Everyday Seduction

Richard Kearney, Karmen MacKendrick, and Three Definitions

In the Aztec design God crowds into the little pea that is rolling out of the picture. . . In the white man design . . . God is everywhere, but hard to see. The Aztecs frown at this.

—William Stafford

This chapter is the culmination of the historical and theoretical consideration of theopoetics. Chapters 7 and 8 are a sketch of some of the ways in which a theopoetic perspective might be employed within concrete Christian practices, and the closing epilogue is a type of denouement, a reflection of the project in more poetic prose. Whereas much of what has preceded this chapter has been writing primarily about the authors considered and a cataloging of the effects of theopoetics from their perspectives, here I will turn to writing with two authors whose work functions as a theopoetic Rosetta Stone of sorts, revealing what it is that theopoetics has been up to all this time. While neither author makes any regular published use of the word theopoetics or focuses on it any more

1. Stafford, "Ultimate Problems," 61
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than in passing, they nevertheless provide key insight into the grammar and lilt of the language of theopoetics.

While there have been a number of articulations of theopoetics given that express its historical context (Miller), theological method (Hopper, Keller, Faber), and linguistic character (Holland and Guynn), there has not been a sustained accounting of theopoetics with an emphasis solely on the function and effect of theopoetics itself. By means of co-opting insights from Richard Kearney’s concept of “anatheism” and Karmen MacKendrick’s interpretation of theology as a form of seduction, this chapter serves to put forth a functional definition of what theopoetics does, capturing a sense of each of the effects encountered thus far. Having canvassed the vast majority of extant literature on the topic, I intend for this chapter to draw together a number of the recurring themes that have surfaced throughout the text thus far.

Upon closing, I will have brought together arguments for more embodied thinking, an emphasis on the pre-rational, a method by which we might avoid objectifying God, and a claim that a poetic sensibility in theological discourse allows for the pursuit of theology as a spiritual activity in and of itself, weaving them all together via a loom built from the work of Kearney and MacKendrick. My intention is that this chapter will provide a definitive theological response to the question “Why should we nurture the development of poetic sensibilities in theological discourse?” I will answer it by means of an articulation of what it is that I think is accomplished by the use of theopoetics.

Seeds of the Ordinary

One recurring theme throughout the theopoetic literature is that experience—or the articulation of experience—is a valid site of new

2. An appendix of “definitions” of theopoetics is included at the end of this book.

3. This is not strictly true, as Alves’s work can easily be seen to focus on the intersection of word and flesh. However, given that Alves engages this topic in his idiosyncratic style, it hasn’t been widely communicated in scholarly circles. As has been made clear previously, I have no desire to “rescue” Alves from his choice to eschew academia—indeed, his choices interrogate my own work by the mere virtue of their existence—and yet it still seems worth considering some of the topics he addresses in a more formalized, sustained way.

4. I actually provide three definitions: varying perspectives on the same scene, so as to discourage the flattening effect that explication can sometimes have.
understanding. This has been held to be true even if it conflicts with some extant authority. The claim is not that every articulation about God is equally valid, which would be nigh on impossible given the diversity of perspectives that abound. Instead, the call is to create space for new articulations to be weighed and considered, rather than immediately being dashed upon the rigid rocks of proclaimed orthodoxy. Theopoetics encourages me to ask with Augustine “What do I love when I love my God?” and inspires me to respond both that I don’t know and that I will not stop trying to love regardless. This is a mark of the theopoetic: an acceptance of a cognitive uncertainty regarding the Divine, an unwillingness to attempt to unduly banish that uncertainty, and an emphasis on action and creative articulation in spite of it all. A theopoetic perspective entails a willingness to entertain the uncertain and employ a hermeneutic of hospitality whose implications are far-reaching. In an attempt to explore this stance we will be assisted by another Irish philosopher living in the United States, Richard Kearney.

As was noted in the second chapter, Heidegger’s contributions to hermeneutics and phenomenology were essential components of early conceptualizations of theopoetics. Nearly fifty years after the Third Consultation on Hermeneutics at Drew University, Kearney offers another phenomenological account of contemporary religious experience. I believe that it elucidates part of what it is that theopoetics accomplishes. In his essay, “Epiphanies of the Everyday,” he calls for the establishment of a fourth phenomenological reduction, which he terms “micro-eschatological.” Kearney’s response to the post-Nietzschean question, “What comes after God?” is a return to a renewed God. This return,

5. For more on the gatekeeping role of theology and some possible ways in which theopoetics may explicitly challenge the defensive maintenance of the status quo, see my chapter, “Toward A Theopoetic Response to Monorthodoxy.”

