

Writing on the Boundary Line

Theopoetics as the Breaking of Form

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ABSTRACT

Insofar as theology is always in need of being (re)written, this essay positions theopoetics as a type of theological writing, one that tracks the discursive valences and aesthetic expressions of the theological within, without, and beyond theology proper. This mode of writing the theological generates what literary critic Harold Bloom calls “the breaking of form,” i.e., an event of critical transgression in which language is made to speak against itself through minor movements of contestation and dissonance within and between texts. As a means of tracking and tracing the theological through writing, theopoetics facilitates this form-breaking phenomenon, gesturing beyond its present conventions. By staging critical (counter)readings of modern, 20th century theologians like Jürgen Moltmann, and Paul Tillich it is argued that each exhibit – perhaps – traces and intimations of discursive ambivalence that enable a theopoetic intervention to brush tradition against the grain in the anticipation of the breaking of form.

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How else can one write but of those things which one doesn't know, or knows badly? It is precisely here that we imagine having something to say. We write only at the frontiers of our knowledge, at the border which separates our knowledge from our ignorance and transforms the one into the other. Only in this manner are we resolved to write.

- Gilles Deleuze

Theology seduced me. I wanted to resist being drawn into its constant uncertainty and intellectual discomfort, but was enticed by its history of gorgeous writing...and by the willingness of theological thinkers to take up thought at the limits of thinking, to say at the limits of language, to experience at the limits of the subject.

- Karmen MacKendrick

INTRODUCTION: ANIMATIONS OF THE THEOLOGICAL

The epigraphs above form a heuristic matrix of sorts, a type of textual soundtrack that guides my exploration of theology as a type of writing, that is, a certain type of rhetorical intervention, a transgressive poetics that enacts critical gestures of resistance against language from within the very form of language itself. Deleuze and MacKendrick are not trained-theologians, yet both suggest there is a certain allure that occurs in theology, a certain animating function that takes up thinking and writing at the limit. What exactly is going on here? Why is it the philosophers and critical theorists like Deleuze and MacKendrick – and notable others, to be sure – are suddenly interesting in theorizing and, in some cases, writing, the theological? If one can only write of those things that one does not know or knows

badly, as Deleuze suggests, then it is my contention that theology, or at least a certain *form* of theology, is writing *par excellence*. Theology claims to speak about what can never be known as such, namely what we call “God,” and about what cannot be known theology cannot stop speaking. Theology as writing, or, better *theopoetics* as writing, is thus an (inter)textual enterprise consisting of a manifold bricolage of chiasmic movements or moments that fold in and upon one another: close readings of texts, creative collocation of texts, and the peculiar, generative dissonance, tension, and contestation that occurs (with)in the opacities *between* texts, the discursive exfoliation which facilitates the event of writing – a performative act of reading and interpretation – about those things which one does not know or knows badly. Theology as theopoetics, then, is, at least in part, a literary adventure with no clear beginning or origin and certainly no final, determinant cessation: writing without end(s). This is my wager.

Theology as writing, theopoetics as a *certain type* of theological writing, is always already caught up in the double-bind of Augustine’s question in Book Ten of his *Confessions* – what do I love when I love my God? – that no answer to this question could ever fully satisfy the unhinged restlessness and the insatiable desire that give rise to this question, yet it is a question one can never stop asking. Indeed, perhaps the best instantiation of theopoetics might be that which takes shape in a discursive space which both opens and leaves open this originary question while simultaneously interrogating the very theological suppositions, tacit or otherwise, upon which this question is founded. Theological writing *qua* theopoetics is thus marked by a critical apophatic gesture, always provoked by the haunting, troubling axioms of negative theology – that language undoes itself, unravels itself, and dooms itself to failure before it even begins. As Mark Jordan puts it, the apophatic offers a “persistent challenge to theological practice. . .humbling theological language at every point.”¹ At its best the apophatic tradition

1 Jordan, *Telling Truths in Church*, 61; 62.

functions as theology's internal critic, the proverbial thorn in its side, an unwieldy reminder that nothing is safe nor is anything off the table.

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.²

These lines from the first of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* suggest that language under the pressure of divine weight always crumbles. Indeed, this is the great lesson of phenomenology, the enduring aporia of philosophy from Kant through Husserl to Levinas and Derrida: we never have clear, pristine access to thing things themselves. Theological writing, theo-poetics as theological writing, must come to grips with the reality that it is always lo(o)sing its grip, always arriving on the scene too late, in the aftermath of an event the opacities of which always withdraw — this is both the impetus and the scourge of theology written in a poetic register.

