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Theopoetics: Process and Perspective

L. B. C. Keefe-Perry

> It is at the level of the imagination that the fateful issues of our new world-experience must first be mastered. It is here that culture and history are broken, and here that the church is polarized. Old words do not reach across the new gulfs, and it is only in vision and oracle that we can chart the unknown and new-name the creatures.
>
> —Amos Niven Wilder, *Theopoetic*

> Poets write in the line of prophecy, and their work teaches us how to live. The language of poetry, when properly absorbed, becomes part of our private vocabulary, our way of moving through the world.
>
> —Jay Parini, *Why Poetry Matters*

The term *theopoetics* was first seen in the form of *theopoiesis*, used by Stanley Romaine Hopper in a 1971 speech that grew out of conversations that had been taking place within the Society for Art and Religion in Contemporary Culture and the American Academy of Religion (Miller 3). Since then, theopoetics has served as a noun referring to a particular devotional quality of a text, a genre of religious writing, and a postmodern perspective on theology. A useful working definition of the term would be the study and practice of making God known through text. Used as an adjective, a theopoetic text is one that reveals some aspect of the divine. At a broader level, the essence of the term is found in its etymology. Combining the Greek *theo* with *poiein,* meaning "to make or shape," theopoetics is a

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means of making God, of shaping experience of the divine, and the study of ways in which people come to know the Spirit.[1]

A number of writers and thinkers have contributed to current conceptualizations of theopoetics since the term came into use, and in fact, even in the years prior to its inception. Though not all have addressed theopoetics directly, any full view of the relevance of theopoetics to contemporary religious discourse would not be complete without addressing the work of these scholars. This article draws on a variety of disciplines to introduce the reader to the sources of theopoetics and to suggest its relevance to contemporary society.

The "Foundations" section details the thinking that undergirds the origins of the word, focusing on the work of Stanley Hopper and Amos Wilder. In "Engaged Phenomenology" and "Embodied Process," I will discuss theopoetics in relation to ideas from Richard Kearny, John Caputo, Catherine Keller, and Roland Faber. Most of these writers do not concern themselves directly with theopoetics, but instead use it peripherally in the course of their own respective agendas. Consequently, it is worth holding in tension the conceptualization of theopoetics that emerges solely from their sources with that offered by Rubem Alves, Scott Holland, Melanie May, and Matt Guynn, all of whom directly consider the contemporary utility of a theopoetic perspective and whose work is considered in the section "A New Theopoetic." The article closes by addressing some of the challenges that theopoetics faces and by offering a vision of the opportunities that further investigation may invite.

Foundations: Discrete Theopoetics

Hopper's speech "The Literary Imagination and the Doing of Theology," is the first piece of scholarship to make direct use of the term (Miller 3). In this text, Hopper asserts that we are in the midst of a "radical revisioning of our way of seeing and thinking" (Hopper 207). He suggests that the question is not how to develop a new, socially relevant theology, but "whether theology, insofar as it retains methodological fealty to traditional modes, is any longer viable at all" (207). If it is to remain viable, Hopper suggests, we must reclaim the power of myth and imagination, moving toward a poetic perspective of the divine instead of a prosaic, theo-logical approach that results in the "progressive reification of doctrine, squeezing the myth out, trying to contain the symbolic in a science and to reduce mysteries to knowledge"

(208). One is reminded of Theodore Roszack's assertion that empiricism can become "*empiricide*, the murder of experience. Science uses the senses but does not enjoy them; finally buries them under theory, abstraction, mathematical generalization" (280). Hopper wants to re-engage experience in a powerful way, freeing it from the weight of outmoded methods and mining it for glimpses of the presence of the living God hidden close to the surface.

Hopper argues that interest in religious discourse is not what it once was because the vocabulary of theological conversation is so far removed from experience that it does not engage most people in a meaningful way. He suggests that any successful attempt at reinvigorating a common religious dialogue will essentially abandon attempts to logically systematize religious thought. Instead, he advocates the shared expression of spiritual experiences that "evoke resonances and recognitions" (218). This shift from theologies, which he characterizes as utilizing hollow language, will require first "the unlearning of symbolic forms" and then "the activation of a new archetypal image" (220). Drawing on Martin Heidegger's work *What is Called Thinking?,* Hopper cites Heidegger's statement that "we moderns can learn only if we always unlearn at the same time ... we can learn thinking only if we radically unlearn what thinking has been traditionally" (221).

In his conclusion, Hopper posits that to the degree that modern theology has rigidly attempted to prove something absolutely, the whole project has been a fool's errand. In his words, any "theology founded upon the mathematical models of propositional logic is founded upon a profound metaphysical error" (224). In essence, he argues that the narrative of humanity is too closely held within the story of God for any theological claim of an objective, external conclusion to be accurate. The depth and mystery of Christ's power is too profound to be abstracted and articulated in entirety, so attempts to describe the nature and capacity of God should be grounded in experience and expressed only with the acknowledgement that they are but one aspect of the divine.

