Theopoetics is the Rage

Scott Holland

Before the message, the vision,
Before the sermon, the hymn;
Before the prose, the poem.

The discursive categories of theology
as well as the traditional images
of sermon and prayer require a theopoetic.

So declares Amos Niven Wilder in his *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*, published in 1976.[1] Amos Wilder (1895-1993) spent much of his career as a biblical scholar at Harvard Divinity School. His brother Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) was a famed playwright and novelist. The two brothers discussed and debated the genres of theology. They noted that the ancient texts and traditions of the Christian faith were filled with poetry, liturgy, parable, payer, story, hymn, and song. They also observed that modern theologies can be propositional, doctrinal, systematic, and even dogmatic. Thus the longing for a "theopoetics."

In the 1960s a circle of religious scholars, along with some poet professors, were meeting in a salon on the Upper East Side of New York City. They called their collective "ARC"—Art, Religion, Culture. This group included Amos Wilder, Paul Tillich, Rollo May, W.H. Auden, Joseph Campbell, Stanley Hopper, and David L. Miller. This creative circle explored together the artistic, religious, and cultural movement from theology to mythopoetics and theopoetics. In this salon, Wilder, Hopper, and Miller made the most explicit use of the category and genre of theopoetics in their writing lives. Take a look, for instance, at Wilder's *Theopoetic*, Hopper's *The Way of Transfiguration: Religious Imagination as Theopoesis,* and Miller's

[1] Amos N. Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 2.

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Hells and Holy Ghosts: A Theopoetics of Christian Belief.[2] (Miller, by the way, was born and baptized into the Church of the Brethren.) Their writings were widely read and well-reviewed. However, the term "theopoetic" didn't move far in theological discourse beyond the Wilder, Hopper, Miller hermeneutical circle at Harvard, Drew, and Syracuse. But, today, simply Google "theopoetics" and you will get scores and scores of live hits from Wikipedia to Facebook postings to Amazon.com to Theopoetics.net, my former student's web site.[3]

Theopoetics is the rage! Emergent Church/postmodern philosopher Peter Rollins, author of *Insurrection* (2011), *The Orthodox Heretic* (2009), and *How (Not) to Speak of God* (2006) among other works, is calling us from a theo-logos to a theo-poesis. Catherine Keller at Drew University is doing an erotic and ecological theopoetics. Process theologian Roland Faber, a professor at Claremont School of Theology, is reminding us that God is the poet of the world. Jack Caputo, an emeritus professor of religion at Syracuse University, is writing about the politics of Jesus as a theopoetics, and I am publishing special editions of *CrossCurrents* journal on theopoetics.[4] In these days of the twilight of the church and the twilight of conventional theologies, more religious writers and spiritual intellectuals are discovering that the Creator God of Genesis is not a moralist but a poet and a potter. God, with a creative word, spoke the universe into existence, and fashioned and formed humanity out of the clay of the earth.

For many working in the genre of theopoetics, the old gods of morality and the gods of metaphysics have died. For us, theology cannot be the search for a new metaphysics at the benediction of God's funeral. Theology is not a *metaphysics* but a *poetics*, for it seems that in the rhythms of creation

[2] Amos Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*; Stanley Hopper, *The Way of Transfiguration: Religious Imagination as Theopoesis,* eds. R. Melvin Keiser and Tony Stoneburner (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); David Miller, *Hells and Holy Ghosts: A Theopoetics of Christian Belief* (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2004).

[3] Callid Keefe-Perry is the webmaster of a very useful sites: http://theopoetics.net. Also see his introductory article on theopoetics, "Theopoetic Process and Perspective," in *Christianity and Literature* 58, no. 4 (2009): 579-601. He provides a genealogy of the term "theopoetics" in that article.

[4] I have edited a special edition on theopoetics—*CrossCurrents* 60, no.1 (2010)—and I am collecting new articles and essays on the same theme for another issue of the journal.

and creativity, aesthetics precedes ethics. Another way to understand this movement away from traditional metaphysics is to state that the theopoet is suspicious of metanarratives or comprehensive theological systems in which all must find their plots and places in a story which is not their own. To assert that the style and substance of the theopoet's work is guided by a poetics, not a metaphysics, is only to affirm that all theology is composition, a kind of writing, an act of imaginative construction.

