Liberating Language

Rubem Alves, Theopoetics, and the Democratization of God-Talk

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Abstract

With the fall of the *analogia entis* and metaphysical accounts of linguistic meaning, we are left searching for a way forward in our thinking about how we talk about God. Some have launched projects attempting to revive a "chastened" analogical methodology, while others have turned to apophatic, metaphorical, or symbolic methodologies. It is the contention of this paper that Rubem Alves offers another way forward via theopoetics, one that takes advantage of the fall of analogical methodologies and promises to democratize theology by centering faith-language around stories of the faithfulness and promises of God. The structure of the essay consists of a triangulation of Karl Barth, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Rubem Alves. Barth and Wittgenstein have dramatically shifted the way that we approach faith-language and Rubem Alves is able to rely on their insights, while forwarding his own, theopoetic account of faith-language. As we seek out new methods for speaking of God, Alves offers a path that promises to move theological practice beyond the academy, employing theopoetics to open genuine dialogue with previously marginalized voices.

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Theology wants to be science,
a discourse without interstices...
It wants to have birds in cages...
Theopoetics instead,
empty cages,
words which are uttered out of
and before the void...[1]

– Rubem Alves

The brave Empedocles, defying fools,
Pronounced the word that mortals hate to hear
"I am divine, I am not mortal made;
I am superior to my human weeds."
Not Sense but Reason is the Judge of Truth
Reason's twofold, part human, part divine;
That human part may be described and taught
The other portion language cannot speak.[2]

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

This paper is a study of the relationship between Karl Barth, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the Brazilian theologian, psychoanalyst, and writer Rubem Alves.[3] More precisely, this essay will explore Alves's (re)investment of the inheritance he receives from both Barth and Wittgenstein, particularly in his shift to theopoetics.

1 Alves, *The Poet, the Warrior, the Prophet*, 99.

2 Emerson, "Life," 353.

3 This paper was presented at the first meeting of the Theopoetics Working Group at the 2011 AAR/SBL Annual Meeting in San Francisco. In the spirit of a working group, this paper was put forward as a proposal of study to be pursued. I am thankful to the other participants in the working group for their comments and support; they have encouraged and directed further exploration in theopoetics since this paper was presented. The essay has been edited for clarity where necessary.

It is natural to include Barth and Wittgenstein because they have made significant and overlapping contributions to the way we use language, contributions that have been taken up by Alves in his theopoetic work. Both Barth and Wittgenstein call the foundations of language into question. Together, they provide Alves essential resources necessary for constructing a democratic theopoetics. This paper will show how Rubem Alves has been able to faithfully bring insights from Barth and Wittgenstein together, while offering his own unique way forward in the development of the language of faith.

Finding a way forward is important because the traditional way of accounting for how human language is able to make meaningful statements about God has been called into question. It is no longer possible to assume that our language describes God by making analogous claims governed by a metaphysics of being. The fall of the analogical method is sure to be contested, but it is clear that speaking of God via analogy is no longer the default method in contemporary, Protestant theology. This is true even in some Catholic circles, led by figures such as John Caputo and Jean-Luc Marion.

Evidence for the loss of the analogical method's grip on the theological mind is evident in works that rely on said methodology to make meaningful statements about God. If any prolegomenal words were spent on analogy before the shift instigated by the likes of Barth and Wittgenstein, they served explanatory purposes. Now, however, opening chapters (if not entire volumes) are dedicated to a defense of the analogical method. While this method has not been delegitimized as a serious contender in explaining how we talk about God, analogy no longer enjoys the nearly uncontested status it held in Western theology for several centuries.

As such, we are left searching for a way to move forward in our thinking about faith language. Some scholars have launched projects attempting to

revive a "chastened" analogical methodology,[4] while others have turned to apophatic, metaphorical, or symbolic methodologies.[5] As Charles Winquist observes, "There has been a shaking of the foundations that demands more than a reconstruction under the aegis of the ontotheological tradition."[6] In other words, our traditional ways of speaking about God have been deconstructed and we are left seeking new ways to name the divine.

As stated above, it is the contention of this essay that Rubem Alves offers one promising path forward via theopoetics, one that takes advantage of the fall of the analogical method and promises to democratize theology as the language of faith.[7] His approach promises to do so by centering faith-langauage around stories of the faithfulness and promises of God, told in a variety of ways by a multitude of diverse voices. For Alves, language about God "is a language about events, their power and their promise. . . The question 'Who is God?' is answered thus by telling a story."[8] As such, any religious person is able to participate in the theological project by naming God, by recounting stories of God's faithfulness, and by presenting the hope of God's future.

Alves proposes a theological method (a theopoetics) that moves beyond the academy and into the streets, giving voice to those who bear witness to the promise of God's future (as our own future) in their communities

4 David Tracy earns this description of his work in reviews of *The Analogical Imagination*. David Bentley Hart offers his own proposal, generated from the Eastern Orthodox tradition in *The Beauty of the Infinite*. More recently, D. Steven Long sets about describing a chastened metaphysics in his work *Speaking of God*. Another project, focused on being, is William Desmond's *God and the Between*. It seems that for many scholars, a "chastened" metaphysics is the new way forward.