Theology as theo-poetics, theology as a type of writing about things one knows badly or not at all is but one way to loosen our stranglehold on language, on the chief metaphors of our religious lexicon, to wield “a more supple and deliberate handling” of them as Jordan maintains.³ As such, theological writing is a type of belated writing that navigates the phenomenological fissures and linguistic lacunae characteristic of agonistic experience, an “incantation at the edge of uncertainty,”⁴ as Catherine Keller suggests in a turn of phrase that may be the most concise and evocative definition of theo-poetics I have come across. My contention is that such incantations leave the Augustinian question open, speaking of “God” and

2 T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” 19.

3 Jordan, 8.

4 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, xviii.

interrogating the theorization of “God” without allowing the name of “God” to function either as a rhetorical trump card that alleviates thought of all paradox or aporia nor as a discursive weapon that serves to bolster repressive and oppressive notions of political sovereignty and ethical subjectivity. Rather, this “name” – “God” – may, at its best, “refer” to a certain excess or residuum within language itself, a certain tropological differential that bespeaks the aporia at the heart of phenomenology.⁵ Thus, what I called “the theological,” above, i.e., the ‘subject’ of theo-poetics, refers to “something more” within existence itself, what Jean-Luc Nancy calls, in a brief moment that is as perplexing as it is fascinating, “transimmanence,” i.e., a type of “crossing” or excess within existence and within time – transcendence through *within* immanence to use the language of one of theology’s most perennial binaries.⁶ Theology as a type of transgressive writing, that is, theology as theo-poetics, seeks out new, creative ways to trace and theorize the theological by drawing special attention to the ways in which the theological is codified in language and expressed through aesthetic form. Indeed, as I shall explore further below, theo-poetics itself is a discourse that enacts gestures of resistance and revolt against form itself. For Deleuze, form or structure is precisely that which is to be identified with the theological as such.

5 This is one of John Caputo’s major claims vis-à-vis the religious import of Derrida’s work: that the various “names” of “God” must be transgressed so that the event of God harbored within those names can lay ethico-political claim to us. See Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* and *The Weakness of God*.

6 Cf. Nancy, *The Muses*, 34-35; Nancy, *Adoration*, 19-20, 106n9. See also Taylor’s theological discussion of this notion in his *The Theological and the Political*. I am also drawing upon Taylor’s use of “the theological” over and against “Theology,” where the former refers to the tracking of an agonistic politics within discourse and prodigious art forms rather than a type of guild discipline, the dominant language of which is doctrine aimed toward expressing pure transcendence and therefore a repressive politics. My contention here is that theo-poetics is perhaps one way of tracking such a movement, a way that draws particular attention to the aesthetics of language as a means of transgressing convention.

[I]t is our epoch which has discovered theology. One no longer needs to believe in God. We seek rather the “structure,” that is, *the form* which may be filled with belief, but the structure has no need to be filled in order to be called “theological.” Theology is now the science of nonexistent entities, the manner in which these entities. . . *animate language* and make for it this glorious body which is divided into disjunctions.⁷

One way of describing theo-poetics – and it is but *one* way – would be as a type of writing that both tracks and interrogates the ways in which the theological itself “animates language,” i.e., the ways in which language harbors within itself certain valences of the theological that may or may not be located within the purview of theology as a discipline traditionally conceived. Insofar as this is the case, then Deleuze’s definition of theology as “the science of nonexistent entities” does not spell trouble for writing the theological; rather it opens up a discursive space in which theo-poetics may take shape as a “fictive enterprise with emancipatory intentions.”⁸

Taking a cue from Deleuze, my hypothesis here is that the traditional, conventional “forms” of theological writing lend themselves to an understanding of theological discourse preoccupied with the various dogmatic strata that fill this structure rather than the phenomenological function and dynamic of the structure and form itself. As a result, these dogmatic strata sometimes serve to bolster existing socio-political arrangements by facilitating discursive logics of erasure and subjugation that jettison not only the apophatic but also and especially the subaltern, that is to say, by valorizing system building and cataphatic formality they also serve to valorize the voice of homogeneity and foreclosure rather than the voice(s) of (the)

7 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 322.

8 Holland, “Theology is a Kind of Writing: The Emergence of Theo-poetics,” 318.

other(s), serving as an insidious apologetics regardless of intent.⁹ These traditional forms of writing are not really writing at all by Deleuze's definition. My suspicion is that these forms are, at worst, deeply restrictive and circumscriptive. They cling to themselves too closely and wield a clenched and suffocating grip on language, indeed on a certain configuration of language and a certain of interpretation of the theological. My argument, then, is that theology as theopoetics must recover the apophatic as central and essential to its character. More than that, theology as writing, theology as a poetics, must gesture *beyond its present forms*, indeed must position itself such that it transgresses its traditional conventions in order to both speak of that which always elides its grasp and to critically interrogate those theological notions that either support or yield tacit acquiescence to an imperio-colonial politics. Juan Luis Segundo has remarked that "the one and only thing that can maintain the liberative character of any theology is not its content but its methodology. . . [as] it is the latter that guarantees the continuing bite of theology, whatever terminology may be used and however much the existing system tries to reabsorb it into itself."¹⁰ Though we may remain less sanguine about the intersectional possibilities of theology's supposed liberative character and perhaps suspicious of its teleological determination in our current cultural and intellectual moment, Segundo's attention to form here is striking. My suggestion would be that theopoetics as writing, theopoetics as a way of tracking of the theological at work within, beyond, and without

9 As Walter Brueggemann once put it, "Empire prefers systematic theologians. . ." See Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 24. This line does not appear in more recent editions of the text.