Hopper closes with an appeal for theologians to recognize that the true root of an engaged and relevant religious discourse belongs in "the realm of mytho-poetic utterance" (225). The way forward will lead us into a new language where theologies are not rigid, logical assertions, but joyful expressions that plunge us into mystery and a primal being; a theology that is "not theo-logic but theo-poiesis" (225).

Working with Hopper's conception of theo-poiesis as a new language that remakes our sense of God, Amos Wilder expanded on the idea in his 1976

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book, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*. There he bemoans the pabulum quality of theological discourse and opens with a barrage of criticism, leading the way with an assertion that, "religious communication generally must overcome a long addiction to the discursive, the rationalistic, and the prosaic. And the Christian imagination must go halfway to meet the new dreams, mystiques, and mythologies that are gestating in our time" (1). Wilder is well aware of the countercultural currents of religious thought and believes that the surge of interest in non-Christian spirituality has emerged because much of modern Christian thinking is abstractly discursive and has "widely lost and all but forgotten the experience of glory which lies at the heart of Christianity" (8). He categorizes most modern theology as "wan and bloodless abstraction" and suggests that the state of Christian discourse is a large factor in the rise of interest in other religions (8).

Wilder is careful though. He is consciously wary of the possibility that his plea for a theopoetic will be heard merely as a call for a fresh coat of paint on a rotting wall. He asserts that what is called for is "not an irresponsible aestheticism but the essential dynamics of the heart and soul" (2). He is not interested in dressing up old icons in modern clothes for the sake of popularity. Wilder calls for a theopoetic approach to Christianity that earnestly engages itself with contemporary religious experience in a rich language that is invitational instead of colonial. If a theopoetic of this sort were available, Wilder suggests, people would have greater access to the redemptive power of Christianity, and society would be able to more fully "purge itself of its own complacencies" (23). In effect, he argues that an authentic renewal of Christian discourse would engender a social movement that would eschew moral complacency in favor of a liberating ethic of action. Wilder suggests that the lack of such an engaged theopoetic "encourages an evangelical pietism or an ineffective liberalism" (27). Consequently, should Christians manage to revitalize the gospel's message with a dynamic language that grows with the contemporary imagination, the result will be a theopoetic that fully addresses the "principalities and powers, [and that] can overcome their bondage, exorcize their evil, and shape the human future" (27). Wilder's thesis culminates not simply in the call for reworded theologies. At the heart of his claim lies the idea that without religious language that fully engages the modern world as it is, we will find it increasingly difficult to *change* that world into the kingdom it can become.

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Wilder anticipates two critiques of his ideas. He imagines that they will be challenged by "rationalists and religious dogmatists for both of whom experience lacks its deeper creative registers" (101). For them, he presumes that the move toward a new theopoetic will appear to be frivolous aestheticism, like the charge mentioned in Ezek. 20:49, "They are saying of me, 'Is he not just speaking parables?'" The creation of beautiful and powerful words is as vital now as it was in Ezekiel's day, and should not be equated with superficial decoration. Second, he expects that those who desire a radical, new spirituality will feel that the theopoetic grounding in biblical scripture is too conservatively rooted in a tradition best left alone. In this category he would include all who believe that the whole project of Christian theology should be abandoned as no longer viable. He acknowledges this charge and yet does not mount a strong defense; should someone desire to see the end of the church, theopoetics will not convince them otherwise. A novel feature of theopoetic thought is its invitational stance. Rather than attempt to convince detractors of their errors, an empowered theopoetic would gradually draw them into conversation, offering a renewal of a "sense of the sacred [which] may well reject many aspects of the religious establishment, but … may also nonetheless contribute to the quickening of traditional pieties and liturgies" (102).

Both Hopper and Wilder use the word "theopoetic" as a discrete noun referring to a type of religious language that they both see as necessary to any relevant Christian renewal. They argue that part of the work of reclaiming theology for the masses requires the creation of a new theopoetic. Such a thing would engage some of the perennial Christian questions of liberation, salvation, and redemption, but would do so in a way that is fresh and grounded in the particulars of experience more than philosophical abstraction. Rather than crafting new theories and proofs of God, both writers anticipate a religious language that is more art and less science. One is reminded of André Gide's remark that "*therefore* is a word the poet must not know" (403). A theopoetic climax is not proof but recognition and resonance. The creation of a new theopoetic will be the creation of language that honors the deep traditions of Christianity while managing to capture a sense of the *experience* of the divine.

Engaged Phenomenology

Both Hopper and Wilder draw repeatedly on the work of Martin Heidegger in the construction of their plea for a renewed theopoetic.

Heidegger's contributions to hermeneutics are an essential component to the original conceptualization of theopoetics. Indeed, one of the most compelling texts addressing theopoetic ideas is the 1967 collection of essays in *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning* (Hopper and Miller), a volume resulting from the Third Consultation on Hermeneutics at Drew University. Although that text is valuable for its diversity of perspectives, more relevant developments in hermeneutics and phenomenology since 1963 include the work of Richard Kearney, particularly his essay, "Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology."

