

**Theopoetic Exploration and Fusing:
*Hyper-reality, Horizons, and the Reading of Scripture***

[We live in] the toxic cultural air of a disenchanted world in which the mark of sophistication is to reduce wonder to banality... In academic circles, this is called "the hermeneutics of suspicion," meaning that things are interpreted to reveal that they are not in fact what they appear to be... They must be exposed and debunked if we are to get to "the truth of the matter." The false, the self-serving, the ugly and the evil, on the other hand, are permitted to stand as revealing "the real world."

-Richard Neuhaus (125)

Introduction

While perhaps the picture painted by Neuhaus is bleaker than the one others perceive, I begin my work with the note that I – even if no one else – am (a) familiar with his articulation of the ironic turn toward a wonderless “disenchanted world;” (b) left less than sated by that world's prevalence and lack of boldness, and (c) nonetheless desirous of critical and informed thought within my faith life. In a way, my work is a response to a question one might put to Neuhaus, “So what, then, are we supposed to do?”

This paper attempts (provisionally) to bridge the disciplines of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and practical theology by means of repurposing language and theory from conversation pertaining to the nascent term *theopoetics*. Working from within Richard Kearney's conceptualization of a fourth "micro-eschatological," phenomenological reduction, I suggest that his reduction leads to a methodology that results in an engagement with Scripture that is marked by theopoetic qualities such as the carrying of a surplus of meaning, the creation of space for marginalized voices, and a positive evaluation of embodied experience. To begin then, let me highlight the space from which I will draw together these themes.

For Christian thought, hermeneutical phenomenology poses a significant set of challenges and opportunities. If – as a line of phenomenologists have claimed since Heidegger's

Being and Time - human existence is interpretative and not essential, then a number of traditional doctrinal positions require reengagement, namely (1) the unique soteriological significance of the Christ event, (2) the promise and hope of that which is to come, and (3) the mediating role of Scriptures to reveal the truth of the first two. What I intend to suggest is that this engagement is of particular utility in the context of contemporary Christianity, its culture of bipolarization, and the fracturing of the Church. Exploring Christian implications of a hermeneutical phenomenology may provide an articulated structure for some means of reconciling the "religious" experience of the faithful, contemporary knowledge, traditional Christian doctrine, and social/ethical desires for civility and dialogue. In this presentation I will focus primarily on the mediating role of Scripture and will approach the intersection of Christian Revelation and Hermeneutical Phenomenology primarily through engagement with Kearney's microeschatology and what I see as his sustained use of Paul Ricoeur's Second Naïveté.

Furthermore, in an attempt to provide clarity by means of some interpretive triangulation, I also suggest that this type of thinking - that is, an insistence that the belief that interpretation "goes all the way down" does *not* preclude the possibility of faith - is readily articulated by means of discussion circling around Stanley Hopper's term *theopoiesis*. My hope is that by juxtaposing a Continental tradition of phenomenology with the American literary (and process thought) tradition of theopoetics, the end result will be something of use for folks interested in the tradition(s) streaming from the source of the Gospel.

Kearney's Microeschatological Reduction¹

*...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.*

-Phillip Levine (44)

¹ Portions of the material regarding Kearney's reduction and the theopoetic stance are adapted from my work in "Theopoetics: Process and Perspective," in *Christianity and Literature* Vol. 58, No. 4 (Summer 2009).

In a 2006 essay ("Epiphanies of the Everyday"), Kearney opens with the question, "what if we were to return to epiphanies of the everyday?" and proceeds to sketch the beginnings of an argument for the capacity of a new phenomenological reduction to help lead the way into an invitational religious discourse.