10 Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 39-40. Later in the same text Segundo states, in a similar manner, that "we must keep in mind the fact that the revolutionary character of a given option does not lie in its content but rather in its real capacity to break up the existing structure rather than to be reabsorbed by [it.]" See, Segundo, 100. It is unfortunate that Segundo's principle work often stands in the long shadow of other Latin-American theologians as his sustained critical attention to form and methodology is crucial to the sort of project to which his title alludes, a project that is, I think, perhaps the best representative of early liberation theology.

theology proper, harbors similar sentiments. This method of tracking draws particular attention to aesthetic expression and the ways in which language itself is wielded and constructed within discourse with a critical, creative eye toward the possibilities of trespassing and transgressing normative convention, of utilizing the constrictive form(s) of language with the aim of crying out against the very constrictions themselves.

THEOPOETICS AS THE ESCHATOLOGICAL BREAKING OF FORM

How, then, are we to write theologically? What is theological writing? To form somewhat of a Derridian question: what does theology want to say, what is the theological trying to say or meaning to say within, without and beyond theology written in conventional form?¹¹ My contention is that theopoetics as a means of writing the theological must be fundamentally oriented toward the future, toward an eschatological event that may *perhaps* irrupt, rupture and transgress its current codifications. As theopoetics, theology eventuates that anticipates the irruption of its own conventions. Theology is not merely an eschatological discourse, it is a type of eschatological writing that anticipates its own overcoming, that anticipates the breaking of its form.

The phrase “breaking form” is a curious one. Within the context of certain sports or performing arts to “break” one’s form usually denotes some

11 One of the many wonders of studying and translating Derrida’s texts is the inherent ambiguity in the French locutions “*vouloir dire*” and “*pour vouloir dire*,” where the latter literally means “to want to say” but is commonly translated in more colloquial communication as “to mean.” Derrida seizes upon this ambiguity often and translators typically render the phrase as “want to say” or “means to say” depending on the text and the degree to which Derrida is playing with the phrase itself. For Derrida, of course, this is an instance of *différance* in which the “meaning” of text—what it is that the text ‘wants to say,’ what it ‘means to say,’ what it is that is ‘getting itself said’ in the text—is inscribed within the supplementarity of the trace. For an analysis of this ambiguity see Llewelyn, *Appositions of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas*, 191ff. For a good example of this in Derrida (there are many!) see Derrida, *Given Time*.

sort of deficiency or flaw, something less than ideal. If I break my form as an athlete or even as a certain sort of musician I am making a mistake, a mistake that may, in competitive ice-skating or dancing for example, result in a penalizing infraction. Contrary to this I want to suggest, with the help of the literary critic Harold Bloom, that “breaking form” in writing, specifically in theopoetics as an attempt to write the theological, is neither something to be avoided nor does it connote a sense of inaccuracy or miscalculation. Rather, the breaking of form is to be anticipated and indeed welcomed as a potentially liberative aesthetic event, an emancipatory transgression of conventions that bespeaks the deep contingency and fluidity of language itself. Theology as I see it should not be concerned with the policing of discursive and disciplinary boundaries as much as it is the very overcoming and effacement of those boundaries, greeting the ripping of its sinuous seams with tears (and tears) of joy. How else are we to approach the fecund richness of our texts and traditions? How else are we to welcome their enlivening polyvalence and vivifying multiplicity but with the transgression of their forms, with the breaking and rupturing of our common lexicon and familiar metaphors? How else can we attend to the profound aporias and deep phenomenological richness of the theological but by creatively reaching toward places that our collective imagination has yet to go, adventurously stumbling toward ideas we have yet to think, and critically interrogating those notions that serve to bolster and underwrite destructive socio-political ideologies? Such an endeavor necessitates the breaking of form.

For Bloom, literature and poems especially are paradigmatic of a certain rupture of normal conventions where language spills over to bring about novelty and alterity, i.e., the breaking of form or genre. “Poems,” Bloom writes, “instruct us in how they *break form* to bring about meaning, so as to utter a *complaint*, a moaning intended to be all their own.”¹² As such, “the

12 Bloom, “The Breaking of Form,” 1. Italics mine.

clusters of poetic meaning come from the breaking apart of form”¹³ rather than the circumscription of meaning within a particular structure or convention. This movement to break form also involves, for Bloom, “the skill or faculty of invention or discovery, the heuristic gift.”¹⁴ One could even go so far as to say that the breaking of form functions as an event of grace, an inventive gift that comes to us from within a certain form, arising within particular conventions but always exceeding them, rupturing them, and transgressing them. Here Bloom makes interesting recourse to quasi-theological language, referring to the poem as a topographical site that is, upon reading and interpretation, “*revealed* as a place of invention.” Even more forcefully and suggestively he states that “this *revelation* depends upon a *breaking*.”¹⁵ That is to say, the poem – and I would add the theological text or trope – has the potential to function as a discursive site contestation and dissonance and therefore as a site of revelation, only when it facilitates the inventive breaking of form and genre convention. All critical reading and all creative writing thus involves a transgressive act of deliberate misprision, displacement, or *différance* as Derrida would put it.¹⁶ Bloom describes this process thusly:

The breaking of form to produce meaning, as I conceive it, depends upon the operation of certain instances of language, revisionary ratios, and on certain topological displacements in language that intervene between ratios, displacements that I have been calling “crossings.”¹⁷

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 2. Italics mine.