This is not to suggest that all contemporary theology must be written in poetic verse, although this would be lovely indeed. It is, however, to make the theopoetic claim that *theology is a kind of writing*. What kind of writing is it? Theopoetics contends that whether theology is inscribed in the genre of poetry, in the form of story, or in a thicker, more theoretical style of prose, it remains a *poiesis*: an inventive, intuitive, and imaginative act of composition performed by authors. It is a kind of writing that invites more writing. Its narratives call forth other narratives, its metaphors inspire new metaphors, and its conversations encourage more conversations.[5]

If I understand Peter Dula's concern in "Theology is a Kind of Reading," (see pages 113-120 of this issue), he is suggesting that the argument most theopoets have with theology is a quarrel with doctrine, not with the great tradition of theology. Theology, he argues, is imaginative. Thus, he urges us to abandon what he sees as a dualism between theology and theopoetics. To accent his point, he writes, "There is a lot to worry about in the texts of Pope Benedict, but none of that has anything to do with a lack of imagination or artfulness." I think my old professor, Hans Küng, would take issue with Dula's claim. In 1979, Joseph Ratzinger, when he was the Vatican's chief enforcer of theology, launched a formal inquisition on the thought of Küng, a Tübingen theology professor. Soon, Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI, revoked Küng's license to teach Catholic theology, leading to his dismissal from the theology faculty and exile in 1980-81 to the University of Chicago Divinity School. In his class on "Ecumenical Theology for a New Century," Küng distinguished between theologies working freely and imaginatively with texts, traditions, and human experiences and theologies more bound

[5] For a more complete treatment of theology as a kind of writing marked by a poetics rather than a metaphysics, see Scott Holland, "Theology is a Kind of Writing: The Emergence of Theopoetics," *CrossCurrents* 47, no. 1 (2007): 317-31.

to the memetics of churchly authority enforced by bishops, popes, and inquisitors. Some theology is imaginative. Some theology is flatly memetic. Peter Dula's theology, unlike the former pope's, is wonderfully inventive, imaginative, and poetic.

In communion with Romantics, Pietists, Pragmatists, and Postmodernists alike, theopoetics, unlike memetic theology, reminds us that reason can only follow paths first broken open by the imagination. No new words, then no new ways of reasoning; no imagination inviting linguistic innovation or improvisation, then no new words—and thus no new ways of naming ourselves and rendering God's name in history.

Theopoetics as a kind of writing has now found its way to the American Academy of Religion (AAR). At the 2011 AAR meeting in San Francisco, we added a working session on theopoetics. We met again this year when the AAR convened in Chicago**.** I have been teaching a theopoetics class for a few years now at Bethany Theological Seminary and Earlham School of Religion. Mayra Rivera will be teaching a theopoetics course at Harvard Divinity School, and other seminaries are planning to add elective courses in the subject.

Since my seminaries are in the orbit of the Historic Peace Churches—Anabaptist and Quaker—let me briefly address three questions our students ask most often about this genre of theological writing and reflection: (1) Concerning solos and harmonies, since poets are solitary singers, does a theopoetics concern itself at all with community-building? (2) Since we are committed to seeking cultures of peace in a blessed, broken world, does the heavy aesthetic accent of theopoetics contribute to the ethics of peacebuilding? (3) Is theopoetics merely a way to poeticize conventional or classical Christianity, or can it be an invitation to polydoxy and artful heresy?

Theopoetics, Solos, Harmonies, Community

Since one of the classical definitions of *religio*, the Latin root of our word "religion," is "to bind," some ask if theopoetics can bind, build, and hold a community of faith and practice together. Another way to address this concern is to ask, Do we have a ritual to read to each another? We do. This has become a favorite poem of our program:

A Ritual to Read to Each Other
William Stafford

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through a broken dyke.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider –
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
Or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep:
the signals we give—yes or no or maybe –
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.[6]

Bill Stafford was a conscientious objector to the great "just war" of the 20th century, World War Two. He was baptized into the Church of the Brethren. However, as a strong poet, he was not much of a joiner. One of my former students, Travis Poling, is at work on a book about him. Poling

[6] This Stafford poem has been widely anthologized in recent years. See www.williamstafford.org and William Stafford, *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 1999), 75.

has learned that sometimes Stafford attended the Church of the Brethren, sometimes he went to Quaker meeting, sometimes he read Rumi with Coleman Barks on Sunday morning. Other times, the Stafford family would attend the Presbyterian church in their Portland neighborhood. Dorothy Stafford reports that when they went to the Presbyterian church, Bill always carried a book by Emerson along, "just in case."

If, like Bill Stafford, we agree that the church is in the world *for* the world, then this ritual we read to each other does lead to the building of the beloved community which includes, but is much larger than, any church, synagogue, mosque, temple, or pagoda.