5 For example, Catherine Keller, Sallie McFague, Richard Kearney, and John Caputo, to name a few widely read authors in the Continental stream of the philosophy of religion.

6 Winquist, *Desiring Theology*, 65.

7 The term language of faith or faith-language is preferred in this context over the more common term religious language, in part because religious language names a specific field of study within which the themes discussed below do not squarely fall. Alves uses the term language of faith throughout *A Theology of Human Hope*, but particularly in the final chapter (pgs. 159–168).

8 Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope*, 90.

through word and deed. As we seek out new methods for speaking of God, Alves offers a way forward that promises to move theological practice beyond the academy, seminary and church, and open it to anyone who wishes to tell stories about God.[9]

Preliminary Remarks

Before diving into the interplay between Barth, Wittgenstein, and Alves, it is important to answer a few basic questions: Why Alves? What is the democratizing promise of his style of theopoetics? Why place a Brazilian theo-poet in conversation with thinkers like Barth and Wittgenstein?

First, as a figure of study, Alves stands out because he is one of the few Protestant, Latin American liberation theologians, as well as one of the first writers to begin using the term *teologia de libertação/teología de la liberation* (alongside Gustavo Gutiérrez). His work cannot and should not be contained by these descriptors, but this unique combination sets him apart as an important voice in the contemporary theological landscape. In addition to being popular and respected in Brazil, he is cited and recognized by influential thinkers in the Western intellectual world, including Jürgen Moltmann, Walter Brueggemann, Rosemary Radford Ruether, John A.T. Robinson, Dorthee Soelle, Langdon Gilkey, Paul Lehman, Elaine Padilla and even more popular figures such as Tony Campolo. However, while his name appears in a wide variety of publications, there have been few studies dedicated to his thought written in the English language.

Alves also serves as an interesting figure of study because his move toward theopoetics is experssed as a deeply personal, therapeutic reorienta-

9 It should be noted that it is possible to differentiate between good and bad stories about God; theopoetics is not necessarily a relativistic venture. See note 52 below.

tion to the world. He describes it as a conversion experience that took place with the birth of his daughter in 1975:

> Raquel's birth was a purifying experience in that it empowered me to say, "this is important," and the rest becomes blurred. Her birth re-integrated things in my life.
>
> For example, when she was born I suddenly discovered that – absolutely – I would not spend another moment of my life writing academically.
>
> I broke with the academic style because I decided that life is very short, very mysterious, and I didn't have the time to waste with academics. I would only say things in the most honest manner. If people like it, fine. If not, I can't help that. Today I couldn't write academically even if I wanted to!
>
> This was a moment of true conversion.[10]

I take Alves's reference to writing "academically" here not to mean that he gives up writing in a rigorous and critical way, or that he disassociates himself with theological themes and authors, for even his most recent work could be judged as "academic" by such criteria. What I take him to mean by "academic" is what he elsewhere calls "scientific" in the German sense of *Wissenschaft*.[11] More recently he restated this shift by sayings that he does not want to "prove" but only "portray."[12]

Thus, by shifting his writing methodology, Alves abandons the kind of writing that restricts the meaning of words to a mirroring of reality. For Alves, academic writing is self-enclosing, preventing the spirit or mind from opening onto new worlds. He is instead interested in writing that is free to

10 Puleo, "Rubem Alves," 188.

11 E.g., see Alves, *The Poet, the Warrior, the Prophet*, 13.

12 Alves, *Transparencies of Eternity*, 15. This dichotomy echoes Wittgenstein's attempt to "show" rather than to "say."

play with meaning, where words are allowed to "break through the mirror" and be "tasted by the reader."[13]

Alves's writing clearly shifted to the theopoetic in the mid-seventies. Regardless of how this shift may be characterized, it was made with the zeal of one newly converted. Alves left the theological style utilized in his dissertation — later published as *A Theology of Human Hope — Protestantism and Repression* and the socio-political criticism of *Tomorrow's Child* for a style that is completely different, one that can be identified as theopoetic.[14] However, while the shift in style is radical, there is a continuity in Alves's writing that is striking. The heart or content of his writing does not change after his 'conversion,' instead he begins saying things differently, yet (arguably) with no less persuasive force. He addresses the same themes and even the same thinkers, but in a different voice.

The democratic promise contained in Alves's use of theopoetics is connected to key influences on his thought. Barth and Wittgenstein laid the groundwork for Alves's shift toward theopoetics, Barth in his breaking with the *analogia entis* and Wittgenstein in his breaking with a metaphysical

13 Alves, *The Poet, the Warrior, the Prophet*, 12–15.

14 Offering a general definition of theopoetic is difficult, for many writers have been drawn to the term for different reasons and have developed it in various directions. Amos Wilder, one of the first to use the term in a published piece, writes that "theopoetic means doing more justice to the role of the symbolic and the prerational in the way we deal with experience. We should recognize that human nature and human societies are more deeply motivated by images and fabulations than by ideas." [Wilder, *Theopoetic*, 2.] Alves does not use language like "prerational," to describe symbols and images in contrast to ideas. Instead he prefers to speak of different rationalities, the rationality of the symbol, image, or body might be different than the rationality of the idea, but the former is not "prerational" while the later is rational. Scott Holland gives a definition of theopoetics that comes closer to Alves's understanding of the term: "[T]heology in our postmodern condition must be understood as a poetics, not a metaphysics. . . . [W]hether theology is inscribed 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 preformed by authors." [Holland, "Theology is a Kind of Writing," 319.] This definition of theopoetics is closer to Alves because it describes an orientation rather than a medium.

account of linguistic meaning. Contained within these breaks is an opportunity to form a more democratic theological practice.