16 Bloom, “The Breaking of Form,” 4-5, 6.

17 Ibid., 11-12.

Applying this to writing the theological, then, one might say that theopoetics amounts to a subtle and supple wielding of the theological lexicon and close attention to difference, a certain vigilance with respect to minor readings such that language can cross itself, transgress itself, and, through acts of creative invention and intervention, stumble upon new discursive iterations in order to think and theorize the theological *otherwise*.

The theopoetic breaking of form is eschatological insofar as it is open-ended, maintaining a welcoming posture toward the coming of an indeterminate future, of irruptive events of tension, contestation, and dissonances *between* and *within* text, movement and moments that propel and galvanize the breaking of form again and again. To be eschatological is to maintain a certain orientation toward language, toward the world, and toward the future as seen through the (potentially) emancipatory present.¹⁸ To write eschatologically, to write the theological eschatologically as a theopoetic, is to write — as the medieval illustration of Socrates suggests — with both hands, a pencil in one and an eraser in the other,¹⁹ always expecting the breaking of form, the rupture and effacement of language through critical and, at times, antagonistic intervention and transgression. Here it is worth quoting Bloom again:

18 Such a posture calls to mind Walter Benjamin's now famous quip: "For every second of time is a strait gate through which the Messiah might enter." See Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 264.

19 I refer here to the 13th century Benedictine monk and English chronicler Matthew Paris. His illustration of Plato and Socrates depicts the latter in the act of writing, holding a quill in one hand and brandishing a scraper in the other while the former looks on from behind. The image, now located in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, served as the frontispiece for the fortune-telling book *Prognostica Socratis basilei*. It reemerged in the mid-late 20th century as a postcard where it was spotted by Jacques Derrida who used it as both the muse and cover for his *La carte postale*. That Plato looms behind Socrates, one finger prodding him in the back, the other gesturing toward the text, perhaps speaks to the sort of contestation and dissonance that I am suggesting is characteristic of writing the theological in a poetic key. See Iafate, "Of Stars and Men: Matthew Paris and the Illustrations of MS Ashmole 304," 150-152. See also Derrida, *The Postcard*.

There is no reading worthy of being communicated to another unless it *deviates* to break form, twists the lines to form a shelter, and so makes a meaning through the shattering of belated vessels. That shattering is rhetorical, yes, but more than language is thus wounded or blinded.²⁰

My claim is that this is always an eschatological act. The theological breaking of form is always an article of the future, always anticipated just beyond horizons of expectation, always structurally to come – and to come again, for better or worse, running counter to the calcifying and totalizing proclivities of doctrinal assertions, assertions that are, to be sure, always political. This is the work of the theological in and against language itself, facilitating the crossing and transgression of language in anticipation of that which we have yet to write and yet to imagine, the effacement and displacement of our familiar religious tropes.

This does not mean, however, that doctrinal loci and central theological metaphors are simply to be categorically rejected or dismissed, but neither are they to be quietly and tacitly reduplicated or reified. Form breaking theological writing, i.e., theology *qua* theopoetics, navigates the sinuous interstices *between* these two conventions “intervene[ing] between ratios,” as Bloom puts it, traversing a precarious space of liminality and self-reflexivity that is satisfied neither with mere repetition nor causal disavowal, a certain deconstructive boundary line, to juxtapose Derrida and Paul Tillich in a turn of phrase I will explore further below. The exigency of these tropes can become all the more powerful and compelling if they are viewed as heuristic devices in the literary or poetic sense, rather than mere metaphysical reference points or ontological signposts. Theological tropes may indeed function as textual signposts but only if theology is willing to give up its misguided quest to root such signposts in some sort of *a priori* (onto)theo-

20 Bloom, “The Breaking of Form,” 18.

logical grounding. All we have after such grounds are unmasked is what Derrida calls the “bottomless collapse” over which and before which we make our incantations and interventions.²¹ These metaphors – the chief religious tropes various theological traditions are always already in the midst of (re)reading – may indeed stimulate our discourse (how could they not?) but only insofar as they are wielded and leveraged such that they initiate the breaking of form, tracking the ways in which the theological animates their language and tracing of what the theological means to say or is trying to say within their discourse. Writers of the theological must seize upon these images and loci as trope, as radical metaphors that can never possibly contain that toward which they point, the event toward which they betlately gesture. As metaphors and tropological markers, these loci are much more fecund, much more vibrant, and certainly much more influential than a speculative metaphysics or an ossified ontotheology precisely because they constitute, access, and galvanize the imagination, which, in turn, shapes political and ethical subjectivity. The question, then, is not *whether* these images and metaphors are to be used or even whether discursive reasoning should be used, but rather *how* such reasoning is used, how such tropes are employed, how both are wielded, and to what end.