He opens with the question, "What if we were to return to epiphanies of the everyday?" and proceeds to sketch the beginnings of a convincing argument for the capacity of a new phenomenological reduction to help lead the way into an invitational religious discourse. While Kearney calls for the establishment of a fourth phenomenological reduction, the thinking that he puts forth in this article illuminates aspects of theopoetics not directly addressed in other texts, and specifically concerned with the term. He offers that this fourth reduction, which he terms "micro-eschatological," follows Edmund Husserl's transcendental reduction, Heidegger's ontological reduction, and Jean-Luc Marion's donological reduction of givenness ("Epiphanies" 5). In sum, Kearney's proposed new methodology: (a) accepts Husserl's epistemological techniques for filtering out habitual patterns of thinking so as to more readily approach a transcendent consciousness and the essences of meaning, (b) accepts Heidegger's means of raising of awareness of ontology with *Dasein*, (c) acknowledges Marion's articulation of the givenness of "saturated phenomena," and (d) suggests that while these reductive methodologies are in place, one may return to a concrete experience of the world that yields a renewing and creative perspective.

Essentially, Kearney's response to the post-Nietzschean question, "What comes after [the metaphysical death of] God?" is the return to a renewed God. This return occurs in an embodied way that engages experience directly without the obfuscation of imposed theology or the mediation of reason bound by presumed metaphysical structures. In his words, the process of returning to experience is akin to "that indispensable loop on the hill path that enables us to climb higher before doubling back to the valley below. The step forward as the step back. And vice versa" ("Epiphanies" 19). In embarking on the journey to create a phenomenological methodology that can contemporarily grapple with God, Kearney has set out, in the words of Catherine Keller, not to "define the proper style for God-talk, so much as perform it by example" ("Richard Kearney's Endless Morning" 890).

Kearney does not deny that all perspective is tinged with cultural bias but nonetheless asserts that it is possible to develop a means of engaging the world that maintains phenomenology's bracketing off and distancing techniques *while* simultaneously considering embodied experience. The result is a necessary re-engagement with the small things of life, which will then be seen as more essentially part of the divine. As Kearney notes, "In our rush to the altars of Omnipotence we often neglected theophanies of the simple and familiar" ("Epiphanies" 3). These "simple theophanies" are tied into his sense of "eschaton," hence his nomenclature of the reduction as "micro-eschatalogical." As constructed in the essay, eschaton is the end time, and as such, beyond our chronology. The eschaton is that time / place/experience in which *kairos* eclipses *chronos* and we "touch the sacred enfolded in the seeds of ordinary things" ("Epiphanies" 3).

By employing transcendental, onotological, donological, and micro-eschatological reductions, one can philosophically engage the world in an embodied way, experience Divinity in the small things, and then express that experience. Such an expression, Kearney claims, will occur at the "in-between site where conceptual reflection finds its limits and poetry finds its illimitable nutrition," a verbose naming of an idea that seems quite close to theopoetics ("Epiphanies" 13). Through the fourth reduction one can come to God "again for the first time," and in that reintroduction to the divine, find a means for believing and expressing that which had previously seemed impossible: one finds that they have entered what Paul Ricouer termed a "second naïveté" (*The Symbolism of Evil* 351). While by no means a perfect overlay, this articulation is in great resonance with Hopper's early sense of the process of theopoiesis.

David Miller, once a student of Hopper's, writes that Hopper understood theopoiesis to be three-fold. First there is a "stepping back" from "metaphysical perspective of the –ologies of Western consciousness with their accompanying excesses: intellectualism, literalism, behaviorism, and supernaturalism" (Miller 4). Second was to be a "stepping down," in which the individual enters the darkness of mystery and is unable to construct meaning because the familiar tools of theology and metaphysics are no longer available. From within this engulfing darkness comes the "stepping through," which was tantamount to a "re-poetizing of existence" (5). Wary of it being interpreted in too simplistic and too prescriptive a manner, Miller restates Hopper's vision of a theopoetic perspective in a clarifying way: "It not only means reading poetry. It means, especially, reading everything in

life and work poetically. It does not mean stepping out of the depths through to anything else. Rather, it means walking through everything deeply, seeing through life deeply" (5).

Hopper identified this repoeticized, theopoetic perspective, by paraphrasing from one of Rilke's letters, asserting that "people have been going about things in the wrong way, backwards in fact. Instead of trying to see God, as they have futilely attempted, they should have tried to see as God sees" (8; Rilke 146). Theopoetics is the process of coming to see the world more divinely. The suggested result of this would seem to be that the spiritual reality of the world would become easier to perceive, to poetically articulate, and to live into. This seems very close indeed to Kearney's micro-eschatological reduction and the "theophanies of the simple and familiar."

While the preceding summarization of a fourth phenomenological reduction mostly addressed Kearney's post-metaphysical arguments, it should be noted that he did not abandon the idea that the poetic "God who may be," is also a God who calls believers into action. In his book, *Poetics of Imagining*, he addresses the importance of imagination in calling up a vision of the possible future, writing that "The metaphors, symbols or narratives produced by imagination all provide us with 'imaginative variations' of the world, thereby offering us the freedom to conceive of the world in other ways and to undertake forms of action which might lead to its transformation. Semantic innovation can thus point towards social transformation"(149). This insistence on the liberating, catalytic potential of a poeticized perspective is also found in the work of theologian cum philosopher, John Caputo. Working with Catherine Keller, who will be considered in the next section, Caputo wrote "Theopoetic/Theopolitic," contributing to a further nuanced understanding of the theopoetic role in social action.

