

# Theopoiesis:

A Perspective on the Work of Stanley Romaine Hopper

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Introduction to *Why Persimmons and Other Poems*

by Stanley Romaine Hopper

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Perhaps one could imagine that theology is poetry, and that poetry is theology...and that it has been so always. Such would be a reason for this book, not to mention that it is the “reason” of this book.

In 1976, Amos Wilder referred to “reasoning” such as this in a small volume whose title recalled an old term from Clement of Alexandria. Wilder used the term—theopoiesis—for his title, and, though he himself expressed some reticence about the total transformation of theology into theopoiesis, he acknowledged that Stanley Romaine Hopper has stood forthrightly in our age for this poetic transformation in the study of religion.<sup>1</sup>

Wilder is, of course, correct. Hopper has always, and self-consciously, trafficked upon poetical pathways. When Christian theology was in our century first liberal and then neo-orthodox, Hopper championed existential philosophy and literature as clues to the spiritual dimension of life. When theology became Biblicist, Hopper explored secular literature for its religious elements. When other religious interpreters studied Melville and Faulkner, he dared to speak of the spiritual dimensions in the “godless” Theater of the Absurd. When theology in America finally entertained existentialist fads from the

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Left Bank by way of the New York Times, Hopper wrote of the importance of the symbolic insights of Freud and Jung to theology. When the study of religion moved toward the social sciences, Hopper migrated into the terrain of Wallace Stevens, Martin Heidegger, and Zen.

Yet, in spite of the fact that it always drew from the well-springs of literary resources, the work of Hopper was not always so thoroughly “theopoetic” as it would become. Early theological articles from 1931 to 1943 culminated in an award-winning book, *The Crisis of Faith* (1944).

While ecclesiastical and rational theology were under attack in this book, it nonetheless itself ended with a *theologia crucis*, a “theology of the cross,” which later would be deepened in an altogether different direction.

Two dimensions seem to be missing from this early period: (1) though Freud is mentioned, the perspective of depth of twentieth-century psychology has not yet made the impact on his thinking which it later will; and (2) oriental aesthetic perspectives, also, are not fully entertained. It was not until Hopper lived in Japan during the academic year, 1967-1968, that these perspectives began to appear.

The publication of *The Crisis of Faith* was followed by eight years of very occasional writings of short length. Then between the years 1956 and 1965 there emerged work with new horizons.

Hopper had written an “Interlude” in the book of 1944. It told of Alice’s wondrous White Knight falling off his horse onto his head and because of the rigidity of his armor, being stuck upside down. In Hopper’s later essays of Jeremiah, on the poets Hölderlin, Rilke and Stevens on the Kierkegaardian notion of Diogenes’ search for one authentic person, and on the concept of irony as “the pathos of the middle” (Schopenhauer), it was, indeed, as if theology in its rigid forms had been turned upside down as a result of a fall into an archetypal imagination, a fall

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into the fantasia of some Alice in Wonderland.<sup>2</sup> The armor was being broken through.

It was at the end of this middle period that Hopper was invited to speak at the Eranos Conference in Ascona, Switzerland. The speech was titled, “Symbolic Reality and the Poet’s Task.” It contained a foretaste of what would become a full-fledged transformation of theology into theopoetic.

After that year (1965), there was a burgeoning of writing on literature, myth, dream and imagination. These pointed particularly in the direction of two important essays, “Le cri de Merlin!” (1971) and “Jerusalem’s Wall and Other Perimeters” (1973).<sup>3</sup> These pieces demonstrated a substantial presence of a depth psychological perspective and, especially the influence of Jung. It remained only for the Chautauqua Lectures of 1974 (“The Relation of

Religion to Art and Culture”) and the Fuller Lectures of 1975 (“Theopoiesis”) to complete the articulation of a poetic revolution in theology for which the present collection of poems gives moving confirmation.<sup>4</sup>

A lecture to the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in 1971 was the occasion of Hopper’s first public mention of the term “theopoiesis.” The speech was called, “The Literary Imagination and the Doing of Theology.” In it Hopper followed Martin Heidegger in noting that a rationalistic approach to theology entails a philosophical metaphysic which has “become questionable.” Theologia, properly so-called, is a “mythopoetic utterance about the Gods with no reference to any creed or ecclesiastical doctrine.”<sup>5</sup> Hopper is citing Heidegger here, but he is himself opposed in the lecture to the traditional –ology of theology, preferring instead the mythopoetic utterance which brackets the onto-theo-logical metaphysic in advance.