Traditional theological images must be wielded in unconventional ways as literary tropes. The normative forms of discourse must be broken and the familiar modes of writing transgressed if we are to leave the Augustinian question open for reframing and interrogation. To use Bloom’s language again theological metaphors must become “belated vessels” that are constantly being shattered under the weight and demand of the event they bespeak. This event, let us call it “God” for the moment, always comes to us from an unforeseen, un-programmable, and incalculable future. For Derrida this event, this experience of the impossible as something previously

21 “‘God’ ‘is’ the name of this bottomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language.” Derrida, *On the Name*, 55-56.

unimaginable, always withdraws, like the thing itself. To write the theological as a poetic, is to attach or assign belated names to this event in the midst of its aftermath. These names constitute a certain “form,” in theological discourse, in the writing of theology as such. The event, on the other hand, if and when it comes, precipitates the breaking of these forms, the trespassing and transgressing of these names, these fragile and flimsy names, reminding theology, much in the manner of apophatic discourse, that these names can never be fully identified with the event that gives rise to them nor can they be used to legitimate projects which might squelch heterogeneity.

Writing the theological in a manner that welcomes the eschatological breaking of form “inscribes an admixture of gathering and breakage,”²² as Karmen MacKendrick puts it. To write is to position oneself at the edge of an aporia, attempting to gather language together such that one can speak in a meaningful manner of an event whose possibility rides on the cusp of every moment. Yet “we pick up language already fractured,”²³ images already broken, vessels already shattered and forms already ruptured. The theological “pulls itself apart even as one pulls it all together.”²⁴ This is the paradox fundamental to the theopoetic project and, as MacKendrick points out, “the challenge of writing about paradox is to trace faithfully the double movement toward and away from [its] gravitational point, even while it consistently eludes saying.”²⁵ Thus, writing the theological is “always writing at the very edge of writing’s possibility,”²⁶ in anticipation that the form of writing itself – what is perceived to be possible, normative, or hegemonic – will be broken and transgressed through the coming of an event, of the experience of the impossible. It is in this way that theological discourse and its forms of writing can facilitate what MacKendrick calls a “constant open-

22 MacKendrick, *Fragmentation and Memory*, 2.

23 Jordan, *Telling Truths*, 66.

24 MacKendrick, 6.

25 *Ibid.*, 7.

26 *Ibid.*, 2.

ing upon questions” such that the “aim is not to reinforce dogma but...to show what it is that resists formulaic finality.”²⁷ This resistance or counter contestation is, I think, the exigency of an eschatological event, of the theological, that pulls writing apart at the seams, that enacts critical gestures of apophatic iconoclasm against the static proclivities of theology’s standard conventions.

ANTICIPATING A BREAKING OF FORM: INTIMATIONS IN MOLTMANN AND TILlich

Despite modern systematic theology’s tendency toward an insular and impervious form of writing that resists breakage, there are interesting intimations and ambivalences that point, however feebly and tacitly, toward the sort of discursive posture I am describing, to the theological that resist formulaic finality. I will briefly mention two possible examples. My choice of these uniform, homogenous figures who are at the same time card-carrying members of theological tradition that is itself, by and large, quite uniform and homogenous is a conscious and strategic risk. My aim is not to further reinforce or underwrite this homogeneity and it is certainly not to endorse the repressive and whitewashed myopia endemic in this tradition, a malignancy of which theology is thankfully becoming increasingly aware. Rather, my modest contention here is simply to suggest that even ostensibly monolithic traditions that have been and continue to be cause for needless violence — both physical and discursive — are not as internally stable as they may seem at first blush. Indeed, upon closer examination it seems that there is a minor reading of such traditions, a moment of dissonance and contestation, a certain undertow of ambivalence that may *perhaps* suggest a tacit anticipation of the breaking of form. By subjecting these traditions to a

27 Ibid., 3.

healthy hermeneutic of suspicion – by interrogating the ways in which they are covertly deployed and, at times, blatantly weaponized in the service of stultifying notions of political sovereignty and ethical subjectivity – and, at the same time, brushing them against the grain by emphasizing these minor moments,²⁸ one can broach a deconstructive argument which suggests that even seemingly homogenous and uniform figures can be wielded *otherwise*. To be sure, I do not mean this to be an *apologia* for the mechanisms of exclusion and subjugation purveyed by such traditions nor do I believe that other traditions or figures should continue to be ignored or repressed simply because one can find an ostensibly ‘better’ or ‘more liberative’ reading of the dominant discourse. For such a gesture would simply and uncritically reify the toxic ideological legacies and pernicious theological undercurrents it seeks to dismantle. I only mean to suggest that these traditions and the figures that constitute them can, with self-reflexive awareness, be wielded differently, that they can and must be used to speak against themselves as a conscious act of discursive resistance, of writing the theological otherwise in a minor key. Derrida reminds us that language cannot be completely owned: “Language is precisely what does not let itself be possessed but, for this very reason, provokes all kinds of movements of appropriation.”²⁹ What is at stake here is ownership and appropriation. Theological writing *qua* theopoetics necessarily involves the deconstruction and abdication of a certain sense of (white, androcentric, heteronormative, liberal) ownership on the part of the dominant power discourse and concomitantly the re-appropriation of such language in a manner that breaks form. As Giorgio Agamben remarks in his study on poetics, “we can only say that here something ends forever and something begins, and that what begins begins only in what ends.”³⁰ Indeed, let us celebrate the end of the dominant reading of certain figures within our traditions and welcome the beginning of a more intersti-

28 Cf. Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 256-257.

29 Derrida, “Language is Never Owned,” 101.

30 Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, 101.

tial appropriation, an appropriation that wields them *otherwise* with the aim of eventuating a broader, more generous understanding of mutual ownership and appropriative responsibility.