In that piece, Kearney calls for the establishment of a micro-eschatological reduction, that (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 yet return to a concrete experience of the world, yielding a renewed 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 without the obfuscation of an imposed *telos* or the mediation of reason bound by metaphysical structures presumed to be eternal. 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 his most recent work, Kearney has abandoned the term microeschatology in favor of the book's title "Anatheism," a neologism that clearly owes much of its use to his previous work with a fourth reduction. In his introduction to that text he writes,

*[Anatheism] is about repetition and return. Not in the sense of a reversion to an anterior state of perfection... nor, indeed, in the sense of a return to some prelapsarian state of pure belief ... The **ana** signals a movement of return to what I call a primordial wager, to an inaugural instant of reckoning at the root of belief. It marks a reopening of that space where we are free to choose between faith or nonfaith... Anatheism, in short, is an invitation to revisit what might be termed a primary scene of religion: the encounter with a radical Stranger who we choose, or don't choose, to call God (Anatheism 7).*

Kearney sees radical hospitality as a Judeo-Christian imperative, not only in terms of a relational ethics, but also in the development of our interpretive lens(es). His call is one of invitation to walk in a place of hospitality and welcoming, even when the welcomed guest may

prove hostile. In his reading of Abraham's Genesis 18 encounter with the "three strangers" and God who foretells that Sarah will bear a son, Kearney sees the commentary that religion "is capable of the best and of the worst... Abraham's heartless banishment of Hagar and Ishmael is totally at odds with his hospitable reaction to the arrival of the aliens from nowhere. Capable of the most cruel acts, Abraham is also capable of receiving potentially threatening nomads into his home with open arms" (20).

It is of vital importance to Kearney, and to any project of theopoetic/anatheistic interpretation, that we remember no duration of hosting will ever co-exist with the knowledge its ending provides: how our interaction with the Other will influence us is not known until it happens. So too with the Other of the everyday, and with the Other of the text. Arguing from within a Christian framework, he claims that this temporarily suspended moment of knowing/unknowing is, in fact, well modeled by the theophany on Mt. Horeb. God as seen there, writes Kearney, "is a God who puns and tautologizes, flares up and withdraws, promising always to return, to become again, to come to be what he is not yet for us. This God is the coming God who may-be... This Exodic God obviates the extremes of atheistic and theistic dogmatism in the name of a still small voice that whispers and cries in the wilderness: "perhaps" ("The God Who May Be" 85). In that whisper we move through a moment: we do not enter into a new state. Rather, we are brought to an ecotone, an edge space that marks a continual re-entrance into the liminal area on the threshold of faith. It is the moment in a film wherein the audience knows they just witnessed something that is pivotal to the picture and will figure into later narrative, but at the moment of their witnessing, they are clear only as to its import, not its intent. It is in those moments, Kearney suggests, that people of faith decide again if we will do the work needed to stay the course and hear that "perhaps" again. Or perhaps someday a "yes." Perhaps².

Convinced though, that God (or perhaps Derrida's "trace" of God) is still an experience today and not just on Mt. Horeb, Kearney notes that, "in our rush to the altars of Omnipotence we often neglect theophanies of the simple and familiar" ("Epiphanies" 3). The wild perhaps of the Mosaic Divine is still present in daily "simple theophanies" which he links into his sense of

² For a fuller theological conjecture as to how it is that this moment of suspended interpretation becomes one of (re)commitment, please consider Sam Laurent's work in pneumatology, particularly as it relates the work of the Spirit to Art and a Kierkegaardian sense of Spirit as signpost to "divinely presented possibilities" (10).

“eschaton,” hence his nomenclature of the reduction as “micro-eschatological.” As Kearney conceives it, the eschaton is the end time, and as such, beyond our chronology. Consequently, the microeschaton is the small moment in which *kairos* eclipses *chronos* and we “touch the sacred enfolded in the seeds of ordinary things” (“Epiphanies” 3), and -I would suggest- in the seeds of Scripture.

Theopoetic Streams

Metaphors give a precision and persuasive power to the construct of God that concepts alone cannot. Because religions, including Christianity, are not incidentally imagistic, but centrally and necessarily so, theology must also be an affair of the imagination.

-Sallie McFague (38)

Current discussion around the term theopoetics comes primarily through two channels, one from newer origins via the theologically and philosophically driven work of Catherine Keller, Roland Faber, and (loosely) John Caputo, and the other, stemming from the work of Stanley Hopper in the late 1960's.³ While Keller, *et al.* have something substantial to add to the conversation on theopoetics itself, for the purposes of directly considering the act of reading, Hopper's literary and Biblical focus lends that work to more ready employment⁴.