Talk about God, Hopper observed that day in Atlanta, has customarily led out of the world of experience to

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things thought to be super-natural and transcendental, to things rational and abstract, to things doctrinal and dogmatic, to things pious and ethereal. In such fashion the sense of the holy, the otherness of things, the transpersonal, the archetypal, has become eclipsed, lost, killed. Theology needs a reversal of its fixated logos, Hopper argued. He said:

...a theology founded upon the mathematical models of propositional logic is founded upon a profound metaphysical error: Christ, as the Great Periplum of the World, the embodied Logos, is again fixated to his Cross, and the Kingdom does not come.<sup>6</sup>

So, Hopper noted several things in summary: (1) When language fails to function at the metaphorical or symbolic levels, the imagination goes deeper, soliciting the carrying power or the archetype, translating the archetype from the spent symbolic systems into fresh embodiments;<sup>7</sup> (2) What matters therefore in interpretation is the psychic depth which our modalities of identification achieve in imagination; and (3) Our theo-logic finally belongs to the realm of mytho-poetic utterance, hence, theo-logos is not theo-logic but theo-poiesis.<sup>8</sup>

One begins to sense the radical nature of this theo-poetical understanding of the study of religion when Hopper outlines three moments of its anatomy in the essay on “Le cri de Merlin” and in The Chautauqua Lectures.

He reported in these works that theo-poiesis is, first of all, a step back.” It is a step back from the metaphysical perspective of the –ologies of Western consciousness with their accompanying excesses: intellectualism, literalism, behaviorism, and supernaturalism. Paradoxically, this step back in understanding religion is aided by the experi

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ence of the failure of theology, a “failure” sometimes referred to as the Death of God.

But the “step back” prompts a “step down.” As one is thrust backward upon the self, one also notices an inability to construe meaning. The bottom drops away, both psychologically and mythically, as in the Zen image of the bucket whose bottom must drop out. The resultant experience of darkness entails a suffering engagement with the unconscious. This darkness and its concomitant bottomlessness is requisite to and requires a third step, one which Hopper called the “step through.”

The “step through” is a re-poetizing of existence. It is characterized by a profoundly and thoroughgoing poetic way of viewing. Hopper follows Philip Wheelwright in calling this view, not metaphoric, but “diaphoric.”<sup>9</sup> It is not a “carrying across” of one thing onto another, but is a seeing through—diaphorically, diaphanously, diagnostically, diacritically. 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.

This was all prepared in the Eranos lecture of 1965. The preparation involved insights from the psychology of Jung. Jung—Hopper noted at Ascona—held a view of metaphor “as expressive of archetypal content.” He cites Jung as having said (in his “Reply to Buber”), “I will poetize.” Hopper indicated the direction in which this “Poetizing” was drawing Jung. The latter had said:

*God has...made an inconceivably sublime and mysteriously contradictory image of himself, without the help of man, and placed it in man's unconscious as an archetype, an arche-typon-phos, not in order that theologians of all times and places might come to blows, but that the unpretentious man might glimpse an image, in the*

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*stillness of his soul, which is related to himself and formed of his own spiritual substance. The image contains everything which he will ever imagine concerning his gods or concerning his soul's ground.*<sup>10</sup>

Hopper aligns this saying to another from Jung in which the psychologist reports the archetypal content “expresses itself first and foremost in metaphors.”