Put briefly (to be discussed in detail below), Barth's rejection of the analogy of being provides an entrance to faith-language that is not guarded by classically trained theologians. The analogical method, governed by the principles of the Great Chain of Being, is implicitly hierarchical and exclusionary in both theological and societal expressions.[15] If the analogical method – and the Great Chain of Being along with it – fail, theology as a discipline becomes radically open for participation by reflective people of faith, disregarding their relationship with the academy.

This democratic impulse is also influenced by Wittgenstein's work, which undermines the metaphysical ground of linguistic meaning, proposing that meaning is generated by use.[16] Meaning, then, is not determined by its mirroring of physical or metaphysical reality, but it is created (and recreated) by the community of speakers. This too has a democratizing impulse, opening the generation and preservation of meaning to the linguistic community as a whole. Alves is able to take advantage of these shifts, giving the creation of religious meaning over to the believing community, breaking the hold of hierarchy which relied on the analogical method as a way to preserve meaning and prevent 'unqualified' members of the public from participating in the theological project.

15 It may sound like a daring and uncharitable contention, but it is less so considering that the Medieval Institute's response to Arthur Lovejoy's seminal volume, *The Great Chain of Being* (on the 50th anniversary of its publication), is primarily concerned with reaffirming creation's inherent need for hierarchies. See Kuntz and Kuntz, *Jacob's Ladder and the Tree of Life.*

16 This is at least true of the later Wittgenstein. Whether it is true of the early Wittgenstein is a matter of debate. There is a group of scholars that comprise a "new," "resolute," or "thereputic" reading of Wittgenstein. This group claims that Wittgenstein's first book (and the only one published during his lifetime), the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, can be read as a therapeutic critique of metaphysical doctrines rather than a defense of them.

By reinvesting the work of Barth and Wittgenstein in his understanding of faith-language, Alves launches what can be considered a radically democratic approach to the way that we speak of God; one that opposes the anti-democratic spirit of metaphysics and analogy as utilized in natural theology.

Breaking (with) the Analogy: Karl Barth and the *Analogia Entis*

Pope Pius XII declared Karl Barth to be the most important theologian since Thomas Aquinas. A good deal of Protestants (not to mention Catholics) would likely take issue with this claim, and perhaps rightly so, but Barth's impact on the theological landscape is undoubtedly as profound as that of Aquinas. Karl Barth's work undeniably changed the face of theology, particularly his rejection of natural theology and his reaction to the *analogia entis* as a doctrine of the antichrist.[17] In many ways contemporary theology has yet to come to terms with Barth's contributions, particularly in relation to the reasons for and implications of his strong reaction to the *analogia entis*, natural theology, and philosophy. Further, his positive articulations of an *analogia fidei*, special revelation, and Christocentric theology are deep enough to warrant continued development.

These contributions have significant implications for religious language, many of which Alves incorporates into his own thinking. Alves may not always be explicit about how Barth has influenced his theopoetic shift, however, early in his career he cites Barth often, providing clues to how he influences Alves's later work. One of the most telling references comes in Alves's *Protestantism and Repression*, in which he discusses why the Brazilian Protestant Church was unable to handle Barth, despite what appeared to be a significant shared interest in breaking with theological modernism and

17 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, xiii.

liberalism.[18] The heart of the Brazilian Protestant Church's rejection of Barth revolves around the topic at hand: the relationship between human language and its object – in this case, God. The reason that Barth is labeled an enemy rather than an ally is as follows: –

> Barth's view of the word of God was solidly rooted in the Hebrew concept of *dābār* ("word"). God's word was the *divine creative act* in and through which God reveals himself. It is an event, a happening, not a proposition *about* God. The word of God is "God present." Hence the written word in Scripture can only be a *witness* about the living divine word, *a sign that points to it*. By itself a sign is lifeless. According to Barth, then, we cannot say that the Bible is the word of God. However, it can *become* the word of God insofar as it becomes the vehicle through which a human being experiences the power of God.[19]

The Brazilian Protestant church preferred to think of the meaning and life of the sign as self-sufficient and guaranteed. To suggest that a sign in itself is dead was interpreted as an attack on the universal verifiability of Christian doctrine. For the church, signs need to be related to an external and eternal meaning if subjectivism and relativism are to be avoided. Barth was (rightly) understood as threatening the traditional account of the relationship between signs and meaning, but (wrongly) categorized with theological liberalism which valued subjective religious experience over revelation. Alves was also dismissed by his denomination (the Presbyterian Church of Brazil) when he too rejected a metaphysical ground for theological meaning.