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), and in it he asserts that we are in the midst of a “radical revisioning of our way of seeing and thinking” (Hopper, “Literary Imagination 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). Furthermore, he argues that any successful attempt at

3 Keller acknowledges that it is a funny coincidence of fate that she began using the term in the early 2000's while teaching at Drew, thinking she coined the term for her own, multiplicitous, embodied, process-oriented uses, only to later discover that it had been already been employed by Hopper some 30 years prior, also at Drew. It is happenstance that this is the case, however their uses of the term share some (unsurprisingly) significant things in common. Again, for more on the ways in which their perspectives overlap see “Theopoetics: Process and Perspective,” in *Christianity and Literature* Vol. 58, No. 4 (Summer 2009).

4 It is worth noting here that while I will principally make use of Hopper here to frame the theopoetic stance, Amos Wilder's

reinvigorating a vibrant religious dialogue will essentially abandon attempts to logically systematize religious thought. Instead, he advocates shared expression of spiritual experiences that “evoke resonances and recognitions” (218).

The 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 “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). His claim then is that we must unlearn modern approaches to theology, arriving at that which is “not theo-logic but theo-poiesis” (225). Hopper's position is succinctly articulated by his student, Amos Wilder:

Reality has become dizzying and uncharted but every particular contact with it all the more fresh and unpredictable. Thus the revolution in cosmology has shocked not only our intellectual but also our imaginative categories... [but] Scripture and the Christian view of nature – when freed from distortions and impoverishments incident to a long history – have the resources to welcome and order all such new imaginative transactions with our theater of existence... The dimension too often missing is... that of rooted-ness, creaturehood, embodied humanness.

Hopper's argument is that to the degree that modern theology has rigidly attempted to prove something absolutely and as distinct from experience, 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 some ways this can be seen as an energetic response to Death of God theologies that were in vogue at the time: Hopper had to find some means to condemn the “hollow language” of theology that was currently under fire and then maneuver in such way so as to allow for some new resurgence of authentic Christian expression. While Hopper's claim of logical theology as “profound error,” can be seen as extreme given contemporary approaches to contextual and constructive theology -- especially ones which allow for the power and validity of voices beyond the normative ones, and the general progressive acceptance that theology is done provisionally and for a certain people at a certain time -- the theo-poetic insistence for a more creatively engaged, embodied expression of Divine experience yet remains powerful.

book on the topic, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*, is significantly more accessible.

The suggestion therefore is that by supporting and validating the experience of folks in conditions outside of our own, we might come to know more, not just of them, but of ourselves and God. Much in keeping with Levinas' assertion that "it is in the face of the Other from which all meaning appears" (299), Jason Derr writes that, "to engage in the theopoetic is to tempt the radical nature of ourselves, it is to follow in the footsteps of the God-Speakers that could upset the Republic, could speak from the margins of our hungers and unspeakable truths" (Derr). We engage each other, encouraging new articulations of the Divine (and interpretations of Scripture) not because we believe that that task will be accurately completed in our lifetimes, but because there is something gained from meeting each other in incomplete spaces. The study and production of language about (and for) God is not to "get it right," but to engender more noticing of God and each other, and that of God *in* each other and Creation. Indeed, "the point is not to use the mind's eye to grasp and classify objects into discrete categories according to 'universal definitions,' [but to become] sensitive to differences and aware of empathetic connections between beings, subject to subject" (Victorin-Vangerud, 76).

Here I will close this section by reinserting Kearney's voice with the claim that "poetics makes hermeneutics possible" (*Anatheism*, 11), that it "makes us strangers to the earth so that we may dwell more sacramentally upon it" (13). I believe that by taking microeschatology's uncertainty in one hand and a theopoetic constructivism in the other we may enter into a reading of Scripture with a much greater appreciation for how it reflects *both* the sacramental flesh of experience and the not-quite-seen ~~God~~ Poet of the world⁵. The power of a faith-inspired *and* critical interpretation of Scripture may indeed be undergirded by poetic and imaginative thought.

