

# The Theopoetics of Literature

## An Aesthetic Statement

*Dave Harrity with Martha Serpas and Claire Miller Colombo\**

This piece serves as what we believe to be the first articulation of a literary “theopoetic aesthetic.” We hope that it clarifies how literary-theopoetic work is distinct from writing that is primarily theological, devotional, or confessional. The intent is to have this statement identify the types of work we hope to highlight in *THEOPOETICS* moving forward, giving guidance to both readers and writers as to what we expect.

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Many think of the theologian and the poet as having discrete pursuits, but that is erroneous. The theologian and the poet have similar allegiances to the world and somewhat similar vocations. We both are curators of what might go unnoticed, unimagined, or unremembered; we have the same duty to make the unseen a bit more visible. Different aspects of theopoetics – the Spiritual (represented by the theologian) and the Creative (represented by the poet) – work together in harmony, acting as a collective remembering, reorienting, revisioning, and rehabilitating. The theologian possesses a largely untapped creative potential, and the poet possesses a largely untapped theological potential. It is our hope to articulate a poetics that might help theologians reveal its creative potential by identifying the general (and overlapping) modes in which poets are working theopoetically. And that poets might realize the latent theological awareneses at work – however quiet or seemingly small – in their vocational practice. We hope not to disturb these potentials too deeply through definition, but we do seek to sketch in the shadows of these muted (if not unrealized) intentions, encouraging a writing toward humanity and divinity at the same time.

The artistic impulse<sup>1</sup> – to create work that affirms (and questions) mutual divinity living inside and among humanity – is the stuff out of which theopoetics is born. The partnership is not new, per se, though it has been recast in this century and the last as a progressive theological movement. But the poets have always known of its beating heart and endless blood. There isn't a culture on earth that has separated the spiritual from the creative – that hasn't venerated its poet-priests, that hasn't gone to its artists and demanded that mystery flourish into enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> Theopoet-

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1 While we are speaking directly about poetry, all other forms of art must be eventually actualized in their own Theopoetic aesthetics—the editors here are speaking for poetry proper, not Poetry as an idea, which is manifest in a variety of creative practices, acts, and media.

2 At least not until now. For more insight into the ghettoizing of sacred writing in the literary arts see Dana Gioia's essay in *First Things* entitled "The Catholic Writer Today" or read it released in print by [Wiseblood Books](#).

ics began when our capacity for language emerged, and it has been fleshing itself out since.

In the literary world, poetry of faith is often labeled by critics as “Devotional Poetry.”<sup>3</sup> A theopoetic poem is not a devotional poem. The difference is simple in definition, but complex in execution. This prescriptive gerrymandering is fair to a degree, though incomplete and lacking in nuance, since the “devotional poet” would certainly take issue with the idea that his or her work is *strictly* devotional. However, from a secular vision (and in many cases, a theopoetic vision) the work of poetry about God, divinity, the human-divine relationship, or the reconciliation of the two is almost always unable to be anything but devotional. And to most people without a rooted spiritual practice, any poem explicitly about God or faith smacks of monolithic fundamentalism or existential irrelevance to contemporary life. However crass that perspective may be, often a poem about God or faith is concerned with little else other than spiritual well-being, thus it has appropriately earned the devotional label. We want to suggest that “Theopoetic Poetry” is concerned with more, has a broader reach, and is often diverse in its modes, though humble in its spiritual temperament.

The devotional poem seeks to praise, lament, or otherwise define a relational rationale for the human-divine experience. It's largely concerned with bridging the inequality between the Creator and the Created. This division is usually very strong in devotional literature: the two only meet at the human admission of the separation itself, whether it be “sin,” limited knowledge of the world in which we exist, or another metaphysical axiom. Oddly enough, in this way, devotional poetry has always been about exactness and redemption, about conquering the human so that the divine might

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3 Harold Bloom’s work in devotional and religious poetry would be a good place to begin this debate, which is tangentially related to these assertions on Theopoetic Poetry. It might be said that what Bloom calls “devotional” or “religious” poetry is, in fact, Theopoetic. For examples of this phenomenon, also see “Before the Door of God: An Anthology of Devotional Poetry” (Yale University Press).

live. A devotional poem can have a strange and fallacious posture that undermines the sincerity of a deeply held spiritual construct. For example, the idea of Christian Incarnation can be the very definition of Christian aesthetics or poetics – conceptually such an idea must have serious weight and consideration to a creative Christian person.<sup>4</sup> The reality that God willingly disrupts divinity so that creation might be whole again is both theologically substantive and aesthetically abundant. That is, the Incarnation has implications which must shape Christian artists, and this shaping, by its very nature as a process-oriented concept, is deeply theopoetic since it's rooted in an a process of *embodiment* and a process of *becoming*.