6. So as to avoid what would be the necessarily lengthy diversion were I to get into the technical aspects and phenomenological details of Kearney’s point, this footnote will have to suffice: his proposal accepts and follows Edmund Husserl’s transcendental reduction, Heidegger’s ontological reduction, and Jean-Luc Marion’s dononological reduction of givenness, but then goes further (Kearney, “Epiphanies,” 5). In effect, Kearney’s proposed new methodology: (a) accepts Husserl’s epistemological techniques for filtering out habitual patterns of thinking so as to more readily approach a transcendent consciousness and the essences of meaning, (b) accepts Heidegger’s means of raising of awareness of ontology with Dasein, (c) acknowledges Marion’s articulation of the givenness of “saturated phenomena,” and (d) suggests that while these reductive methodologies are in place, one may return to a concrete experience of the world that yields a “renewing and creative perspective.”
though, is not a book-of-Revelation-styled second coming in which en-
emies are swept aside and true Christians are left sated and pure; rather,
it is much more akin to John’s record of Mary Magdalene and Jesus after
the resurrection: God close enough to touch but unrecognizable through
her tears, until she hears her name being called.

Instead of imposing a presumed theology or metaphysical structure
regarding God’s ultimate and complete return at the end times, or escha-
ton, Kearney explores where and how it is that God—and traces of the
eschaton itself—is in the everyday.7 In his words, the process of returning
to experience is akin to “that indispensable loop on the hill path that
enables us to climb higher before doubling back to the valley below. The
step forward as the step back. And vice versa.”8 In embarking on the jour-
ney to create a phenomenological methodology that can contemporarily
grapple with God, Kearney has set out not to “define the proper style
for God-talk, so much as perform it by example.”9 His writing is both
a model in its content and its form, and he draws examples from film,
television, and contemporary events just as readily as he does from theol-
ogy and philosophy. For Kearney, thinking faithfully entails a necessary
re-engagement with the small things of life, which then, in turn, are seen
as more profoundly signifying of the divine. As he writes, “in our rush to
the altars of Omnipotence we often neglect theophanies of the simple and
familiar.”10 These “simple theophanies” are tied into his sense of “escha-
ton,” hence his nomenclature of the reduction as “micro-eschatological.”

The eschaton is that time/place/experience in which God’s kairos
time eclipses humanity’s chronos time and we “touch the sacred enfolded
in the seeds of ordinary things.”11 For Kearney, the encounter with God
in the seeds of the ordinary requires the laying down of certainty. Just as
Mary Magdalene’s experience of the Resurrection was held at bay because
of her certainty that Jesus had already been carried off, Kearney offers

7. It should be acknowledged that this framing is not at all that dissimilar from
Jesuit spirituality and Ignatius’s maxim to “find God in all things.” See, for example,
Richard Peace’s, Noticing God. While Kearney does not make immediate connections
between his project and an Ignatian worldview, it is worth noting that Kearney was
raised Catholic and that these ideas would not be foreign to him.
11. Ibid.
that we may be dampening our experience of God by making strident insistence upon God’s nature, location, movement, and plans for return. In his most recent work, Kearney has abandoned the term “micro-eschatology” in favor of the book’s title Anatheism, a neologism from ana-meaning “coming back to,” that clearly owes much of its function to his previous work as foundationally set in “Epiphanies.” In his introduction to Anatheism, Kearney offers an explanation of the term as “a call for a new acoustic attuned to the presence of the sacred in flesh and blood. It is *amor mundi*, love of the life-world as embodiment of infinity in the finite, of transcendence in immanence, or eschatology in the now.”"12 This is undeniably resonant with Duguid-May’s insistence upon the Kaufmanian position on the sufficiency of the material world to signify the presence of God, but it also bears more than a passing resemblance to Caputo’s Derridian framing of the “call of the undecomstructable,” which comes “packing only vocative power . . . the powerless power of a provocation or a summons, a soliciting, seductive power.”13

