See Hayles, ed., *Chaos and Order*, pp. 8–10.
51. Cited in <http://www.connected.org/is/prigogine.html>, “The Networked Society,” (accessed December 15, 2008).
52. Johnson, *Two’s Company, Three Is Complexity*, pp. 13–16.

53. Taylor, *The Moment of Complexity*, p. 138.
54. Taylor, *The Moment of Complexity*, p. 142.
55. See the Wikipedia article on “Complexity,” at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Complexity> (accessed on December 15, 2008).
56. Taylor, *Moment of Complexity*, pp. 14, 16, 23, 134, 146, 185, and 191. See also Helene Shulman Lorenz, *Living at the Edge of Chaos: Complex Systems in Culture and Psyche* (Einsiedeln: Daimon Verlag, 1997).
57. Mark C. Taylor, *After God*, p. 346.
58. Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, tr. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 109–111.
59. Agamben, *End of the Poem*, p. 111.
60. Cited in Agamben, *End of the Poem*, p. 109.
61. W. S. Merwin, “One of the Butterflies,” *The Shadow of Sirius* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2008), p. 91.
62. Stanley R. Hopper, “Ontology as Utterance, or The Cavern Beneath of the Cave,” manuscript of a presentation given at the Fourth Consultation on Hermeneutics at Syracuse University in 1970; and, “Once More: The Cavern Beneath the Cave,” D. R. Griffin, ed., *Archetypal Process* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989), pp. 107–24. The allusion in these titles is to a saying by Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*, #289: “In the writings of a hermit one always also hears something of the echo of the desolate regions, something of the whispered tones and the furtive look of solitude; in his strongest words, even in his cry, there still vibrates a new and dangerous kind of silence—of burying something in silence. When a man has been sitting alone with his soul in confidential discord and discourse, year in and year out, day and night; when in his cave—it may be a labyrinth or a gold mine—he has become a cave bear or a treasure digger or a treasure guard and dragon; then even his concepts eventually acquire a peculiar twilight color, an odor just as much of depth as of must, something incommunicable and recalcitrant that blows at every passerby like a chill.... behind every cave in him there is ..., and must necessarily be, a still deeper cave; ... an abyss behind every bottom, beneath every ‘foundation.’” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, tr. W. Kaufmann [New York: Vintage, 1966], pp. 228–29) Hopper writes in the 1970 essay: “If we spring away from the idea of a ground in which every being as such is grounded, do we not spring into such an abyss? or into the cavern beneath the grotto beneath the hollow beneath the cave?” (ms. p. 22).
63. From “Transmission of the Lamp” (China, 7th century CE): “All hindrances to the attainment of bodhi which arise from passions that generate karma are originally non-existent. Every cause and effect is but a dream. There is no triple world which one leaves, and no bodhi to search for. The inner reality and outer appearance of man and ten thousand things are identical. The great Tao is formless and boundless. It is free from thought and anxiety.” Tao-hsin (4th patriarch, China) “It is like a pail of water when the bottom has fallen away. When nothing retains the water and it has all dropped, the negation is indeed complete.” Or from the Zenrin Kushu (Ruth Fuller Sasaki trans.): “In the bottomless bamboo basket I put the white moon; In the bowl of mindlessness I store the pure breeze.” <http://viewoftheblue.com/frankspage/zenquo.html> (accessed July 8, 2009).