So far, what has been discussed above is a straight-forward reading of Barth. However, I think Alves inherits something from Barth that is more

18 Alves, *Protestantism and Repression*, 186–8.
19 Alves, *Protestantism and Repression*, 187. Emphasis original.

contentious. That is, that Barth rejects any traditional analogical account of the linguistic relationship in his rejection of the *analogia entis*. This is contentious because Barth retains the language of analogy in his work, using it in his constructive proposals of the *analogia fidei* and *analogia relationalis* (and even to be willing to speak of a highly qualified sense of *analogia entis* later in life).[20] In my reading, Barth did not mistakenly contradict or intentionally negate his earlier stance by using the language of analogy in his later work, as some scholarship suggests.[21] Instead, I believe that Barth maintained the language of analogy precisely to mark the contrast between his use of the word and its more conventional meanings. That is, while Barth rightly understands that analogy has a role to play in our relationship with God (in as much as every part of creation plays such a role), he ultimately subverts an analogical account of theological language.

Analogy (in any sense) for Barth is nothing like the more general literary or philosophical descriptions of the term, nor is it like the more specifically theological definitions of Aquinas or Erich Przywara(the Jesuit theologian whose 1932 publication, *Analogia Entis*, sparked Barth's reaction to the concept). Put simply, Barth's understanding of analogy rests in an event (Jesus Christ's incarnation) rather than a metaphysical relationship. This becomes a bit more sticky when considering the *analogia relationalis* in Barth's trinitarian theology, where perhaps a more metaphysical description of creation's relationship to God appears to emerge,[22] however, even here it is possible to

20 See McCormack, "Karl Barth's Version of an 'Analogy of Being'," 144.

21 Hans Urs Von Balthasar began to develop this reading, arguing that Barth misunderstood the role of the *analogia entis* in Erich Przywara's theology (and Catholic theology as a whole), and simultaneously failed to recognized that his *analogia fidei* and *analogia relationis* assume an analogy of being. Keith Johnson's monograph, *Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis*, provides a detailed account of how Barth's relationship with the *analogia entis* matured, while convincingly arguing that Barth did not ultimately change his mind or contradict his earlier claims.

22 Many of the relational trinitarians find their source of energy here. I am thinking specifically of Colin Gunton, who uses the Trinity to put forward a fundamentally relational metaphysics. For example, see Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*.

see how Barth's concept of analogy stands in contrast to its more conventional description.[23] Keith Johnson's recently published dissertation on this topic is helpful on this point, particularly his study of what he describes as "Barth's mature use of analogy."[24] Johnson describes a use of analogy that is hard to recognize as such. Analogy is taken up and transformed in faith, conversion, covenant, election, and vocation. Barth puts analogy in its proper place, where it serves a purpose, but his account of analogy has nothing in common with the analogical function utilized in the *analogia entis*.

This redefinition of analogy is important if Barth indeed opens the door for a radically democratic theological method for Alves, as it paves a path for an account of faith-language that refuses to come under the control of rationalism.[25] Most grant that Barth reoriented the starting point of theological inquiry from creation (nature) to the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ (grace). However, there have been few who have studied the full implications of this reorientation for faith-language. A theological method centered on "God with us" instead of God as Creator (in the sense of the Apex of Being) is sure to look radically different. Theological inquiry centered on nature attempts to establish control over religious texts, meaning, and symbols. A theology instead informed by the grace of the incarnation of Christ does not seek such control, for its power does not lie in control.[26] Natural theology provides a stable foundation for the theologian to assert their expertise as the appropriate qualification for

23 This is demonstrated in Barth's use of ana-logy in the lectures published as Evangelical Theology. Here Barth breaks the word up to suggest that logos is always a response or reply to the Word. Thus, "theology is modest because its entire logic can only be a human ana-logy to that Word; analogical thought and speech do not claim to be, to say, to contain, or to control the original word." Evangelical Theology, 13.

24 Johnson, *Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis*, 201–28.

25 As Alves observes, rationalism is merely the human structuring of reality by those in power. This is the basic argument of *Alves' Tomorrow's Child*.

26 This calls to mind 1 Cor 1:18–31 which reminds us that the power of the cross is foolish and weak to the world, shaming that which appears strong. Similarly Barth proclaims that if God's power were the bare power of control that God would be a tyrant and unworthy of worship. *Church Dogmatics*, 2/1, 524.

guarding religious narrative and symbol. Barth's reorientation toward the election and incarnation of Christ puts this foundation in question and, in my judgment, opens up the theological project for genuine participation by anyone who is moved by the event of Christ.

Thus, from Barth's startling rejection of the *analogia entis*, Alves inherits an awareness that traditional conceptions of analogy serve metaphysics which, in any form, are driven toward a totalizing description of all that is.[27] In its rational totalitarianism, the *analogia entis* is necessarily hierarchical and exclusionary. Medieval illustrations of the Great Chain of Being demonstrate this quite readily, breaking reality – including humanity (often divided by gender and class) – into higher and lower links on the chain. This orientation to reality filters into and corrupts all aspects of life, including the political, ethical, and religious.

For Barth, the only things that ought to so thoroughly permeate life are God's love and grace revealed in the incarnation of Christ. He warns that if theology continues to rely on a traditional account of analogy, "then it would surrender itself to a new Babylonian captivity. It would become the prisoner of some sort of anthropology or ontology that is an underlying interpretation of existence, of faith, or of man's spiritual capacity."[28] Instead, true (evangelical) theology can only "expect justice for itself only by the fact that God justifies it. It can give only him and not itself the glory. Evangelical theology is *modest theology*, because it is determined to be so by its object, that is, by him who is its subject."[29] The analogical method attempts to justify theology in itself, but in so doing, sets the rules to protect itself, excluding people and ideas that cannot be homogenized.