The strictly devotional poem often makes for a flaccid spirituality let loose in language. Thus, while some devotional poets pay careful attention to craft, ultimately much of that genre misses the embodiment it desperately – but perhaps unknowingly – desires. Theopoetic poetry then, in many ways, moves oppositely. A theopoetic poem concerns both inward spiritual depth and outward physical existence, and sacrifices the importance and prominence of neither. In the aesthetics of theopoetic poetry, the being, world, and divinity conceive one another in inexactitude and are rooted in the complexity of their relationships, the negotiations of their dominance, and the compromise of assertive visions.

In a way, theopoetic poetry riffs on ideas like Keats's "Negative Capability", or Hopkins's "Inscap/Instress/Outscape" or even Joyce's reimagining of the Epiphany as a form of experience.<sup>5</sup> Each of these literary concepts possesses a clear and sturdy thread: they all concern the interactions between the imagination and being, between the Creator and Created by asking simultaneous questions of both. Theopoetics guides a literary artist toward

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4 It should be said that theopoetics is as wide as it is deep, and that other faith traditions will have their own theological/mythic constructs to run through the theopoetic ringer, which will only add tesserae to the mosaic being constructed. While it seems that the conversation is currently dominated by Progressive Christianity, it's the hope of these editors that explorations in Theopoetics occur in other literary and religious traditions.

5 A quick Google search should clarify the meaning of these important terms in literature.

contextualizing experience and shepherds the intangibility of experience into art, turning confused isolation into a reach for the communal, all with an eye toward faith, hope, and love – charity in its true sense.<sup>6</sup> It's this act of making incarnate coupled with the intention of pursuing the divine that makes an act of theopoetics, which results in a tangible piece of art. The truth of theopoetics becomes self-evident as it is practiced artistically: the paradox that poetry values and embraces is the very same mystery that theology wades through. God is elusive and exhaustive, abstract and familiar, obscure and fecund, ethereal and manifest. God is with us just as we are with God.

As practitioners of theopoetics, whether theologically or literarily, we must be attentive to our creation – in part to support one another, but also to collaborate and enlarge the ideas that will aid us in seeking after words for God and the world. Said plainly...

Theologians must continue naming facets of divinity as clearly as they can, respectfully regarding – but challenging – the orthodoxies that have come before them, shaped them, and reshaped them;  
**theologians must do the work of gathering up God in the world.**

Poets must be uncompromising to their aesthetic allegiances and obligation to render God and the world that God so loved, accounting for the risks of sentimentality, of speaking truth to power, and of living a slow, intentional way in a world of break-neck speed;  
**poets must do the work of unpacking God in the world.**

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6 For more on this idea, see Flannery O'Connor's [The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor](#) in which she unpacks the idea of Charity as the ultimate aim for the Christian practice of love, an act—she loosely asserts along the way—that is inseparable from Creation as a whole and Creation as an act.

And we must do this work together, long on experimentation and forgiveness, short on the status-quo and derision. We must, together, split the head of God by smashing our idols against it, we must be bold in asking God where we can put our fingers.

Theopoetics is work that isn't simply regarding God or faith as its subject matter, and it's less a statement of faith than it's a reimagining of the fluctuations in the relationship between disparate progressions of being; it's work that perpetuates the interplay between God and humanity, examining how the two shape and reshape one another; it's work that engrosses discussion on the nature of divinity, creation, and experience rather than fixes an artifact or individual in place; it's work that traverses and searches rather than freights and anchors. It's about allowing a question to linger unanswered.

Upon approaching the waters of theopoetics, one must be comfortable with the vulgarities of getting wet, the mists of liminality and the ripples of limbo. One doesn't come to theopoetics to have their questions *answered*, one comes to have them *opened*. Theopoetics thrives within the discomforts of begging truth to be revealed, not basking in the sun of the known. Theopoetics lives in the movement into mystery, just as we do together.