[Anatheism] is about repetition and return. Not in the sense of a reversion to an anterior state of perfection . . . nor, indeed, in the sense of a return to some prelapsarian state of pure belief. . . . The “ana” signals a movement of return to what I call a primordial wager, to an inaugural instant of reckoning at the root of belief. It marks a reopening of that space where we are free to choose between faith or nonfaith. . . . Anatheism, in short, is an invitation to revisit what might be termed a primary scene of religion: the encounter with a radical Stranger who we choose, or don’t choose, to call God.14

This “primary scene of religion,” the choice to see God or not, is of utmost importance for Kearney. He understands it as a decision for, or against, radical hospitality. Do we invite in what might be God or not? Indeed, Kearney sees hospitality as a Judeo-Christian imperative not only in terms of social ethics, but also in the development of our interpretive lenses and our constructive theologies. His call is one of invitation to walk in a place of hospitality and welcoming, even when the welcomed guest may prove hostile. Making the choice for faith may indeed be frightening and unpredictable, but hospitality may well call us to that. This is perhaps

12. Ibid., 166.
best exemplified in Kearney’s reading of the Genesis 18 encounter between Abraham and the “three strangers,” who foretell that Sarah will bear a son. There Kearney sees the commentary that religion “is capable of the best and of the worst. . . Abraham’s heartless banishment of Hagar and Ishmael is totally at odds with his hospitable reaction to the arrival of the aliens from nowhere. Capable of the most cruel acts, Abraham is also capable of receiving potentially threatening nomads into his home with open arms.”15 Abraham, the great father of the Judeo-Christian lineage, contains multitudes. Making the choice for faith does not mean that all will become singularly clear.

What I want to suggest by means of Kearney is that a vital part of any project of theopoetic interpretation is to remember that no duration of hosting will ever co-exist with the knowledge its ending provides: how our interaction with the other will influence us is not known until it happens, and sometimes not even then. So too with the other of the everyday, with the other of the text, and with the personal other whose articulation of God and God’s movement “fails” to meet the claims of our existing orthodoxy. This is not to say that we invite the guest in hoping to be accosted or destroyed, but that the call is to acknowledge that whenever we host the Stranger in any form—personal, textual, or otherwise—we are entering into a situation of profound uncertainty and possibility. Kearney believes—at least for hermeneutics and theology—that we are both called to invite the other in and to do so without any insistence or promises made regarding our safety.

Kearney offers that this temporarily suspended moment of (un)knowing in the act of hosting is more than amicable to the Judeo-Christian worldview, as it is well-modeled by the theophany on Mount Horeb. The Divine, he writes, “is a God who puns and tautologizes, flares up and withdraws, promising always to return, to become again, to come to be what he is not yet for us. This God is the coming God who may-be. . . This Exodic God obviates the extremes of atheistic and theistic dogmatism in the name of a still small voice that whispers and cries in the wilderness: ‘perhaps.’”16 In that whisper we are brought to an ecotone, an edge space that marks a continual re-entrance into the liminal area on the threshold of faith.

15. Ibid.
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Anatheism is the moment in a film wherein the audience knows they have just witnessed something that is pivotal to the picture and will figure into later narrative, but at the moment of their witnessing, they are clear only as to its import, not its intent. It is in those moments, Kearney suggests, that people of faith decide again if they will do the work needed to stay the course and hear that "perhaps" again. What he proposes is an articulation of God akin to the form of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "besides," a way of philosophically and theologically coming into the presence of a topic without demanding that it hide something beneath or beyond it, or that it necessitates anything other than what it is. Set up as a "besides," Kearney sees anatheism not as some kind of Hegelian synthesis of—and above—theism and atheism, but as a kind of thinking that is perpendicular to both.