It is with this in mind that I want to position Jürgen Moltmann as something of a liminal figure between the traditional form of writing systematic theology and the *possibility* of writing the theological in a form-breaking poetic register, an intermediary between modern systematic theology and what is now called constructive theology.³¹ In the retrospective and programmatic preface to his *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, Moltmann eviscerates the conventions of systematic theology as detrimental to the critical and dialogical nature of theological discourse.

Every consistent theological summing up, every theological system lays claim to totality, perfect organization, and entire competence for the whole area under survey. In principle one has to be able to say everything, and not leave any point unconsidered. All the statements must fit in with one another without contradiction, and the whole architecture must be harmonious, an integrated whole. [. . .] Systems save some readers (and their admirers most of all) from thinking critically for themselves and from arriving at independent and responsible decision. For systems do not present themselves for discussion.³²

Moltmann goes on to compare the dogmatic form of modern systematic theology to imperial edicts that are above critical questioning and rejection, edicts which presume to assert timeless answers that facilitate the closure of

31 For some programmatic statements regarding the burgeoning “constructive theology” moniker that are, in some instances, consistent with the sort of theo-poetic approach I am describing see Chopp and Taylor, *Reconstructing Christian Theology*; Jones and Lakeland, *Constructive Theology*.

32 Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, xi.

important questions rather than their opening toward new discursive spaces and more reflexive discourses. As Moltmann notes, these decrees are “imposed by force if necessary,” operating under a totalizing and ostensibly exhaustive logic that makes “judgment[s] which [are] final and no longer open to appeal.”³³ Against this, Moltmann argues, in essence, for the breaking of theology’s traditional forms of production and transmission in ways that “avoid the seductions of the theological system and the coercion of the dogmatic thesis.” This breaking of form would instead facilitate, through transgressive writing and the utilization of repressed mediums and sources, “an intensive theological discussion” that keeps central questions open and chief religious symbols malleable. This breaking of form, or rather the anticipation of the breaking of form, is decidedly eschatological, “prepar[ing] the way for a theological discussion *in the future* which will be both broader and more intensive.”³⁴ Methodologically, Moltmann describes this sort of posture toward future dialogue and present forms as “an adventure of theological ideas” that inspires “other people to discover theology for themselves – to have their own theological ideas, and to set out along their own paths.”³⁵ Thus, though he is trained in the standard conventions and imperious forms of modern systematic theology and situates himself within such a tradition, Moltmann intimates a striking degree of ambivalence toward the merits of those conventional forms in his later work making him an impor-

33 Ibid., xii.

34 Ibid., xii. Italics mine. A few short paragraphs later he puts it all the more forcefully. “Behind all this is the conviction that, humanly speaking, truth is to be found in unhindered dialogue. [. . .] There are unsettled theological problems for which every new generation has to find its own solution if it is to be able to live with them at all. No concept within history is ever final and complete. Indeed in the history of Christian theology the openness of all knowledge and all explanations is actually constitutive; for it is their abiding openness that shows the power of their eschatological hope for the future.” Ibid., xiii-xiv.

35 Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, xv. See also Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, xii-xiii and *A Broad Place*, 203.

tant liminal figure between the codified form of systematic theology and the sort of form breaking discourse that I am calling theopoetics.

In a similar manner, Paul Tillich, perhaps the most important and influential systematic theologian of the 20th century, also intimates a certain sense of ambivalence with regard to theology's conventional forms, an ambivalence that is especially helpful for tracking what it is that the theological means to say or wants to say as an animating exigency that haunts and troubles language. Despite his desire to secure God within a clearly demarcated Heideggerian ontology as the pristine ground of Being-Itself, Tillich always maintained that he was a "boundary thinker," perpetually positioned between disciplines, locations, and contexts. Indeed, he considered this sort of liminal posture to be such an integral part of who he was and what his work represented that it was the title and subject of two later autobiographical works, a 1960 article in *The Christian Century*,³⁶ and a book-length reflection titled *On the Boundary*.³⁷ There and elsewhere Tillich claims that "the boundary is the best place for acquiring knowledge" and that "at almost every point" in his life he aimed "to stand between alternative possibilities of existence, to be completely at home in neither and to take no definitive stand against either."³⁸ For Tillich, this methodological position is difficult and dangerous but is ultimately the most fruitful place for thought, the most fecund site for discursive practice. To continually position oneself as such thus requires existential courage and eschatological risk. Though Tillich ultimately remains indebted to the problematic discursive categories of modernity, this boundary line mentality gestures toward the breaking of form required of theological writing, albeit ambivalently. Indeed, such a boundary-line ethos comprises a critical methodological point of departure for theopoetics as a discourse that finds itself at the limits of theology itself, traversing the discursive borders and interstitial spaces

36 Tillich, "On the Boundary Line," 1435-37.

37 Tillich, *On the Boundary*.

38 Ibid.,13.

between disciplines like theology, comparative literature, and critical theory. In a certain sense writing the theological, that is, theopoetics, is writing on the boundary line, writing at the limits of language itself, writing at the frontiers and borders of our constructive capacities as Deleuze suggests above, wielding language as a means of resisting language, utilizing form as a means of breaking form – for what else can we do?