As a final remark, it is helpful to remember that, while Barth appears to be a theologian of heteronomy, his claim that God is "wholly other" is qual-

27 For a history of this totalizing direction to metaphysics through the principles of plenitude and emanation, see Arthur Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being*.

28 Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 6.

29 Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 5.

ified by the word "wholly." God does not approach us as a created other, an other who is over or against us.[30] For Barth, God's otherness is always an otherness *for* us.[31] Divine otherness is nothing like the otherness with which we are accustomed. Thus, those who would be skeptical of the democratic impulses of such a seemingly authoritarian thinker must ask who holds the seat of this authority and how it is shared with human participants. By emphasizing the authority of God, Barth undermines the authority of human reason — this is his democratic impulse and his contribution to Alves's project.

Permission to Speak? New Wittgenstein and Theopoetic

Ludwig Wittgenstein, like Barth, revolutionized the way we approach language. Also like Barth, Wittgenstein often appears in Alves's work and is clearly an important figure for him. Nietzsche may make more named appearances in Alves's writing than any other philosopher, but Wittgenstein is not far behind and is no less influential on his thought. Alves most often quotes the following from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."[32] Alves uses the phrase to

30 This is the fascinating aspect of Barth's formulation that "God is God." While seemingly straightforward, it is important that the sentence does not end simply at "God is." The formulation is meant to call our attention to the fact that God's being is completely other, God is not in competition with humanity, but is so wholly other that God is able to be wholly for humanity. God is God. God is not everything, God is not pure Being, God is not an absolutization of creational attributes. Eberhard Busch provides an exceptional explication of this formula in his essay "God is God," 101–13.

31 See, for example, Barth, "The Gift of Freedom: Foundation of Evangelical Ethics," 69–96.

32 The earliest I have found this quote is in Alves's 1972 book *Tomorrow's Child*, p. 39. However, this quote shows up often after this point (sometimes unattributed), even in Alves's more poetic work. For Alves, this statement is unpacked in the imaginative work of Lewis Carroll. Later in *Tomorrow's Child* Alves quotes the following from *Through the Looking Glass:*

expose the power structures at work in language.[33] Thus, if the powers that be, whether political or religious, place limitations on language, they also put limitations on the world of those they would dominate. However, those subject to such power structures are able to create new worlds by using language that is not sanctioned by the authorities. Poetic and narrative language are more conducive for such subversive uses, both in their ability to escape detection (see, for example, apocalyptic literature) and to broaden the horizons of possibility.[34]

Alves's willingness to turn to the *Tractatus* as well as to Wittgenstein's later works such as the *Philosophical Investigations* indicates that he is close to a reading known as the "new Wittgenstein," which traces a continuity throughout the whole of Wittgenstein's work instead of a point of demarcation between the *Tractatus* and his later works. This "new reading" (it has existed since the 1960's in the work of Rush Rhees) proposes an "understanding of Wittgenstein as aspiring, not to advance metaphysical theories, but rather to help us work ourselves out of confusions we become entangled in when philosophizing."[35] Key to understanding this reading and its rela-

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "Which is to be the master—that's all." (p. 185)

The point Alves is driving at is that humans give meaning to words in their use, words do not com with meanings inscribed upon them apart from their use in a particular context and community. A more biblical allusion is Jesus' statement that the Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27); similarly, language is made for humanity, not vice versa. The question is which is to be the master. Wittgenstein opens this question up for Alves.

33 Alves often borrows a similar sentiment from João Guimarães: "Everything is real because everything is invented." *The Poet, the Warrior, Prophet*, 62.

34 Broadening the horizons of possibility is especially important for Alves in that it provides the space to create non-violent, non-reactive responses to oppression. One of the clever devices of power is to set the limits of possibility so that responses are divided between acquiescence and revolt. Only new language will provide the necessary tools to break through such dichotomies.

35 Crary, *The New Wittgenstein*, 1.

tionship to Alves is Wittgenstein's statement at the end of the *Tractatus*: "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly."[36] The new reading takes this statement as an indication that Wittgenstein is performing 'philosophical therapy,' compelling his readers to give up philosophical pseudo-problems by working through them. As a psychoanalyst himself, it is clear that Alves too is performing a sort of therapy, asking us to work through theological pseudo-problems and instead use theological categories to expand, deepen, and create meaning.

Alves makes several references to Wittgenstein throughout his work, including a play off of the much (and perhaps over) analyzed parenthetical remark by Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*: "Grammar tells what kind of object anything is (Theology as Grammar.)"[37] Alves's own twist on this – maintaining its character as little more than a playful aphorism – is: "Theology as poetic gardening."[38] Here Alves takes Wittgenstein's point a bit further. Wittgenstein uses grammar "to describe the workings of this public, socially governed language,"[39] while Alves is attempting to emphasize the contribution of human creativity in this process. He relies on Wittgenstein to make the point that language is a human, social construction, but emphasizes the creative and storied role of the person in this process. This is better expressed in a story about an interaction with a student from Maine and the meaning of apples as told by Alves:

> "We love not the thing, but the words which are written in it," I said.