"Besides" is an interesting preposition . . . because there's nothing very dualistic about it[;] . . . a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them . . . Beside permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic noncontradiction or the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object. Its interest does not, however, depend on a fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or even pacific relations, as any child knows who shared a bed with siblings. Beside comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations.17

Kearney isn't looking to confirm or deny prime tenets of either position, but to encourage dialogue and hospitality among, between, and beside them both. For Christians this means that if we are to accept that God is a God of creation and newness then we might also want to accept that our answers to Augustine must remain provisional, lest in our answering we forswear a fuller future understanding of God's nature or action. We know experientially that we love God, but we don't know—at least not in any final, self-enclosing way—the fullness of what exactly it is that "God" means. As such, we would be well-served by learning "to speak of God without allowing the name of God to function as a rhetorical trump card that alleviates thought of all paradox or aporia."18 By inviting in poeisis we invite in that which is not fully formed, that which

17. Sedgwick, Touching Feeling, 8.
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could emerge as friend, foe, or—perhaps more frightening than a foe—an instance of sublime otherness so profound it does not become the object to our subjective will, but reconfigures that will, transforming our very sense of subjectivity and relationality, momentarily fusing the horizon(s) of our own sense of self with that which is decidedly not us. This invitation affirms a mutuality present in the theopoetic position: it calls for a continual interplay between a speaker of a “new world-experience”\(^\text{19}\) and a receptive ear willing to harbor the vision of a world which is not yet fully known. The speaker risks transgression against (a possible) God, risks idolatry in the hope of more vision and union, and the host risks the same by virtue of the invitation for the speaker to continue, to carry on.

By means of this framing I propose that we are already always engaged in the anatheistic wager. The givenness of the world is such that in every moment we can invite in the strange text of the world and hear it speak, or we can attempt to immediately name it and know it into fixity. As a Christian, I see this as exactly the same fulcrum upon which the power of sacramentality turns. If a sacrament is “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given,” then the world can be seen to be full of possible signs and words that we might invite to speak to us of God’s grace. Perhaps anatheism is simply an articulation of the human condition: we live in a world of signs such that we might at any turn stumble across/into the living God. Yet without a cultivated sense of listening and reception we may well miss the invitation to an audience. Theopoetics is an invitational stance that accepts the anatheistic wager by ceding the necessity of proof, willing to accept that the world as it is already bears sufficient seeds of Divine possibility. Whether the seeds will take root—or even sprout at all—we can not yet know.

Seducing God

Following Kearney’s anatheism, the theopoetic gesture is an invitational one, a prioritizing of hospitality above fixity and hermeneutic safety. What has yet to be addressed though, is why the invitation is to be accepted at all. What is there to budge us up off our comfortable couch of certainty and answer the knock on the door from only God knows who? Why enter the fecund-but-foggy theopoetic jungle when the cut-and-dry

\(^{19}\) Wilder, Theopoetic, 1.
library of clear theological doctrine is open and well-lit around the clock? Two answers occur to me.

First, and perhaps more readily discernible, because formalized and institutionally centered doctrinal certainty tends to support status quo systems of social power, and thus, to the extent that current systems and structures appear to be in collusion with unjust forces, attempts at challenging the mode of discourse might allow for the encouragement of voices that might not otherwise be given space. As a Christian, particularly as a member of the Religious Society of Friends with Anabaptist tendencies, I find that my interpretation of Jesus's ministry and message consistently points me toward acknowledging and lifting up voices that do not occupy seats of worldly power. This is a type of pragmatic answer most resonant with Alves, Duguid-May, Holland, and Kearney, for whom the power of the theopoetic is in its ability to create hospitable spaces for dialogue, to affirm the wisdom of the body, and argue that voices need not be "academic" to articulate wisdom of God and God's movement. It is, however, a different reason for letting theopoetics in that is the focus of the remainder of this section.

Without a poetic sensibility and perspective within theological discourse, without occasionally coming up besides mystery and fog, I believe that we are somehow living less than we might, refusing to receive and fully honor our bodies and our fleshly finitude. When we craft theology so that it attempts to be self-enclosing and make claims with a certainty and finality, claiming to be based in knowledge instead of hopes and understandings grounded in faith, we are trying to think thoughts that we cannot think, and make claims about outcomes we cannot know or control. Without the poetic we risk becoming too full of theological hubris, too sure we can force words and thoughts to do as we wish, and not accepting enough of that which is: we are limited, failing creatures with a limited language; those who cannot ever hope to have a grasp on the fullness and nature of God. Theopoetics accepts this and is a way to understand why—given the fact that we know our words will never be sufficient—we might want to continue to make them regardless. Theopoetics is an acceptance of God's invitation, or as the poet Rilke would have it, God's imperative to Divine embodiment: "You, sent out beyond your recall, / go to the limits of your longing. / Embody me." Gone to the

20. cf. Isa 55.

limits of our longing, wanting to put into language that which is beyond all language, theopoetics is a way to respond “Yes” to the words that I dimly hear: a way to sing praises to the Lord and offer up laments without trying to force a response from God.