According to Caputo, all political structures have theological roots whether or not their creators intended this to be the case. Consequently, any truly transformative shift of political systems will include the refiguring of language and perspective. The resulting framework will not be devoid of theology but rather will name and incorporate previously unnamed theological perspectives that, without being announced, always had undergirded the previous system. Caputo recapitulates Heidegger's claim that "it is not a question of getting free of our presuppositions but rather of entering into them all the more primordially" (105). This call for the political necessity of reimagining God from the primordial seems in harmony with

Hopper's assertion that the way forward is through a darkness lit by poetics, Kearney's consideration of the social ramifications of semantic innovation, and Wilder's claim that a new theopoetics can "shape the human future" (27).

Embodied Process

The philosophically grounded movement toward social change runs parallel to work of Process Theologians regarding the embodied and particular theopoetic qualities of process perspectives. Foremost among these scholars are Catherine Keller and Roland Faber. While Faber's book, *God as Poet of the World*, is quite comprehensive regarding process theology, his articulated perspective regarding theopoetics is thoroughly influenced by the thought of Alfred North Whitehead, and as such, is of a markedly different tone than those views discussed above.

Faber's writing tends to be rich with neologisms and dense language that makes no apparent attempt at being poetic. Instead, he offers a thorough explication of a system of thought that outlines theopoetics as a "theology of perichoresis (of the mutual coinherence of all things) in which the universe represents God's creative adventure and God the event of creative transformation of the world"(15)[2]. In developing a worldview that envisions God as a creating event, and the world as shifting creation, there is much room for metaphor, the Aristotelian mark of poetic genius: finding the familiar in the unfamiliar and vice versa. Indeed, just as a skilled poet can bring an entirely fresh perspective on something utterly banal and uniform, so too does Faber's concept of a theopoetic. He writes that the theopoetic impulse is one that always "seeks to roughen up unified appearances by differentiating the various deep-lying, multiple voices hidden under various powerful contenders of an alleged "orthodoxy" of content, method, and direction of thought" (318). According to Faber, a theopoetic perspective on theology will entail the rejection of any system that claims a complete and closed system of thought regarding the divine.

Theopoetics as outlined in Faber's book is open and pluralistic. One is reminded of Whitman's assertion, "I contain multitudes," and indeed, Faber uses the word *polyphilia* (love of multiplicity) often, arguing that a theopoetic perspective will always "hold open a 'moving whole' that never, at any point, resists revision and progression of thought (318). At best, this approach suggests, any articulated vision of God, no matter how complex,

will only be but an aspect of a divinity that is eternally in the process of becoming. The result is a radically reconfigured vision of the divine: rather than an anthropomorphic and distant God, a polyphilic theology posits a relational God, constantly engaged in the renewal of the world. It is this perspective, one of divine relationality, that Catherine Keller develops in her article "The Flesh of God."

In that essay, Keller champions the work of Sally McFague, particularly her development of a panentheistic theology of God in the world. A theology of this sort is predicated on an assumption, as Keller puts it, that "if God is immaterial, God doesn't matter" ("Flesh" 91). Consequently, McFague's, and therefore Keller's, assertions revolve around the eco-theological idea that creation is a body of God, and that our relationship to the divine must be similarly "enfleshed." Just as the poet must bring new eyes to the particulars and details of life so as to more fully capture them in verse, Keller suggests that theologians bring a renewed perspective on creation to more fully capture how God moves in the world. She is quick to note that our society has a tendency to perceive a duality between self and body that finds itself paralleled in the common separation of God and World. Keller's hopes are tied to a desire to transcend this theological separation. She writes that "the challenge is to think of the difference of 'God' and 'world' with a radicality that actually deepens their interdependence. Or put differently, we will want to complicate the boundaries by which these two terms are opposed, while releasing mystery into the first term and creativity into every level of the second" ("Flesh" 94).

Keller's premise dovetails nicely with the theopoetic perspective in general, and Kearney's "theophanies of the simple and familiar" in particular. Following McFague's lead, Keller desires a panentheistic model not to build a God of the gaps, but as a guide that helps Christians to see the world differently, and because of the new sight, become inspired to engage it for the better. Keller even goes so far as to ask if "seeing God" is another way to say "seeing the creation with new eyes" ("Flesh" 107). Any sense of God then is essentially relational: truly seeing creation does not happen without a seer. As such, the more that people become aware and attuned to the possibility of theophany, of the relationship between creation and creator, of the sacred *in* the profane, the more likely they will be to see it, consequently having their own perspectives and habits transformed.