36 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* 108.
37 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 99e.
38 Alves, *The Poet, the Warrior, the Prophet*, 131.
39 Biletzki and Matar, "Ludwig Wittgenstein."

> One of the students looked at me, picked up an apple, gave it a bite, and said "I love apples . . . "
>
> The juice dripped from the sides of his mouth as he smiled at me. I understood what he was saying without words:
>
> "An apple is an apple: this round, red, juicy fruit. When I bite an apple I bite its flesh only . . . No words . . ."
>
> I took the apple from his hands, the same fruit, gave another bite and said:
>
> "– I love apples, too. But we can never eat the same fruit, even if the thing is the same. This very apple belongs to two different worlds. Yours is filled with memories of past falls; there are yellow and red leaves in it; and even a chilly breeze. [. . .]
>
> But around my apple there circles another universe you will never know . . . I was a boy in a small town in Brazil. Apples did not grow there. I had never seen one. The name I knew, and also pictures from Snow White's story. I knew they grew in distant lands and that, if they were to come where I lived, they would have to travel a long way. My father had returned from a trip and brought me presents, of which I have no memory. Except for an apple. It came wrapped in a silky, yellow paper [. . .]. Yes, I love apples . . . but, as you see, yours and mine, although they are the same, contain different universes. They tell different stories . . ."[40]

Like Wittgenstein, Alves is proposing that we are responsible for filling language with meaning; it does not hold meaning within itself. Alves adds to this Wittgensteinian point in his exploration of our sensual, storied, and embodied relationship to language and meaning.

Finally, because it is relevant to the topic at hand, and because it is a common reading of the final sentence of the *Tractatus* ("Whereof one can-

40 Alves, *The Poet, the Warrior, the Prophet,* 44–5.

not speak, thereof one must be silent."), it must be asked whether Wittgenstein intends to silence speech about God.[41] Certainly there are many in the analytic tradition who take this prohibition to be against any and all religious content. The new reading suggests instead that the prohibition is directed toward metaphysical constructions. Does Wittgenstein, then, spell the end of metaphysics and does the end of metaphysics spell the end of God-talk? It is my sense that the answer to the first part of the question is "yes" and to the second, "no." I think that alongside Barth and Alves, Wittgenstein allows us celebrate the end of metaphysical grounds for language without simultaneously prohibiting our ability to speak meaningfully about God. This, of course, is only true if we are able to accept that meaningful speech about God does not mirror some otherworldly reality, but is meaningful because it maintains a useful function in our particular forms of life. Alves finds this account of meaning freeing, using it to allow him to work theopoetically. As such, his orientation shifts from the *analysis* to the *creation* of religious meaning.[42]

The Theopoetics of Rubem Alves

Alves's turn to theopoetics is not simply a matter of aesthetic taste. Alves has socio-political reasons for his shift to narrative and poetic forms of theological reflection. What would a theology that takes the voices of the poor seriously look like? What form would a theology that encourages the partici-

41 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 108.

42 The etymological meaning of *poeiō* is "to do, make, call forth, or create," explaining the shift from theo-logy (analysis) to theo-poetics (creation). *Poeiō* is in contrast to *prasso* which also means to do, but has connotations of following standard practice. Biblical writers play on this difference, particularly John in his gospel. Alves also makes a similar distinction between a contemplative sense of truth and an action oriented sense of truth. It is clear that his theopoetics comes from the latter. For Alves's two orientations to truth, see "What Does it Mean to Say the Truth?," 163–81.

pation of those not 'adequately' educated take? For Alves, it is something like a theopoetics.

Liberation theology exposes the fact that theology itself excludes the voices of those without access to education recognized by the developed, Western world. One of the ways that these voices have been silenced in the church has been through theology's collusion with philosophical realism. Alves tackles this correlationism in *Tomorrow's Child* in which he argues that the boundaries of reality are determined by those who currently sit in power. Interested in retaining said power, this group draws the lines of reality in their favor. Thus, what counts as 'realistic' is skewed toward the world which they wish to inhabit, a world where they remain in power. However, as Alves notes, God's actions in history are not ones that line up with reality. The exodus, the returns from exile, Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, and the promise of the eschaton all exceed the perceived limits of reality. Thus theology needs to be open to voices, expressions, and events that fall outside the present delineation of reality.

One of the ways theology is able to be open to such voices is through narrative and poetry, which, while composing the majority of theology's sacred texts, have been excluded from theological discussion due to their unscientific nature. This exclusion has stunted theological development, cutting theological reflection off from the source of its meaning.