Poetry and Peace, Aesthetics and Ethics

One of our favorite theopoets is Rubem Alves, who is recognized in his native Brazil as a liberation theologian, psychotherapist, poet, and theopoet. I would highly recommend his beautiful and satisfying theopoetics book, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet.*[7] Consider his words on an embodied poetics and peace:

> Do you know that the body is a temple?
>
> We thought of finding God where the body ends,
> And we made the body suffer and we turned it into a heavy load,
> And obedient entity,
> A machine of work,
> Into an enemy to be silenced and
> In that way we persecuted the body to the point of death.
> As if God prefers the smell of sepulchers to the delights of paradise….
>
> And we became cruel, violent, allowing exploitation and war.
>
> For if God can only be found beyond the body, then everything can be done to the body.[8]

[7] Rubem Alves, *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet* (Philadelphia: SCM Press, 1990).

[8] Rubem Alves, *I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 8-9.

For Alves, as for many working in the genre of theopoetics, the linguistic turn of late modern and postmodern philosophy and literary theory must also become a turn to the body, and this has profound implications for a poetics of peace. Indeed, when the Theopoetics Working Group convened again at the 2012 AAR meeting in Chicago, the topic was "Theopoetics and the Body."[9]

On the related question of aesthetics and aesthetics Alves declares that "Outside of beauty there is no salvation!" *Extra ecclesia nulla salis?* No. Outside of *beauty* there is no salvation.[10]

Theopoetics and Classical Christianity

Must theopoetics poeticize classical Christianity as a kind of orthodox theopoetry? Can it work instead as an artful polydoxy? I vote for polydoxy. Let me conclude this brief introduction to theopoetics with one of my students' favorite polydox poems. It is helpful to provide some background first. The Anabaptist father of the Social Gospel movement, Walter Rauschenbusch, had a daughter named Winifred, who would love and marry the New York City poet James Rorty. In 1926 Rorty published his collection *Children of the Sun*. The central character of the book's signature poem is Lilith. In Jewish legend Lilith was Adam's first wife before Eve. What happened? According to the saga, Lilith demanded democratic equality with Adam in every way, and thus she was exiled east of Eden and called a witch.

Children of the Sun
James Rorty

At length and after many days and much folly,
After eating the sour crusts of obedience, and
drinking deep draughts of bitter virtue guttered
from the roofs of the hovels men live in
because they are afraid to face the sun –

[9] We had a productive meeting at the November 2012 AAR and made plans for future meetings and consultations. The meeting was chaired by Callid Keefe-Perry, who will soon publish his book on the great variety of theopoetics, *Bridge to Water: A Theopoetics Primer*.
[10] Rubem Alves, *Transparencies of Eternity* (Miami: Convivium, 2010), 115.

At length after many days of strutting in the tall hat of piety and the shiny broadcloth of goodness and the white gloves of service and the stiff shirt of denial, until the pitting gods, perplexed, moaned and were faint with the sight of so much solemn-frantic miming on the earth –

At length I went to live with Lilith the witch and together we put away childish things.

(Her hair is darker than the sweet night that bloomed after the seventh day when the lord rested and the scent of the honeysuckle went up over the earth, and her breasts are swelling and fragrant like apples of the September harvest, and from the red bow of her lips my soul is loosed, a shaft flying forever, and by the strong clasp of her loins I am anchored deep in the earth where the feet of the joyous god are planted.)

Yes, Lilith and I sat together on the curbstone of the world, and we laughed because Eden had blossomed for us again, and we were clean like the happy beasts that roll where the grass is thick in the sunshine.

And I said to Lilith, "The church bells are ringing: whom shall we worship? The terrified people go darkly to worship a Fear they have fashioned." Said Lilith, "We worship the sun."

> So, we worshipped the sun that is careless and
> kind to the cow in the pasture, the bird in the
> tree; Lilith and I, sitting on the curbstone of
> the spinning world, laughing and kissing,
> without respect, impudent in the wide smile
> of the Lord.[11]

This poem is for all of us who practice a poetic spirituality somewhat east of the sanctuary doors, not only "after Christendom" but also after Anabaptism. Although the current movement in theopoetics is diverse, with theopoetic writers representing a variety of theological perspectives including classical, orthodox, Evangelical, liberal, and postmodern, there remains a common creative quest for new vocabularies and new forms for naming God, world, self, and others.

Those of us from dissenting theological traditions such as Anabaptism have the spiritual and intellectual freedom to experiment with polydoxy, since we have learned in the theater of martyrs that orthodoxy can be violent and deadly. Sometimes the order of salvation does follow a conventional poetics of Repentance, Obedience, and Redemption. However, more often the theopoet practices a more artful ritual of Transgression, Excess, and Gift.

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[11] James Rorty, *Children of the Sun and Other Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), 18-19.