Theopoetics invites, it does not demand. In giving voice to our hopes and fears in a way we know to be inherently limited and lacking, we embrace that we too are limited and lacking and that we will do the best we can with what we have. The reason to entertain the guest of the poetic in theological discourse is because without it we fall short of fully honoring our embodied and finite nature, our limitedness besides God’s infinity. Our human being is finite, and is therefore incapable of fully enclosing—or disclosing—the infinite. To attempt to deny this or to try and force it to happen does not result in a perfect, infinity-capturing theological articulation, but in a God-flattening depiction.

I believe that we do indeed “dwell poetically on the earth,” and we are yet clay-footed creatures whose lives are beautifully unsorted portfolios of onionskin, palimpsest, and meaning. I also believe that God is simultaneously the catalyst of those words that we carry, and the most eager audience of our songs and scraps of poem. It is precisely because of our inability to fully grasp God that there is cause to continually renew our cries of praise and lament. The limits of my longing include a desire to name a God that we know we cannot fully name, and a desire to articulate how it is that God moves in the world when there is no certain way to know that movement. And yet, even without certainty, we can put words to our experience and hope, being open to hear the hopes and experiences of others. This listening, an attention to intention and receiving the articulation and sense of the other, is a cornerstone of Karmen MacKendrick’s work in the history of philosophy and theology.

Remaining secure in knowledge of what the world signifies, we will have no idea, and no way to discern, what strangeness might arise before any of our senses. But when we listen to another person, we listen to the call, not only of her words, but also of the world to which those words call us and in which those words respond: the world in which they have their sense, the praise into which they join. We try to hear the sense of her faith—not the list of beliefs, but the desires and delights, voiced in praises and laments, which give sense to her world—but the only way to try to hear this is to suspend the presumptions that underpin

our usual understandings. . . . Fidelity reads signs in light of desire: the world is sacramental not simply insofar as it "is," but as it is read; in the voice of praise we not only hear, but echo, in paying attention. We listen not only for another's web of meaning, but also for the astonishment of other desires.  

What MacKendrick offers is a tantalizing re-conception of theology as a form of seduction, as an extended love poem and an act of mutual, public courting between theologians and God. In allowing ourselves to be open to how the world calls out to God and by being willing to host whatever "strangeness that might arise before any of our senses," we prepare ourselves more fully to be caught up in God's invitation. Viewed this way, as the natural, open-ended, human response to God's desire, theopoetics asserts that the "imperfection" of human language about God is not something against which we must struggle, but something in which we can rejoice! That is, "the incomplete, finite nature of words may be something other than a flaw: it may correspond exactly to what words do and even ought to do, which is not merely show us answers, but also to keep drawing us into questions."  

I am reminded of the difference between a wedding and a marriage, of the moment of public witness that is the wedding itself, and the years of love-building and life-making that it marks the beginning of. Is the wedding itself a perfect symbol of what is to come? No. And . . . it is how we mark that something more is on the horizon. We affirm the couple, form community around them, and remind them that there is a great—and joyous/trying—work to be done. What MacKendrick asserts is that our articulations are symbols of what is to come and they mark the advent of eternally-arriving horizons of hope and struggle.

In her call for a deep listening, MacKendrick asks us to prepare for the strange and unexpected, asks us to accept that that which we have known may not be all that there is. She asks us to "listen" to the world, to receive it not just as it "is," but also in the way that others see it, how they read it, how it calls out to them. Implicit in this conception is an understanding and acceptance of multiplicity, and an awareness that what ought be sought is not some single, smooth, systematic articulation of reality and God, but a rough, textured, polyphony of cries, songs, and praises. This should be familiar to the Christian as when the Holy Spirit

descended in Pentecost, and its flame came to rest upon each of the heads gathered with Peter, there was not a sudden shift to one, Godly, language, but rather the ability for each to understand each though many tongues were spoken.  