Keller acknowledges that the dominance of Greek epistemological constructions in modern academia, and the eternal and shifting nature of

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God, can lead to a temptation to abandon the task of theology entirely: there simply is no way to get the whole of God in words just right. She resists this temptation though, and drawing from Nicola Cusa's *docta ignorantia*, recapitulates a tenant familiar to the theopoetic perspective. The task before us is not to resort to skepticism or disbelief, but to "keep always in mind how humanly constructed are the models whereby we know anything at all" ("Flesh" 103). As people, theologians and otherwise, deepen their relationships with spirit and develop their understandings of the divine, there is every reason for articulations of God to continue to develop as well.

A New Theopoetic

Contemporarily, the strongest examples of intentional theopoetics can be seen in the work of Rubem Alves and Melanie May. Alves writes in such a sweeping language that it borders on poetry itself, while May tends toward a more narrative expression of experience. Regardless, each has written a book that Wilder and Hopper would have likely categorized as theopoetic. Furthermore, both May's *A Body Knows* and Alves's *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet*, have been intentionally written in a theologically nontraditional modality with an awareness that to do so goes against the grain of modern religious academics. Nonetheless, both books *are* theological without being formulaic, systematic, or closed. Each author is explicit about the choice and reasoning behind their deviation from formal theologies.

> Experiences of a lifetime have prepared me to write in this way. It nonetheless remains a challenge to relinquish the relentless requirements of razor-sharp ratiocination that characterized my formal theological training. I still ache as I struggle to stitch flesh and blood sensibilities into the apparent self-sufficiency of scholarship. I am still mending my own alienated choice to dissociate logic from life that I thought was the ticket to academic achievement. (May 14)

> God is the Wind: it comes, it goes, it cannot be put in paper cages or word cages. … After it goes the only thing which is left is the memory of its touch on my skin. I can only speak about this: reverberations on my body, as it is touched by the Wind; sometimes a chill, sometimes a warm feeling, goose-pimples. … Not theology. Poetry. If you like—theo-poetics. … (Alves, "Theopoetics: Longing and Liberation" 161)

May's text runs the narrative of her own experiences of bodily pain, recounting life-threatening illnesses and the new life she found on the other side of them. In the course of her story, she lifts up her own sense of resurrection, now claiming that her theology has become a doxology, affirming that, "what our bodies know is a life-giving source of our knowledge of God" (23). Because of the embodied quality of May's thinking, she is grateful for her life and speaks of that gratitude into the mystery, glad to have received its gifts and not needing to understand them in entirety. In a way, May is treading the same path as early Christians: speaking of God not out of a desire to contain and comprehend, but from a place of thanksgiving. Early prayers and psalms were not systematized theologies or ordered ontologies, but instances of language grasping at slivers of the spirit, attempting to speak personal experience into the Mystery, hoping it would catch.

May's embodied doxologies are resonant with Keller's vision of a necessarily material aspect to the divine, and a similarly grounded, experiential theology is also taken up by Alves, who writes that "the body has a philosophy of its own," and that our realities are inherently shaded by a material world that only takes on meaning when ascribed with words (Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet* 37-57). In his essay, "Theopoetics: Longing and Liberation," Alves expands on the theme of the body being fed by words, asserting that "There are words which are not to be thought. They are to be eaten. I think that the angel, in the book of Revelation, was a poet. … He gave the little book to the seer and ordered him not to read, not to understand, not to think about it with clear and distinct ideas, but to eat it …" (166).

Anyone looking to Alves or May, or any theopoetic for that matter, for a complete theological system of thought will not find it. Theopoetics is an active, embodied perspective, generating language that reveals some of the nature of the divine in this world, making it easier to see the divine in the everyday. It is not prescriptive and does not presume to have encapsulated the full nature of God. A theopoetic can never be the end-stop of theological conversation. Rather, as Scott Holland has noted, "It is a kind of writing that invites more writing. Its narratives lead to other narratives, its metaphors encourage new metaphors, its confessions invoke more confessions, and its conversations invite more conversations" ("Theology Is a Kind of Writing" 327). It engenders dialogue and promotes a radical acceptance of plurality regarding personal experience of the divine.

For Holland, the contemporary writer who has written most about theopoetics in the vein of Hopper and Wilder, theopoetics is compelling because it is an embodied and populist approach to God-talk. While modern philosophy, theology, and to a large degree, even poetry, have become isolated in the rarefied atmosphere of academia, theopoetics remains the means through which common people may begin to voice their sense of the divine. Holland refers to Plato's exile of the poet from the ideal republic because of his distaste for the manner in which poetry can excite the masses in ways which are unpredictable. Writes Holland, "philosophers make the eternal Logos, Word, or Reason inhabit political structures and moral forms, but poets, dangerous poets, make the flesh become word" ("Theology" 323). This dangerous action, this flow of word into flesh into liberating word, is exactly what Holland would like to see more of. He is concerned with the distance at which theology holds itself from the world and envisions a new language of God wherein "a theopoetics and a hermeneutics of gesture finally meet on the tongue of language and taste" (*How Do Stories Save Us?* 136).