An Applied Phenomenology

[B]y allowing [God's] name to fluctuate in all its undecidability and provocativeness, by releasing it from its servitude to being in order

⁵ This phrase "God as Poet of the World," is both a quotation from Whitehead as well as a the title of a text by Claremont's Roland Faber, in which he claims that 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). Faber's application of the term is one grounded in process theology, but nevertheless insists that authentic theologies must entail the rejection of any system that claims a complete and closed system of thought regarding the divine.

to free it as a promise, we free it from its service as the name of a res, even the most real of all real beings, but we do not deny thereby that it has any reference to reality at all. Rather, we enlist it in the service of a certain "hyper-reality," of a reality promised beyond that what is presently taken to be real, the hyper-reality of the beyond..."

-John Caputo (11)

Kearney's assertion that there is a space beyond/*ana* the arguments for theism and atheism and Hopper's theopoetic claim that we are in the midst of a "radical revisioning of our way of seeing and thinking" both (a) insist on the extreme relevance of present embodied experience *and* (b) believe that the moment of the present is an event in which further things can be seen. That is, without needing to make claims to some overarching thought-structure both thinkers believe that here, in the stuff of daily life, there is more to be explored: small moments of theopoeisis and microeschaton which inspire transgressions and excesses of hospitality; moments which lead to more moments and greater invitations.⁶

I suggest that their position(s) map readily onto a methodology for the reading of scripture. I hesitate to call it a "new" methodology because, as Kearney says of anatheism, "it is simply a new name for something very old and... constantly recurring in both the history of humanity and each life... Without the abandonment of accredited certainties we remain inattentive to the advent of the Strange; we ignore those moments of sacred enfleshment when the future erupts through the continuum of time" (7). The kind of guidance found in a deep reading of Scripture then, is neither like reading a manual for existence nor like the kind of recursive plunge that Barth envisioned in his "strange new world within the bible" (Barth, 30-50). Rather, it is a type of reading that engenders some encounter with what Anabaptist writer Jeff Gundy calls the "heretical sublime," or what John Caputo names as "hyperreality"⁷.

Moving from experience, broadly conceived, to the experience of reading Scripture, what occurs? More particularly still, what occurs for someone reading Scripture who has spent time in the "desert of criticism," and has cultivated a more-than-healthy hermeneutic of suspicion?

6 I'm playing here with Scott Holland's claim that "...good theology is a kind of transgression, a kind of excess, a kind of gift. It is not a smooth systematics, a dogmatics, or a metaphysics; as a theopoetics it is a kind of writing. It is a kind of writing that invites more writing. Its narratives lead to other narratives, its metaphors encourages new metaphors, its confessions more confessions..." (Holland, 128-9).

7 Caputo's use of the term shares nothing in common (other than its typography) with Baudrillard's sense of it as "virtual" or simulacra.

What I am suggesting is that in the small anatheistic moments wherein we experience a microeschaton, experience the Other in the daily, and have to re-make our notions of God (*theopoiesis*) we find exactly the kinds of encounters we can encourage people of faith to have in the reading of Scripture. Moreover, anatheistic articulations of experience and interpretations of Scripture may allow for the development of conversations in which theologians and thinkers of many stripes can interact equitably: something akin to Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" takes place in the moment of surrender to the possibility that in the meeting of God in the Other our own sense of God, Other, and Self will shift. That is, people give up thinking that the notion "understanding scripture/God" is something we *do* and acquire knowledge as a result of, and instead turn towards a rethinking of Augustine's "*crede, ut intelligas.*"

Rather than a model of "faith seeking understanding" where people of faith are on some safari hunt for meaning with reason as their gun, it becomes an immersive experience in which reason is used to situate oneself "within a process of tradition, in which past and present are constantly fused"(Gadamer, 258). Fused not so that our contemporary thought is burned out to some pre-modern naïveté, but so as to allow for some renewed sense of the source to which the tradition might be pointing. We read not to master the material but so that it "can really be made to speak to us" (358) over and through our certainties, regardless of our intent.

