

Introduction

Plato's Body

*J. Blake Huggins**

If I believe there is some truth in the mouths of poets, I shall live.¹
-Jean-Luc Godard

Theology...must not be relegated to one particular form of writing.²
-Shelly Rambo

How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one's own language? Kafka answers: steal the baby from its crib, walk the tightrope.³
-Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri

“What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Tertullian’s age-old and, by now, well-trod question is always running the risk of re-inscribing a hackneyed binary. Yet, it still haunts, still persists. For those who find themselves at home in the fecund interstices between theology and philosophy—precariously suspended in the creative and generative boundary space where the one ends and the other begins—this question is especially salient, acting as an open wound or an unreachable itch to which we always return. There is, however, a deeper, more ancient question, a more primordial tension that pre-dates even that of Tertullian, though it is susceptible to the same clichéd

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¹ *JLG/JLG - autoportrait de décembre*, DVD, Jean-Luc Godard (1994; New York, NY: Cinema Parallel, 1995).

² Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 58n50.

³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 1986), 19.

and banal renderings. In Book X of his *Republic*, Plato, after engaging in a lengthy discussion of justice, the ideal city and the “proper” stories that should be told in such a city, observes that there is an “ancient quarrel” between poetry and philosophy, an aged dispute shot through with many proofs and a certain degree of enmity and animosity. Plato’s position with regard to this quarrel is well known: for him, the poet is subservient to the (male) philosopher-king who rules the city through reason. Indeed, the philosopher-king dictates what sort of poems are to be composed and what sort of poets may contribute to education and the development of culture (spoiler alert: quite a few are banned). Since this infamous, prejudicial dialogue the relationship between poetry, poetics, and literature to philosophy has been just as tensive and antagonistic as the one between theology and philosophy. In the latter dyad theology sometimes asserts itself, despite ostentatious ‘radical’ concessions regarding so-called ‘postmodern’ epistemological ‘humility,’ as type of master discourse much in the same manner that philosophy originally relegated the poetic to the position of serving as an apologetics for the ideal city-state. Indeed, the reckless and feckless dangers of such theo-political apologetics are woven into the painful histories of imperialism, colonialism, and White supremacy of the past and the present, insidious ideologies—of which there are many—which continue to taxonomize, regulate, and discipline bodies as docile objects to-be-known. What elides the knowing, panoptic gaze?

One way of working through these ancient prejudices—one that we might call the theopoetic—would be to juxtapose both Tertullian and Plato’s questions with the aim of leaving them open in a manner that might create the conditions for generative and capricious imbrication to emerge, where the discursivities of each (the theological, the philosophical, the poetic) are allowed the vermiculate and aleatory play of creative chiasm without finally remaining subject to the tutelary sovereignty of something like a philosopher-king. The theopoetic gesture is, as I understand it, one which stages

critical interventions between discourses, leveraging and staging minor readings across or between texts and movements such that language might be wielded against itself, wielded otherwise toward an unknown and uncertain future, one which interrogates rather than reifies “the split between theology and poetics.”⁴ Methodologically, such a move bears striking resemblance to what Jacques Derrida has called the logic of supplementarity, i.e., to the practice of writing as an instance of doubling through the (re)production of that which both adds to and presents itself—within and against the present—as a substitute to an ‘origin’ which is itself supplementary. Supplementary writing, writing as supplement, writing *the* supplement, minds this gap or split between discourses or disciplines—and within subjectivity itself—by functioning as a cut or caesura at the joints of experience, gathering itself together where sinew meets bone and vice versa. As a supplemental practice, then, theo-poetics functions within not without theology. For Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri, this sort of Pauline ‘in the discourse but not of the discourse’ posture constitutes a minor literature which “doesn’t come from a minor language, [but] is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language...affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization.”⁵ As a minor literature, then, theo-poetics opens up “the possibility of setting up a minor practice of a major language from within,”⁶ where the familiar is made strange and the language itself cedes its purely representative function in order to move toward its extremities, its limit points. Theo-poetics is therefore a round and resolute rejection of all languages of the masters and instead a gesture of supplementation, where the play of supplements within language is no longer ‘about’ something in itself but ‘is’ that something ‘itself,’ an event of “minor utilization”⁷ in which one’s own language is rendered peculiar and unsettled, freakish even. It is precisely the resistance to

⁴ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 58n51.