In theopoetics Holland sees a means of returning to a sense of God among present perspectives of postmodernity and yet claims that the call toward a theopoetic is discernible as far back as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who understood poetry to be a providential gift that supports "those delicate sentiments of the heart … which may be called the feeding streams of religion" (*Stories* 137). For Holland, the theopoetic impulse acts as a "divine lure" of sorts, pulling at the heart's sentiments, irresistibly drawing people into physical action and not just thought.[3] On more than one occasion, in his role as a Church of the Brethren Pastor, he has encouraged a congregation to "search out God in the streets like a spy," urging them to find and share reflections of the divine wherever they might (Personal Communication). This democratic vision of theopoetics is also taken up by Matthew Guynn, a nonviolence activist in the Northwest United States and fellow member of the Church of the Brethren.

Guynn points to the Hebraic connotations of the word *dabhar* as a guide to understanding the power of language to function theopoetically. Rather than being merely a passive marker, the Hebrew word for "word" is much richer, providing a reading wherein "the word itself [is] a thing, and a power" (102). The Hebrew language captured the idea of words shaping reality millennia before Jerome Bruner ever wrote, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," and Guynn suggests that this sense of *dabhar* is very much in line with his imagined theopoetic.

Drawing heavily upon Alves's work, Guynn writes that theopoetics helps people to "reconsider personal narrative, impact, and power … [and] often provides opportunities for choice or a confession of belief, for a kind of conversation"(102). This type of invitational, confessional conversation takes on what Guynn terms a "theopoetic sensibility" when it moves toward creating a space wherein the reader is "drawn out into the 'Open,'[4] the space where new life can flow forth from the subterranean caverns of the Source, of dreams, of the larger Divine life" (102). He sees theopoetic language as the site of intersection between personal experience, interpreted experience, culture, and renewal. Thus, when a text is acting theopoetically, it functions in opposing directions, simultaneously pulling the reader further into the poetic narrative and pushing the reader into a reconsideration of, and reconnection with life in the world beyond the text. Guynn cites his own translation of Alves here, emphasizing that moments of theopoetic captivation draw readers into text, into relationship, and into service.

> Suddenly the reader discovers that the story is not talking about an object but instead it is a net that wraps her, obliging from her a word, either a confession or a decision. The story doesn't speak about something … it speaks with someone, establishing a network of relationships between people who agree to conspire--to co-in-spire, to breathe together--gathered around the fascination of that which has been said. (Alves, *La Teologia Como Juego* 110-11)

Guynn approaches theopoetics from a perspective of Christian activism and engagement, following Wilder's vision of a new theopoetic capable of revitalizing the Church so that it will "purge itself of its own complacencies"(23). Approaching the topic from a different angle is Phil Zylla, Academic Dean and Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology at McMaster Divinity College. In his article, "What Language Can I Borrow?," he clearly lays out an argument for the intentional advancement of theopoetic thought in the field of pastoral theology and seminary training.

Drawing significantly on Donald Capps's book, "*The Poet's Gift*," Zylla closely associates the work of poet and pastor, suggesting that both are charged with ferreting out means of expressing "the complex reality of concrete situations" (130). As the necessity to consider multicultural and minority perspectives continues to press on the church, Zylla offers that theopoetics ought to be more seriously considered by pastoral theologians. By learning to appreciate the poetic, pastors and lay people alike will

develop a greater ability to communicate with one another and to listen across personal differences and cultural boundaries. He asserts that "if we are to speak meaningfully of the deeper experiences of God in our lives and in the lives of our congregations, we need to pay careful attention to how language may express the depth dimension of our searching" (131). For Zylla, poetically engaging the divine moves toward depth and mystery.[5] He suggests that a theopoetic renewal of pastoral theology would entail the acceptance of ambiguity and a practice of pastoral guidance that takes into account the power of language to refocus perspectives.

In these type of "reorientation" conversations, Zylla suggests that rather than just providing psychologically based support, the minister can offer the petitioner an opportunity to recalibrate, to understand how the presence of God in their life is there, waiting to be seen. While at first this can seem like somewhat of a "grin and bear it" approach, what is being proposed is decidedly not an ascetic pietism but rather an infusion of faithful theopoetic vision into sessions often overly grounded in models of rational psychology.

While Zylla has every intention of providing the emotional and social support desired in pastoral encounters, he also is challenging the field to move beyond the discursive, maintaining compassion while plunging more deeply into the mystery. He posits that "The lived transforming Word guides the sensitive articulation of authentic pastoral conversation," and urges the field of pastoral theology to take up the charge of poetically delivering God's word in a way reminiscent of 1 Pet. 4:11 "If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides …" (137). This kind of speaking not only serves the listener, but the speaker as well, inviting them both into deepening opportunities to reorient their lives. What is shared in a theopoetic space is not prescriptive but descriptive: the articulation of a perceived presence of the divine and an acknowledgement that "the deepest strivings of our hearts end in God's presence. The deepest longings of our souls require God's touch" (132).