In the preceding section, the question of whether faith-language falls with metaphysics was posed. Alves contends that this is not the case because transcendence and metaphysics are not two ways of referring to the same thing (implying that faith-language is related to transcendence, but not to metaphysics). The category of transcendence plays an important role in Alves's theology. Transcendence is paired with a depth metaphor for Alves, the Portuguese word *saudade*. *Saudade*, which is not easily expressed in any other language, can be described as a wound, a longing, a desire, or an

absence. It is the feeling of pining for something that is lost, like the feeling of love for one who has passed away. Of *saudade*, Alves writes:

> *Saudade* is a word I often use. I believe it is the foundation of my poetic and religious thinking. Translators with expertise in several languages say that there is no precise synonym for it in other languages. It is a feeling close to nostalgia. But it is not nostalgia. Nostalgia is pure sadness without an object. Nostalgia has no face. Whereas *saudade* is always *saudade* "of" a scenario, a face, a scene, a time. The Brazilian poet Chico Buarque wrote a song about *saudade*, in which he says that "saudade is a piece of me wrenched out of me, it's to straighten up the room of the son who just died." It is the presence of an absence.[43]

For Alves, this longing is our experience of transcendence.[44] We long for peace, justice, love, beauty, goodness – for God. Yet these things slip our grasp, leaving us with a desire for that which is no longer and not yet.[45]

Unlike the "event" of deconstructionism (which might sound something like *saudade*), our feeling of *saudade* is for something that we know.[46] What we long for, what marks our past and is coming from the future is something that we trust to be the subject of our hope. "God exists to soothe *saudade*."[47] God is what is at the other end of our wounded desire, of our

43 Alves, *Transparencies of Eternity*, 15. Emphasis original.

44 In his earlier writing, Alves puts it this way: "Transcendence, therefore, is the deepest dimension of the world of visible things in which we live." *A Theology of Human Hope*, 150.

45 This may be the religious equivalent of Paulo Friere's conscientização (critical consciousness), which is a recognition that the world is not as it should be.

46 Our longing does not possibly belong to a demon or a monster as it does for a deconstructionist like John Caputo, though our knowing the subject of our longing is not a comprehending in the sense of "grasping;" it is not a knowledge of control. For a detailed account of "event" in deconstruction, see Caputo, *The Weakness of God*.

47 Alves, *Transparencies of Eternity*, 24.

experience of transcendence. If transcendence is an experience of longing, God is the subject of that longing. God is not transcendence, but the reason for our experience of it.

Alves accounts for knowledge of God through a particular view of revelation. For Alves, this revelation is generally passed on through stories of God's faithfulness in the past and stories of God's promises for the future.[48] Storytelling is the primary form of participation in the theopoetic project, and, as expected, holds a democratic impulse. The (re)telling of God's faithfulness and promises takes place within the church through liturgy to be sure, but it also happens on the street and in the home. This sort of God-talk is not limited by 'proper' analogies (of either attribution or proportion). They are informed by the Word of God as well as the lived experience (i.e., wisdom) of the people telling the stories and those hearing them. They are extra-contextual in that they are not limited by space or time, yet they speak hope into the present space and time. This is the nature of the sacred and the transcendent for Alves.

Lest we presume that theopoetics is an ephemeral, over-spiritualized endeavor, Alves emphasizes the bodily characteristics of revelation, especially through the mediums of food and physical presence. He combines this with his work on longing and *saudade* in his reflections on a lilac bush given to him by his father which makes his father present through its color, scent, and shade. He writes:

> A lovely thing, this: that there should be things that are more than things, things which makes us remember... Things present which open to us the world of absences... But absence alone is not enough. There are a lot of things which have been lost and left behind, of which we have no longing remembrance. It's because we

48 This sensibility too may be inherited through Barth, who writes: "Who and what Jesus Christ is, is something that can only be narrated, not examined and described in a system." *Church Dogmatics* II/2, 188.

> didn't love them. Longing remembrance is born when there is love and absence. When things awaken longing remembrance and cause the memory of love and the desire for return to grow in the heart, we say that they are sacraments. This is a sacrament: visible signs of an absence, symbols which make us think about return.[49]

Alves is here writing about more than just the physical objects that bring his father's memory back to him. He is making a theological point, that the "things" of this world – often considered of a lower material nature – incarnate that which we call God. They do more than point beyond themselves; they incarnate God – they *present* God to us.

Alves is convinced that God appears in a sonata, an embrace, a line of poetry, a favorite meal, or in a lilac bush.[50] The body and the bodily desires, for Alves, can be taken as authentic instances of both the goodness of creation and the revelation of the transcendent. If we can trust our bodies, we can trust the language that comes out of them as an appropriate medium for God-talk. If we can, with Alves, affirm the goodness of creation, the problem of whether we can say anything about God begins to fade. In our being, saying, and desiring, God becomes known.

I believe that Alves liberates faith-language for use by all. Talk about God is no longer deferred to the theologian or pastor: to those trained in the appropriate methodology. Instead, God-talk opens up particularly to the voices of the marginalized, to those who may have no idea how to 'appropriately' talk about God. This does not mean that the collective wisdom of the marginalized is collated and translated in order to be taken up into the the-

49 Alves, *I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body*, 13. Emphasis original.

50 This to me is reminiscent of early American pragmatism and poetry like that of Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and W. E. B. Du Bois. It also brings to mind the last line of Bob Dylan's "Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie": "You'll find God in the church of your choice/You'll find Woody Guthrie in Brooklyn State Hospital/And though it's only my opinion/I may be right or wrong/You'll find them both/In the Grand Canyon/At sundown."

ological discipline. Such a translation project may be a helpful venture in specific situations, but it still leaves the marginalized outside of the project themselves. The point is not for the theologian to hear voices from the margins and then to move on (even if this is still a step forward in many cases). Alves is posing a method — or perhaps more accurately, a way of life — that goes beyond translation. His theopoetics invites the marginalized to speak for themselves and to become full participants in their own right.