⁵ Deleuze and Guatarri, *Kafka*, 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

minor utilization and the deterritorialization of expression that has resulted in the repeated reification of these ancient prejudicial erasures, from Plato's banishment of the poets to Tertullian's misunderstanding of philosophy and beyond. Indeed, the figurations of Plato and Tertullian as such are indicative of the more stultifying tendencies of Western thought, though, to be sure, they are not without ambivalence and their own minor configurations. Can theopoetics mine and mind the disjunctive contestation, the generative discontent?

If the answer to this question is to be affirmative then it cannot be accomplished by theologians alone lest the errors of the past—the closing off of a certain line of questioning—be reduplicated. This is one reason why the *THEOPOETICS* Editorial Team is comprised of what we hope is a healthy cross-section of this amalgamation—constructive theologians, philosophers of religion, practitioners, poets—that will inspire a wide and diverse array of critical and creative reflection on theopoetic themes with the aim of holding the loosely conceived questions represented by Plato and Tertullian in generative tension by re-framing them, unfolding and refiguring them, perhaps by questioning the frame of the questions themselves—by enacting gestures of bricolage and imaginative *poesis*.

This issue features pieces given before the 2nd Annual Theopoetics Working Group that convened in November 2012 at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting in Chicago, IL. The theme for that year revolved around the ways in which the theopoetic gesture might engender certain practices and discourses of embodiment and a return to the flesh or the carnal as a potential site for critical and hermeneutic intervention. And, again, such aims have special bearing on our matrix of orienting questions because the splits between theology and poetics and theology and philosophy coincide with the bifurcation of mind and body endemic in Western discourse. In his elucidation of the ideal city, Plato takes great care to ban only a certain type of art and poetry, namely that which did not conform to

standards of the high art ruled acceptable by the guardians of the *polis* and the philosopher-kings, governed by the imperious aegis of pure reason and rationality. These were, of course, the ‘lower,’ more visceral and bodily aesthetic forms—poems, stories, and music—which appeal to the passions. In other words, this ancient prejudice repressed those discourses and forms of art that emerge from and are facilitated by the affective dimension and do not abide by the strictures of pure reason alone. While this mind-body dichotomy has certainly remained operative in the historical development of both philosophy and theology it is worth noting it is further complicated in Plato’s own corpus, his own *body* of work. His *Timeaus*, for instance, strangely and ambivalently belies a strict split between the sensible and the intelligible with its emphasis on *khora* as a type of middle term, a primordial receptacle that engenders the difference between the psychic and the somatic. What, then, are we to do with Plato’s (fleshly) body (of work)? How are we to read its inscriptions?

Much ink has been spilled by way of a critique of the transcendental ego and the supposed sovereignty of the Cartesian *cogito* over and against the bodily, the corporeal, the embodied, the fleshly—the *affective*. Many of these interventions seize upon liminal concepts such as *khora* as a means of gesturing toward the unthought. Though various inflections, methodologies, and critical points of departure current and contemporary discourses (trauma studies, affect theory, queer thought, etc.) continue to effectively and creatively interrogate the axiomatic basis of ostensibly steadfast dictums such as *sola ratio*. There are indeed other ways and nodes of *knowing*. What exactly is embodiment and how is one to think and perform carnality in light of these critiques? What sort of agency is engendered by affect and the somatic? Further, what is the role of the theological in these endeavors, tacit or otherwise, and how does it function in certain inscribed practices—of reading, of liturgical performance, of scholarly textual production, etc.—to either accentuate or denigrate the turn to the body and the manifold ways

in affect manifests itself? The pieces gathered here are but one small contribution to the consideration of such questions, a consideration keyed in a certain poetic register representative of prior theo-poetic scholarship. The authors represented here engage in diverse genres and modes of expression that include academic prose, liturgical expression, and poetic verse. This, too, is representative of theo-poetics as gesture within and against language, indeed both *within* and *against* theology, i.e., a type of interstitial, boundary-traversing writing that anticipates and indeed facilitates the adventurous and fortuitous breaking of form and convention.