Those who look to theopoetics and expect to find a referent to some Platonic form of theology misunderstand its nature. To the degree that a concrete theopoetic text exists, it deserves that qualitative assignation because its author has crafted something that is in poetic process. It can be returned to again and again with different readings at different depths. The development of a theopoetic perspective entails growing into a regular

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"reading of the world" that allows for various divine tones and timbres to emerge from the everyday. Learning to see the world differently means learning to live in the world differently, and both of these may very well pivot on the power of spirit to engage. Theodore Roszak has said it well:

> Unless the eye catch fire
> The God will not be seen
> Unless the ear catch fire
> The God will not be heard
> Unless the tongue catch fire
> The God will not be named
> Unless the heart catch fire
> The God will not be loved
> Unless the mind catch fire
> The God will not be known (272)

Objections to a Theopoetic Perspective

In his editorial to the 1997 Fall edition of *Cross Currents*, William Birmingham addresses Scott Holland's article on theopoetics and comments that, "Some may find Holland's particular theopoetics too narrowly romantic—I, for one, do not see how without substantial modification it would comprehend, say, Aquinas's *Pange Lingua*" (Birmingham 292). Birmingham writes as if other theologies had the capacity to comprehend anything on their own, and this, while indeed a semantic argument, points precisely toward the issue with which many theopoetics writers grapple: most modern theologies are so abstracted and removed from life that it is possible to think of them as functioning and comprehending on their own.

Theological inquiry is inherently embodied because it is a function of the seeking life. Theopoetics attempts to highlight this fact and address it head-on, transforming personal experience into a spark for further conversation rather than authoritatively proclaiming abstract universal truth or interpretation. Undergoing "substantial modification" is something that applies to formulaic methodologies and prescriptive dogmatics, neither of which any theopoetics writer claims it to be. Indeed, Holland's claim that theopoetics is a kind of writing has since been further developed, and he now agrees with Guynn that "theopoetics is a style of writing or a theological stance, an artful way of working with language and worldview" (Presidential

Forum Workshops; Guynn 99). This clear articulation is useful for facing perspectives that attempt to give theopoetics attributes it does not claim. For example, in his essay, "Can Models of God Compete?," Jeremy Hustwit endeavors to portray theopoetics as a type of theological modeling. There he remarks that, "the primary criterion for a theopoetical model of God is not its correspondence to the reality of God, but the degree to which it is personally compelling" (437). This conceptualization of theopoetics falls far short of the mark.[6]

First, he argues that theopoetics has a "non-realist view of language," that is, those attempting to use theopoetics to guide their articulation of the divine do so without thinking their language refers to a solid reality beyond the constructs of language (438). Rather than place theopoetics on a realist, non-realist continuum, it is more useful to understand that theopoetics is generally concerned with evoking experience, not postulating models of God. Hustwit seems to place theopoetics in the Derridian camp of "*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte,*" which is by no means a foundational principle of theopoetic thought, especially given those who argue so clearly that theopoetics is not a mere self-referential aestheticism and must be engaged with applicable, embodied ethics (Goizueta, Wilder, Guynn, Derr).

Hustwit characterizes theopoetic language as if it were only smoke and mirrors, reducing the peculiarities of linguistic novelty to mere internal coherence, presuming that theopoetic speech is simply concerned with appearance and style. This could not be further from the truth. Theopoetic discourse need not even be florid. The power of poetry does not reside in verbal acrobatics but in its ability to capture the experience of a fleeting moment in language that persists. As the poet Philip Levine wrote,

> …Some things
> you know all your life. They are so simple and true
> they must be said without elegance, meter and rhyme,
> they must be laid on the table beside the salt shaker,
> the glass of water, the absence of light gathering
> in the shadows of picture frames, they must be
> naked and alone, they must stand for themselves. (44)

Hustwit's title belies his frame of reference, as "Can Models of God Compete?" suggests a competitive heuristic that is diametrically opposed to this author's sense of "theopoetic" as a qualitative marker of invitational processes and dialogical perspectives. As Jesus tended to the widowed, the

orphaned, and the sick, so too must the church turn to the margins and engage all in conversation. Exclusivity and dominance are the tools of the powers and principalities, while radical hospitality and invitation draw us into conversation and communion. To paraphrase Walter Bruggemann, empires are built on monologue and communities on dialogue.

Theopoetics should not be portrayed as a God modeling tool, and as such, vulnerable to the same challenges as other systematics. While there may be some who view theopoetics as another type of constructive theology, this author's reading of the literature points more strongly to a conceptualization of theopoetics in the vein expressed by Melanie May: doxological not doctrinal. Borrowing terminology from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, theopoetics must not be understood as a monological *pro forma* veneer on theology but rather as a dialogical enterprise that acknowledges that all text is in continual dialogue with past and present texts. Language, "as a living, socio-ideological concrete thing … lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. … It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word" (Bakhtin 278). This fits well with Alves's litany that words must be eaten (appropriated) for nourishment, and in the eating they, and the eater, are transformed.

The viability of theopoetics is tied to its insistence on the particular, and a theological re-interpretation of the Imagist poet's maxim, "show, don't tell." Adrienne Rich's comments on poetry are applicable to theopoetics as well: "there is no universal Poetry anyway, only poetries and poetics, and the streaming, intertwining histories to which they belong" (Rich and Doty 21). To raise questions about "the theopoetic perspective" on a model of God, for example, is flawed in its very construction by the inclusion of the definite article. There is no *single* theopoetic perspective. Theopoetics maintains what Faber terms a polyphilia, or love of multiplicity, and as such, prompts a joining of voices. Far from a flaccid ambivalence however, the theopoetic invitation is also a challenge for others to begin to speak their truth and to test it with others, making space for marginalized voices to safely enter the discourse. The degree to which this aspect of theopoetics continues to emerge will dictate the extent of its proliferation in the years to come.