Though Moltmann and Tillich both intimate nascent anticipations of the breaking of form through various means of textual ambivalence, I do not mean to suggest that either or both of them are such form breaking theologians or that their intimations are necessarily conscious or intentional. As a deconstructive reader, my inclination is that there are certain minor moments in their texts, certain movements of internal dissonance including but not limited to those mentioned above which are suggestive of auto-deconstruction, of the breaking of form. These moments are not dominant readings, to be sure, and as I have already noted they are not indicative of their form at large – they are readings against the grain. In his later eschatological work, for example, Moltmann, though he wants to affirm a certain open-endedness to history indicative of the breaking of form, ends up appealing to a transcendental signified – a notion of timeless Eternity that exists outside the present world and will ultimately supplant the world in the onto-teleological future – in order to secure and legitimate his claims.³⁹ Though he at times gestures toward “the God beyond God”⁴⁰ and displays some affinity with the death of God movement and so-called Christian atheism,⁴¹ Tillich, for his part, predicates his entire theological system on God as

39 This is a point others have noticed as well. See, for instance, Keller’s incisive review of Moltmann’s *The Coming of God*, “The Last Laugh,” 381-391.

40 Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 186ff.

41 In Volume 1 of his *Systematic Theology*, Tillich maintains that “God does not exist,” however this statement is possible for Tillich precisely because God is being-itself, what he calls a “non-symbolic” statement. See Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume I*, 205; 238-39.

the ground of Being, that is, on an untenable ontotheology.⁴² My point here is not to debate the finer details of Moltmann's eschatology or Tillich's ontology. I simply want to note there are aporias in the work of both Moltmann and Tillich, moments of contestation and ambivalence that do not cohere with the larger systems. It is by tracking such aporias, noting when and where they surface, that one can begin to catch a glimpse of form breaking down, of the theological irrupting within theology. Moltmann and Tillich thus anticipate, though not consciously, the breaking of the theological form in which they are inculcated while at the same time remaining within the purview and under the discursive tutelage of that very form. My aim in teasing out these connections and leveraging admittedly minor and, in some sense, charitable readings of both figures is simply to take brief note of their equivocations and to suggest that a certain posture of ambivalence and self-reflexivity is required if theology is to become a type of poetics, i.e., a discourse that expects and welcomes the breaking of form and the undoing of language. Unlike Moltmann and Tillich, however, a theopoetics strikes a position of *conscious* ambivalence and reflexivity, incessantly haunted by the chastising throes of the apophatic. Such a discourse positions itself at the very edges of writing's possibility, on Tillich's discursive boundary line and shot through with Moltmann's adventurous sensibility, anticipating the breaking of its current form and the undoing of language even while operating within its conventions. In a certain sense, this is all one can hope for – to gesture toward the possibility of something *otherwise*, of a form of writing that transgresses present conventions from within those very conventions themselves. Elliot Wolfson poignantly describes such an (impossible) endeavor as “the revolt of the poet against language through

42 Even here there is a bit more nuance at work in Tillich that I am unable to fully explore here. For instance, in Volume 2 of his *Systematic Theology* he maintains that being “remains the content, the mystery, and the eternal aporia of thinking.” See Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol. II*, 11. For more on this nuance and how it pertains to the sort of form breaking ambivalence I am describing here see my “Tillich and Ontotheology: On the Fidelity of Betrayal,” 27-36.

language in attempt to portray what cannot be portrayed.”⁴³ This is the task of writing the theological eschatologically, of writing the theological within a fractured language system with the hope, *if there is such a thing*, that form can be broken yet again in order to speak of something form itself cannot contain.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

In one of his earliest extant works a young Samuel Beckett wrote the following of James Joyce’s *Work in Progress*, an early version of what would later become *Finnegan’s Wake*: “Here form *is* content, content *is* form. . .his writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*.”⁴⁴ My wager here is that the tracking writing of the theological that now falls under the burgeoning moniker of theoetics takes a similar aesthetic shape, instantiating intermediary events of contestation and dissonance within and between texts, the valences of which break form and convention with an eye toward future discourse. Callid Keefe-Perry, currently the most fastidious and erudite cartographer of the origin, emergence and use of the term theoetics, suggests in his genealogical study that “theoetics accepts that there is a language and diction unique to theological discourse and it encourages us to *play* with that discourse, to ask how it limits us, and to consider what happens when we *mix* our own paints.”⁴⁵ As we know from Derrida’s entire

43 Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 293.