Jeffrey Hocking's opening piece, "Risking Idolatry?: Theo-poetics and the Promise of Embodiment," notes a certain genealogical connection and discursive affinity between deconstruction and theo-poetics while also teasing out important differences. Drawing on the monumental work of John D. Caputo and that of Rubem Alves, whose early work *The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet* is now a seminal text for theo-poetics, Hocking argues that Caputo's version of deconstruction ultimately fails to provide an adequate orientation for embodiment because it is too preoccupied with conceptual idolatry. Against and beyond this, Hocking, with the help of Alves and an innovative reading of the Johannine gospel which provides a working definition of *poesis*, suggests that perhaps a robust commitment to embodiment also involves wagering the risk of idolatry, a risk theo-poetics rather than deconstruction is ready and willing to make.

In a similar vein, Andrew Tripp's "Scripted Bodies and the Poet's Word: Theo-poetics and Pastoral Care," explore the possibilities theo-poetics may have on pastoral care, particularly within clinical settings. Drawing on contemporary scholarship in pastoral theology and taking Martin Heidegger's poetic hermeneutics as a clue, especially his work on Hölderlin's hymn "The Ister," Tripp gestures toward what he calls a constructive pastoral theo-poetics that remains vigilant and attentive to the multifarious ways in which bodies can be scripted and inscribed by deep somatic pain and distress. As

such, Tripp argues, a pastoral theopoetics can provide caregivers with the resources necessary to properly attend to the “happening” or the “event” of the whole body as a constellation of memories, experiences, and possibilities.

In “Ritual in the Dark: A Liturgy of Image and Text,” Craig Goodworth and Travis Poling seamlessly blend theology, poetry, and contemporary art in the form of a liturgical incantation that explores the spatiality of darkness as a site from which change emerges and transformation is engendered. The piece included here contains an outline and selections from the liturgy as well as documentation of the initial performance of the ritual by Goodworth and Poling at Bethany Theological Seminary and Earlham School of Religion in October 2012. Exploring the physicality of darkness and opacity through the tactile image of roots this theopoetic invocation of image and text conjures an awareness of an embodied connection with the earth and the soil from which planetary life first emerged and to which it will ultimately return.

Shortly following the publication of the inaugural issues of *THEOPOETICS* the theological world lost one of its most thoughtful, creative, and inspiring thinkers. In their individual pieces Patrick Bruner Reyes and L. Callid Keefe-Perry reflect on the death of Brazilian thinker Rubem Alves and consider the impact his body of work—a large portion of which has yet to appear in translation for the English-speaking world—continues to have on theopoetic discourse. Alves’s legacy is and continues to be both irreducibly rich and profoundly singular. His texts are always already ahead of us. These elegiac pieces bear witness to the enduring gift that was and continues to be Rubem Alves, expressing both mourning and respect as well as creative possibility.

In large part, Alves’s legacy contests and complicates the highly ambivalent legacy of Western thought bequeathed to us, a legacy that is itself ambivalent, undetermined, undecided and internally unstable. These legacies

remain divided and are hardly singular. As such, theopoetics does not operate outside its pluriform heritage. On the contrary, it functions as a necessary supplement, a type of minor literature, an orchestral movement or variant *within* theology, one which wields a dominant language or a normative set of tropes otherwise and interrupts or unmasks the performative logics that subtend and govern their hermeneutic frames. Such is the (theo)poetic revolt against (theological) language through the very medium of language itself in the attempt to adequately and proximately attend to the capacious vicissitudes and aleatory opacities of material life which themselves endure and persist as transgressive wounds, as openings on to *something* which outstrips form. But who can foresee what modes or styles of writing such a disposition will engender, and with what success, results, or aims?