The Future of Theopoetics

> I must keep God caged
> Said the Priest, binding the thongs
> of his premises …
> (A child tried to shut
> the moonlight in a box, but
> he fell asleep soon …) (Hopper 104)

Theopoetics is not another theology, claiming to have God all figured out and hegemonically excluding the possibility of any validity beyond itself. Nor is it simply an aesthetic move toward writing about religion in verse. Theopoetics is an invitation to begin to "read" the entirety of experience as scripture, until daily life itself becomes infused with heirophany and a call to faithfulness. Rather than attempting to capture moonlight, theopoetics offers a standing invitation to view a midnight moonrise, cresting the dark hills just as the light of the dark reaches its peak. As Paul Ricoeur noted years ago, the power of the poetic lies in its ability to create a "depth-structure of belonging-to amid the ruins of descriptive discourse" ("Hermeneutic" 101). To engage in the theopoetic process is to begin to come to terms with the gracious presence that unites all things, even in this broken world, to learn to see spirit at work in the mundane, and to transcend modern alienation with a call to unite and to serve. Theopoetics is a means of engaging language and perception in such a way that one enters into a radical relation with the divine, the other, and the creation in which all occurs.

At the crux of the theopoetic project is a question that cries out for attention.[7] Given that science and religion are so often set at odds, how are we to be intelligent, thinking creatures on the one hand, and faithful, trusting people on the other? Theopoetics provides a possible way forward. It maintains the validity of science while simultaneously announcing that there is something more.[8] Asking powerful, scientifically guided, critical questions can help to move the world toward a greater good, and yet for some, any sense of deep joy is predicated on an acceptance that there are things that cannot be understood with prosaic rationalism alone. As Paul reminded the Hebrews, "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

When the prevailing mores are tied to materialism and the most commonly expressed hope is for *economic* salvation, a theopoetic perspective begins to bring people toward an awareness of the divine in

the everyday. Living in a time when religious discourse has been vigorously reinserted into politics and international affairs, the theopoetic appeal for an egalitarian engagement with the divine surely has a place. The task set before the church is to consider the ways in which God is manifesting as real, and how to better pronounce the word.

As theopoetics comes into its own, there may well be an increasing number of venues for individuals to share their own articulations of God, and a greater number of people attempting to use those venues to put words to the numinous. In these venues, "pronouncing" will recapture its own etymology of pro-nuntius: the messenger speaking out, putting forth the word. More broadly, as the field of theopoetics expands, theology will be invited to move from the ivory tower into the streets, lives, and mouths of the faithful. There it will taste of honey, and when spoken, will be put to use in the building up of the true church in the body of believers, the faithful who will join with Blake:

> I rest not from my great task!
> To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
> Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought: into Eternity
> Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human Imagination. (136)

Rochester, New York

NOTES

[1]See Stathis Gourgouris's article, "Poiein—Political Infinitive," for further insight into the Greek ramifications of the word.

[2]Interestingly, in Stanley Hopper's first essay containing theopoeisis he too references a Whiteheadian perspective, a cosmology that understands "the whole is… present in each actual entity, and each actual entity pervades the continuum" (Whitehead 105). This reference seems to anticipate later developments in process and pan-en-theism theologies developed by Faber, Sally McFague, Catherine Keller, et al.

[3]See Barry L. Whitney's article for further consideration of the "Divine Lure."

[4]Guynn cites page 249 from Hopper's *The Way of Transfiguration: Religious Imagination as Theopoiesis.* For more on Rilke's "Open," see also Heidegger 104-11.

[5]Holland concurs with Zylla's vision of theopoetics and is quick to note that he is not making a case for theology to be written in verse. Rather, in a statement that it seems Zylla would support, he argues that "whether theology is inscribed

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in the genre of poetry, in the form of narrative, or in a thicker, theoretical style of prose, it remains a *poiesis*: an inventive, imaginative act of composition performed by authors" (*How Do Stories Save Us* 109). The emphasis lies on the poetic quality and its surplus of meaning, not the form of verse itself.

[6]Hustwit's position that "theopoetics finds the linguistic constitution of human experience to be too radical to refer outside of its own discourse to a non-linguistic world," stands in opposition to Matt Guynn's remark that "Theopoetics points beyond the page toward a way of being and a way of engaging groups and social issues," (103) and Roberto S. Goizueta's comment that "theopoesis is itself rooted in communal, intersubjective praxis" (264). What Hustwit puts forth as "Fallibilism," (438) is a well-articulated explanation in line with current trends regarding the conceptualization of theopoetics.

[7]Much of this section is an amplification of material originally created for the web portal, *theopoetics.net*.

[8]For additional perspective on the integration of science into a prophetic vision, see chapter 9 of Roszack's *Where the Wasteland Ends.*

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