The theopoetic method, in its openness, need not lose the rigor and depth thought to be best captured in academic theology. Instead, in Alves's hands, this theopoetic method finds ever greater depth paired with a rigor that is not overshadowed by more scientific forms of writing. The turn in this methodology is a turn toward the people, not away from excellence. It is easy to become suspicious that this is the case when Alves writes the following: "There came a time when I ceased to find enjoyment in writing for my peers. I began to write for children and ordinary people, playing with humor and poetry."[51] This playful turn is not, however, a condescension to non-academic readers. Alves continues to write about God with a striking complexity and depth. He does not shy away from citing philosophers, theologians, or sociologists alongside poetry, stories, and self-searching testimony. For Alves, theopoetics is not a diluted version of academic theology or a theology translated for the common person. It is evident in his writing that he is convinced that a theopoetic method is indeed the preferable medium for exploring faith, doubt, our own humanity and our relationship to the divine.

Anyone who feels the *saudade* of transcendence, the longing remembrance of a lost love, or the sense that the world is not as it should be, has a

51 Alves, *Transparencies of Eternity*, 15. It is worth noting that early in his career, Alves suggested alternative criteria for critical reflection on theology: "I want to indicate that theology is to be tasted and verified. By what criteria? Obviously criteria extracted from life. Notice: life. Not thought about life!" Alves, "The People of God and the Quest of a New Social Order," 11–12.

religious sensibility that can be articulated in an appropriately theopoetic way. Anyone who imagines a more humane world and desires to make that world present understands the power of hope and promise. These are religious orientations (even when they have secularizing characteristics), and, for Alves, they are able to be appropriately expressed by the people that hold these orientations in a multiplicity of ways including (and especially) narratively and poetically. Any expression of this orientation is appropriate God-talk, and — if Alves's therapy is successful — the question of how this language sufficiently speaks of the divine is not central for those who feel the heartache of saudade and the joy and promise of an open future.

Concluding Remarks

In summary, the democratizing thrust of Alves's account of religious language takes its cue from Barth's re-centering of authority. The authority to speak about God comes from God alone, without strings, channels (the *analogia entis*, natural theology), or hierarchies (the Great Chain of Being). It is an authority that is as open as the experience of transcendence — of the present embrace of God coming from the past and the future, from faithfulness and promise. Alves pairs this with Wittgenstein's re-centering of linguistic authority. The power and responsibility for creating and maintaining meaning is liberated from metaphysical structures and given to the communities who participate in the language game. Ultimately, in Alves's reinvestment of Barth and Wittgentsein's thought, the center of power and authority is removed from the theologian and philosopher and is passed to the community for whom the language functions.[52]

52 Again, this liberation of language is not without criteria, it would be a mistake to suggest that Alves is proposing a relativistic account of linguistic meaning (I would contend instead that his is an eschatologically open account of linguistic meaning). Relying on the etymology of poetics as the creation of something new, for Alves, lan-

The excerpt from Ralph Waldo Emerson in the epigraph serves to portray what Alves reacts to when he abandons the academic disposition. When a person identifies themselves with a rationality that bridges the gap between the human and the divine, that person also elevates themselves above all others, developing a hierarchy that, if left unchecked, threatens to ossify the whole of reality. Alves, and most of liberation theology along with him, seeks to question the foundations of hierarchy wherever they find them. Alves's own work focuses on the foundations of hierarchy in religious language. His inquiry, however, refuses to play by the rules of the philosophers.[53] His probing of the foundations of the hierarchies of religious language is initiated in a different voice, one that rejects traditional ways of theologizing for a poiesis — an imaginative, creative way of writing that is not simply a negation of hierarchy, but one which offers an alternative way for those who wish to respond to it.

Thus, by (re)investing the inheritance received from Barth and Wittgenstein, Alves offers an alternative way forward, a way that is characterized by democracy, inclusion, and freedom. Alves's theopoetics calls theologians to become facilitators rather than guardians of religious language. If we truly believe that the poor, weak, and oppressed are the blessed inheritors of this earth, if we believe that the wisdom of God is as foolishness to this world,

guage is being used against its proper purposes when it is being closed down. So, for example, when a politician uses language in a way that restricts its meaning in order to appeal to a constituency, they are abusing language. Whereas, in a more traditional picture, it is the responsibility of the trained philosopher to expose such abuses, Alves hands this responsibility to the broader community. Further, Alves shifts the method of critical engagement. Returning to the example of the politician, rather than correcting the misuse by forwarding an alternative definition (which only serves to close down meaning in a different direction), Alves is recommending a poetic approach that serves to break open meaning.

53 Alves follows Wittgenstein as an anti-philosopher by refusing to accept the terms of the discipline. See Alain Badiou's *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, which makes a very helpful distinction between the sophist and the anti-philosopher. While I do not follow Badiou's constructive conclusions, his reading of Wittgenstein is illuminating, and it helps to place Alves in relationship to both Wittgenstein and the wider philosophical/theological tradition.

then we can trust that a theological method open to the margins will result in blessing. This is the sort of theopoetics that Alves encourages us to embody and is why, in my judgment, both theopoetics and Rubem Alves are critical for building a more just, democratic, and fruitful way of experiencing, thinking about, and speaking of God.

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