44 Beckett, “Dante. . .Bruno. Vico. . .Joyce.,” 117. Italics original. Beckett opens the piece by suggesting that “the danger is in the neatness of identification,” an injunction that I think applies just as much to theoetics and the writing of the theological as it does to literary criticism, indeed the two discourses are perhaps closer than the purveyors of each are willing to admit.

45 Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water*. Italics mine. In a similar vein, see also his “Towards the Heraldic: A Theoetic Response to Monorthodoxy,” 142-158 and “Theoetics: Process and Perspective,” 579-601. I am particularly appreciative to Callid for his insight, comments, and questions as I worked through earlier versions and iterations of this piece during and following the initial meeting of the Theoetics Working Group at the 2011 American Academy of Religion annual meeting in San Francisco, CA. More

oeuvre, there is nothing glib or careless about this type of aesthetic play. The sort of play and discursive mixture characteristic of theo-poetics does not lack intellectual rigor, critical thoughtfulness, or scholarly diligence. It does, however, suggest that traditional forms of theological discourse have blind spots, lacunae that at times serve as intimations of the breaking of form, intimations that must be seized upon, tracked, excavated, and placed in tense intervention with texts that might facilitate the minor movements and critical (counter)readings necessary in order to tease out the opacities of what it is the theological means to say, or wants to say, in language.

In the final section of his *The Symbolism of Evil* Paul Ricoeur remarks, in a wonderful turn of phrase, that symbols always give rise to thought with the “hope for a recreation of language,” that “after the desert of criticism we yearn to be called again.”⁴⁶ Called by what? By whom? To borrow Augustine’s question yet again — an open question that should always haunt theological writing — “what do I love when I love my God?” What is it that propels this insatiable desire, this voracious restlessness, this unhinged yearning that undergirds the theological enterprise? My wager is that it is this very desire itself, this restlessness with convention(s), that eventuates the breaking of form, the cracking and undoing of language under the weight of an event, of the “coming” “of” “God,” whose infinite exigency demands a rejoinder. This event, this eschatological occurrence that comes to us through and in spite of our horizons of expectation, disrupts our metaphors, transgresses our tropes, and ruptures our conventions — it necessitates the perpetual breaking of form. Theo-poetics, then, amounts to the wielding of these images, the exertion of tropological language, and the interrogation of content and codification such that language is made to speak against itself and the intimations of the theological which animate language adequately theorized and aesthetically expressed. To write the theo-

than that, though, I remain deeply grateful for his sustained intellectual presence in my life and, especially, for his friendship.

46 Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 349.

logical in such a manner is to embark on a journey, an adventure into the unknown with no clear origin or end, with the anticipation that writing itself will be exceeded and undone. French feminist H el ene Cixous puts it thusly, describing what I cannot help but call the task of theopoetics.

The thing that is both known and unknown, the most unknown and the best unknown, this is what we are looking for when we write. We go toward the best known unknown thing, where knowing and not knowing touch, where we hope we will know what is unknown. Where we hope we will not be afraid of understanding the incomprehensible, facing the invisible, hearing the inaudible, thinking the unthinkable, which is of course: thinking. Thinking is trying to think the unthinkable: thinking the thinkable is not worth the effort. Painting is trying to paint what you cannot paint and writing is writing what you cannot know before you have written: it is preknowing and not knowing, blindly, with words.⁴⁷

What else can writing the theological be but the utilization of the poetic imaginary such that it eventuates the breaking of form? What else can the writer of the theological be but what Derrida calls the poet, i.e., “the one who gives way to *events of writing* that give. . .language a new body and make it manifest in a work?”⁴⁸ The theopoet, then, positions herself at the very edges of writings possibility, at the frontiers of knowledge, reflexively inhabiting familiar language with the aim of critically effacing and interrogating it through the eschatological breaking of form.

I end here were I began, with Deleuze: how else can one write but of those things which one doesn’t know, or knows badly? How else can one read this question except as an invitation to track the theological, to trace its

47 Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, 38.

48 Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 105-6. Italics mine.

movements in discourse, to embark upon a journey through the nooks and crannies of well-known language and ostensibly threadbare tropes in order to discover something new and unknown? For how else are we resolved to write except for the desire of that which we can never know, the yearning for that which surprises, breaks, and jars? Let us then cast the only thing we have, our very language, upon the groundless ground of the inexhaustible with the hope that their structure might be fractured, their form broken. Let us wield a more supple grip on our lexicon, responsibly seizing its tropes gingerly and delicately, fervently anticipating their incineration through the crucible of the apophatic, their evisceration by the razor sharp edges of the infinite such that their ashes and their remains become eschatological fertilizer upon the fecund soil of poised and present language. ~~Finally~~, let us position ourselves at the very edges of our constructive capacities, at the frontiers of our imagination, thinking the unthinkable and writing the unwritable so our language might be “broke open in anticipation of God,”⁴⁹ our form ruptured by the animating, aleatory exigencies of the vermiculate theological.

49 Jordan, 62.

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