Those gathered were not given a new language for the sake of talking about God, they were given the gift of hearing that all could speak in their own way. Because MacKendrick sees the world as full of a multiplicity of signs that affirm God’s possible presence, she realizes that she must then accept that it is the whole world that points to God, not only the things we like or call “good.”

The efforts to disentangle beauty and destitution, enticement and fear, joy and sorrow are also efforts to tidy the sacramental promise back into a contract fulfilled and finalized and kept: to read simple signs that inform us of a clearly defined divine entity, ideally one in which power is neatly divorced from vulnerability, one we can praise without lament. Much, probably most, of Christianity does just this, but it thus takes the sacramental firmly out of the world thus rendering the promise unsigned, the word invisible. If we want to remain in the world that is, if we really want any sense of the sacramental, we are recalled to attention . . .

The world and the other, destitution and beauty, call; they do not impose with the ineluctably of logic or physics. They call to desire to attend, to faith to say the strange too: the strangeness of discerning divinely. If we accept the responsibility of response to the call, it is not simple joy that follows; it is rather the far more complicated joys entangled in the passing of time, joys that fight against our own immense capacity for inattention and self-absorption.  

It strikes me that what MacKendrick is doing is a kind of unintentional re-framing and resolution of Feuerbach’s critique of Christianity, using a novel blend of Continental philosophy and Catholicism. In The Essence of Christianity, Feuerbach takes issue with claims that it is possible to know that there is a God just because revelation says as much. He then cleverly points out that if it were so clear then the theologian would “make himself a negation,” no longer necessary because anyone

27. Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity, 206.
could see clearly that God existed. This doesn’t happen—says Feuerbach’s imagined theologian—because God’s full nature can never be revealed as itself: it can only come to us via human reading and reason, or it would be too infinite and astounding to be understood. As such, we need to keep mining Scripture to further understand God. Feuerbach points out that this formulation of revelation sets up an internal incoherence.

If God cannot reveal the entirety of the Godhead to humanity directly, but has to arrive via revelation and reason (which itself cannot even disclose the fullness of God), then what is termed interpretation of “revelation” is really just a self-enclosed cycle: humanity is merely revealing humanity to itself. That is, the “secret of theology is . . . anthropology.”

This kind of reasoning allows Feuerbach to conclude that religion is “nothing else than the consciousness of the infinity of the consciousness,” or “human nature reflected, mirrored in itself,” and that “God” is just the projection of a collective assemblage of human hopes and ideals. Put another way, “God springs out of a feeling of a want,” and therefore God is merely a “conscious or an unconscious need.” On several points MacKendrick and Feuerbach agree, but they differ wildly in their use of those points and the conclusion they reach using them.

MacKendrick whole-heartedly agrees that revelation isn’t usefully conceived of as “proof” of God’s existence either: no more so than love letters to the beloved prove that there is a beloved. “But,” I can imagine MacKendrick saying, “it does pretty convincingly show that love, desire, and longing exist.” This longing and desire is the focus for her, a “conscious need” worth examining, not because of what is needed, but because there is a need at all.

Citing the influence of Deleuze and Guattari, MacKendrick offers that “the subject, who is lacking, is drawn by that desire/desirable object outside herself, but the desire is that drawing power, not the lack within the one drawn.” Whereas Feuerbach claims that “God springs out of a feeling of a want,” I again imagine MacKendrick saying, “No. That is theology you are thinking of. God is that which allows for the wanting.”

28. Ibid., 207.
29. Ibid., 3.
30. Ibid., 63.
31. Ibid., 57.
32. “Desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object . . . Desire and its object are one and the same thing” (Deleuze, Anti-Oedipus, 28).
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The infinitely iterable “why” of theologian and child is grounded in a dual amazement: at the sheer fact of somethingness, on the one hand, and at the nothingness that dis-encloses[.] . . . that the world is astonishing, wonder generating. It astonishes when we attend, and what is wondrous about it is what draws our attention. Absence is mysterious, enticing, but so too is what there is; it is in this interplay that the world opens up to a query that never intends to get to the bottom on it, for which more is always possible.34

There is some marked measure of both familiarity and transcendence in the Divine, a compelling call that seems to move me into action, not because of a promise or command, but because of an almost-heard whisper, or the insinuation of a curve or line housed in the twilight, which we would not have seen were it not for our listening and attention. Indeed, MacKendrick is very clear on this point: the Divine does not ever give itself over to us fully. That, she says, would be to confuse the seductive with the pornographic, to claim that “the elusive, veiled, and glimpsed” is the same as the “fully presented, obscenely detailed image with nothing to offer that is not already given.”35 Her emphasis is not on satiation or satisfaction, but on desire. On seduction.