*If (Jung writes) such a content should speak of the sun and identify it with a lion, the king, the horde of gold guarded by the dragon, or the power that makes for the life and health of man, it is neither the one thing nor the other, but the unknown third thing that finds more or less adequate expression in all these similes, yet—to the perpetual vexation of the intellect—remains unknown and not to be fitted into a formula*<sup>11</sup>

Hopper adopted this imaginal psychological viewpoint, stressed the unknown third (tertium non datur), and demonstrated in his lecture how these indicate a mythico-religious sphere,” but a mythic and religious dimensionality not to be accounted for by traditional strategies in theology. Jung’s view had implied an experience of this dimensionality, and it would be the radicality of the experience which would call for a new mode of theological understanding. As Hopper put it: “We have been brought to the threshold of a basic revision of the Western religious consciousness.” Or again: “Intellectualistic patterns and mandala form must now be let go of.”<sup>12</sup>

The radical experience to which Hopper points is shared by way of the power of poetry—for example, this by Wallace Stevens:

*The heaven of Europe is empty, like a Schloss  
Abandoned because of taxes.*<sup>13</sup>

America, too, has been impoverished, “overtaxed,” by its theologies, as Stevens further indicated in his poem about Jersey City, saying: “The steeples are empty and so are the people....”<sup>14</sup>

Hopper noted, however, in an essay from five years after the Eranos lecture in which he had quoted Stevens’ lines, that for the same poet the failure is curiously an achievement, for Stevens also wrote:

*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>15</sup>

The reason for the poetic achievement of failure (Hopper noted) had been expressed earlier by Friedrich Schelling: “The crisis through which the world and the history of the gods develop is not outside the poets; it takes place in the poets themselves; it makes their poems...it is the crisis of the mythological consciousness which in entering into them makes the history of the gods.”<sup>16</sup> So, it is in this spirit that Stevens can write:

*There was a muddy center before we breathed.  
There was a myth before the myth began...  
From this the poem springs.*<sup>17</sup>

So it is that Hopper is alerted to look for a way into the study of religion, not through the logos of logic, not through –ology, but through poetry, through poiesis. He reminded his audience toward the end of his lecture at Eranos: “I have not spoken theologically. After all, as Jorge Luis Borges says, ‘God is not a theologian.’ Neither is he a metaphysician. There are those who have said he is an artist, a maker, a poet.”<sup>18</sup> So Hopper petitions the poets and is a poet, and he is, thereby, precisely by not speaking theologically, all the more a theologian.

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Hopper petitions the poets and the poetic way into theology because poetry, as he quotes Pierre Jean Jouve as saying, is “soul inaugurating form.”<sup>19</sup> For Hopper, the forms of soul come particularly from the poetry of Rilke and Stevens. Rilke had said in a letter that Hopper often cites: 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. Instead of looking up at the Cross, they might have looked at the world from the perspective of the Cross.<sup>20</sup> Hopper has noted that such a strategy would have been poetic in the extreme: diaphoric. It would “imply (as he put it) a certain transparency both within ourselves and toward all things.”<sup>21</sup> This, of course, would be the transparency of soul in the unpretentious man of whom Jung spoke. It is what theopoiesis, the poetizing of divinity, naming the Gods imaginally, may well be all about.

Theopoiesis was used by the ancients as a term meaning “deification,” “making God,” “making divine.” Justin Martyr, Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus were drawn to the term as a description of what happened to true Christians after they died. “God became man so that man might be ‘made God’ (theopoieo).” But Clement of Alexandria had the so-called “Gnostic” audacity to suggest that theopoiesis can take place during life’s time. Theopoiesis would then be the likening of theological insight to life-experience allegorically, metaphorically, poetically, diaphorically. To this point Clement wrote in the *Stromata*: “The ‘theopoet’ is the real man who alone is wise while others flit about as shadows.”<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the “rationale” of such Christian Gnosticism is that theopoiesis, like the poems of this volume, acknowledges the shadows, viewing theology from their deep perspective, at the same time as it views

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the deep shades theologically, which is to say, not personally, but archetypally.

Perhaps it is this sort of transparency in and through shadings and nuances that makes it possible for Hopper to say at the end of his lecture at *Eranos*: “We are permitted—from the deep centrum of our being—to be both the eyes of becoming and a tongue for utterance: the manifest of glory, the resonance of praise.”<sup>23</sup> Surely it is the profound resonance of such utterance (the poems herein) which is “soul inaugurating form,” which provides the forms of a perspective in theology.

So it is that Stanley Hopper's "theopoetry" has been for many, and now may be for more, a stepping back into religion in a new way, a stepping down into the depths of their own psyches, and a stepping through into creative expressions of meanings which, though old, are fresh. Theopoiesis: bottomless buckets of grace!