Two (or more) trajectories intercept here: those who tend towards an interpretation of scripture as mere cultural artifact, fully claiming a detached mentality of distanced hermeneutical suspicion, and those who tend toward an interpretation of scripture as a context-less, eternal vehicle for complete and pure transmission of Divine mandate. To both of these positions the anatheistic tracings of the non-quite-yet-fully-disclosed-God open up some room for exploration and hospitality without requiring either to abandon their post. While I do not think he had these ideas of Gadamer in mind when we proposed it, Paul Ricoeur offers much to this point:

It is in the age when our language has become more precise, more univocal, [and] more technical... that we want to recharge our language, that we want to start again from the fullness of language... Beyond the desert of criticism we wish to be called again. (349)

In every way, something has been lost, irremediably lost: immediacy of belief. But if we can no longer live the great symbolisms of the sacred in

*accordance with the original belief in them, we can, we modern men [sic],
aim at a second naïveté in and through criticism. (351)*

The idea then, reading Kearney, Hopper, and Gadamer through Ricoeur, is not to come to Scripture (or experience) expecting our demands to be met, but to enter into it with acknowledged hopes for the encounter, praying that some insight be given, yet always aware that even our notions of insight might be reoriented⁸: our smooth expectations “roughed up” a bit. To paraphrase a line from Nicholas of Cusa that Kearney himself uses, Scripture disturbs, uproots, and reiterates the call of Yahweh to Abraham to 'leave his house'; it shakes every edifice, even the venerable *esse subsistens* (Kearney, *Wake*; 75). Both the jaded Christian connoisseur of Neuhaus' “toxic cultural air” and the Biblical literalist can come to the table without having to give up their current position as long as both allow that something radical may happen in the encounter of the Other in the text that opens up some micro fissure into the eschaton, from which hope flows.

Indeed, faith that the text will consistently give up its power to us is not a faith at all, but an insistence that the human power of reason and interpretation is sufficient to extract God's will directly from language, as if the entirety of God's humble majesty might be captured in text. Reminded as we are in Acts 17:29 that "we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals" (NRSV), I suggest we take seriously Kearney's injunction to recall that all "religions are imaginary works, even if what they witness to may be transcendent and true (Anatheism,14). I think that theopoetic and anatheistic project(s) honor 2 Timothy's assertion that "all scripture is inspired by God," (3:16, NRSV) while remaining in dialogue with André Gide's request that we cultivate "a disposition to receive" (*une disposition à l'accueil*) (Anatheism, 14) and remembering that “therefore is a word the poet must not know” (Gide, 403).

The call is to cultivate a receptive disposition, developing ourselves to better interpret Divine inspiration without trying to clutch tightly to that inspiration, holding it over others by some means of reason or “proof.” The call is to accept the free floating moment of invited, fertile, anatheistic doubt, allowing it to inspire our work in the world even *while* we are

⁸ Phil Zylla does a great piece about the power of the theopoetic perspective to radically dis- and re-orient people of faith. For more on this see his “What Language Can I Borrow?”

uncertain. Perhaps *especially* because we *are* uncertain we must see what happens when we follow in the path we believe we are being pointed. It is as if each encounter with the Other of text is a bequeathal of unnamed and mixed seed stock: we must do the work of tilling and sowing ourselves to see what bears good fruit. This is just what I believe Ricoeur suggests when he says that the Second Naïveté "...starts from the symbols and endeavors to promote the meaning, to form it, by a creative interpretation" (355). This is the tilling, sowing, and waiting work: an uncertain, hospitable encounter with the Other of the text that results in experimentation with new language and new ways of living. With new language that *leads* to new ways of living, for as Kearney wants us to remember, "semantic innovation can thus point towards social transformation" (Kearney, "Poetics" 149).

Are there things to be suspicious of? Certainly. Marx, Neitzche, and Freud have firmly tamped down the path of questioning on which many now tread. There is much to be gained in a critical evaluation of what presents itself, but for a person of faith there must be something beyond irony and doubt. There must be some maneuver available that lets them critically come to the text and yet be startled -as we might at a sudden new reading of a poem that we thought we knew so well- by traces of the presence of God. I suggest that this willingness to be surprised, to cede that it is exactly its sacredness that precludes utter mastery of holy text, is a possible way forward. A way beyond some of the current dichotomies that divide us, and a way towards possible a "reality promised beyond that what is presently taken to be real." I believe that theopoetic and anatheistic perspectives gently contribute to this way forward: not with a strong insistence on the way things will be, nor with firm clarity on what it is we are to believe is to come, but with a persistent and luring call toward the text in ways that simultaneously pull the reader further into the poetic narrative and push the reader into a reconsideration of, and reconnection with life in the world beyond.

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