<sup>1</sup> Amos Niven Wilder, *Theopoetic*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press (1976): iv. Wilder says: "I believe that I had picked up the term 'theopoetic' and 'theopoiesis' from Stanley Romaine Hopper and his students, no doubt in one or another of the remarkable consultations on hermeneutics and language which he organized at Drew and at Syracuse to which many of us are indebted."

<sup>2</sup> "The Book of Jeremiah: Exposition," *Interpreter's Bible*, Volume V.G. Buttrick, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956), 794-1142; "The Naming of the Gods in Hölderlin and Rilke," *Christianity and the Existentialists*, C. Michalson, ed. (New York: Scribners, 1956), 148-190; "The Modern Diogenes: A Kierkegaardian Crochet," *Religion and Culture*, W. Leibrecht editor, New York: Harpers (1959): 91-112; "Irony—the Pathos of the Middle," *Cross Currents*, XII, 1 (Winter, 1962): 31-40; "Wallace Stevens: The Sundry Comforts of the Sun," *Four Ways of Modern Poetry*, N. Scott, Jr., editor, Richmond: John Knox Press (1965): 13-31

<sup>3</sup> For example: "Whitehead: Redivivus? Or Absconditus?" in *America and the Future of Theology*, editor W. Beardslee, Philadelphia: Westminster (1967): 112-126; "Challenge and Ordeal in Religion and Literature," *Emory Quarterly*, 1968, 62-71; "The Author in Search of his Anecdote," *Restless Adventure*, R. Shinn, ed. (New York: Scribners, 1968), 90-148; "Myth, Dream and Imagination," *Myths, Dreams and Religion*, J. Campbell, ed. (New York: Dutton, 1970), 111-137; "Le cri de Merlin!" *Yearbook of Comparative Literature Volume IV*, J. Strelka, ed. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press (1971): 9-35; "Jerusalem's Wall and Other Perimeters," *Humanities, Religion and the Arts Tomorrow*, H. Hunter, ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1972), 228-245; "Albee's Tiny Alice Revisited—How People Live Without Gods," *The American Poetry Review*, II, 2 (March/April, 1973): 35-38

<sup>4</sup> "The Relation of Religion to Art and Culture," *The Chautauqua Lectures*, August 12-15, 1974, mimeographed by The Chautauqua Institution, Chautauqua, New York. Publication of The Fuller Lectures is still forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> "The Literary Imagination and the Doing of Theology," privately circulated manuscript, p. 2. The citation here is from: Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, J. Stambaugh, tr. (New York: Harpers, 1969): 54f

<sup>6</sup> Hopper, "Literary Imagination," p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press (1962): 70ft

<sup>10</sup> Hopper, "Symbolic Reality and the Poet's Task," *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, XXXIV/1965 (Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1967): 193, 189

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210, 201.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Hopper, "Myth, Dream and Imagination," p.112.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.136.

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Jean Jouve, "En miroir," *Mercure de France*, p. 109, cited in: Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, M Jolas, tr. (New York: Orion, 1964), p. xxvi ftn.

<sup>20</sup> Hopper, "Symbolic Reality," p. 211. Hopper is citing Rilke's letter to "L.H." of November 8, 1915.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> *Stromata*, IV. 317.

<sup>23</sup> Hopper, "Symbolic Reality," p. 214. Cf. "W.H. Auden and the Circumstance of Praise," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, XLIII, 2 (June, 1975), 135-152; "The Poetry of Meaning," *Literature and Religion*, G. Gunn, ed. (New York: Harpers, 1971), 221-236 (First published in 1967, as the introductory essay in *Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning*, edited by Stanley Romaine Hopper and David L. Miller (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., Hew York), and containing the essays of the Third Consultation on Hermeneutics convened at Drew University during April, 1966.) "Kafka and Kierkegaard: The Function of Ambiguity," *Myth, Creativity, Psychoanalysis: Essays in Honor of Harry Slochower*, M. Solomon, ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978), 92-105; and, "The 'Terrible Sonnets' of Gerald Manly Hopkins and the 'Confessions of Jeremiah,'" *The Poetics of Faith, Part II: Imagination, Rhetoric, and the Disclosures of Faith*, W. Beardslee, ed. (Semeia; Chico: The Society for Biblical Literature, 1978): 29-74