Via MacKendrick, theopoetics can be seen as a way to mark and embody our desire to draw closer to God. Just as the satiation of desire in the beloved does not end the desire for the beloved, but draws us even closer, so too can our spiraling and failing words momentarily bring us both a measure of joy and—when reflected upon—a desire for more. That being said, the satiation in its moment is the entirety of the desire and focus. It is impossible to enter fully into the abandonment and selflessness of material and sexual satisfaction while conceiving of the act as a means for some other ends. It is not the case that one ever cries aloud in ecstasy, “Oh this moment is sublime because I will later be drawn closer to this beloved!” Theopoetics unites with MacKendrick in this tension between being fully present to a mystical moment and the desire to have that moment mean something more. In every instance though, she resists the move to attempt to fully disclose—and perhaps enclose—the Divine, an act which she says “aims at a complete unveiling and equally complete satisfaction, leaving nothing to desire.”36 Too often theology “tells the

34. MacKendrick, Divine Enticement, 53.
35. Ibid., 28.
36. Ibid., 29.
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whole story, closing the narrative," when instead it could be crafted so as to "draw forth desire with an eye to continuing so to draw, not with some other goal or telos in mind." MacKendrick invites us to endlessly seek after an utterly illusive and wholly desirable God.

While theological discourse is too varied to fully comply with the totalizing categorization of "self-enclosing," the methodological orientation of academic theology—whether systematic, constructive, practical, or contextual—is often toward a better understanding of God and God's movement in the world. Alternatively, the emphasis of theopoetics is not a fixed "goal" as such, but the cultivation of a disposition of hospitality toward God, of a spiritual sensibility that invites the possibility of the infinite into the stuff of everyday life. Indeed, although von Balthasar does not appear anywhere in Divine Enticement, MacKendrick perfectly parallels his claims that "every worldly being is epiphanic," able to reveal both the Being of the created world, the beautiful light in which all things show themselves to us as fascinating, mysterious, and worthy of exploration," and also "God the Creator, the glorious light in which all things show themselves as inherently good, mysterious, and worthy of redemptive love." Thus, what I want to suggest is that even MacKendrick's "theology as seduction" position, which at first might seem radical, is—just as Kearney says of anatheism—"simply a new name for something very old and... constantly recurring in both the history of humanity and each life..." The cultivation of an endless love for an endless Spirit that calls us all forth into that which is to come is not a new idea, but it too may benefit from a renewed articulation.

What MacKendrick has done is to re-open the conversation regarding the validity of natural or general revelation, but in such a way that the "reading" of experience is done on even terms with the reading of Scripture. Whether it is the Bible or the immaculate row of a summer flower bed, she asks us to give over to possibility, give up fixity, and yet nevertheless continue to sing, cry, and make propositions. She asks this because she is in agreement with Kearney: "without the abandonment of accredited certainties we remain inattentive to the advent of the Strange; we ignore those moments of sacred enfleshment when the future erupts through the continuum of time." Theopoetics is a method of encour-

37. Ibid.
40. Ibid., 7.
aging exactly those moments when the strange reveals itself as familiar, when the gardener is seen as Jesus, and there is some momentary realization, eruption, and momentary in-breaking of the kingdom of God.

Whereas theology without poetics might be construed as “fully presented, obscenely detailed images with nothing to offer that is not already given,” ever since Hopper, theopoetics has been envisioned as shared expressions of spiritual experience that “evoke resonances and recognitions.”41 Via analogy, if theopoetics at its best encourages an ever-deepening desire for, and relationship with, God, then scientistic theology at its worse can tend toward making the Word a site of sexual objectification. And yet, once again, this seems too clear of a dichotomy, too clear of a division. Who wants to enter into a relationship which is only ever endless desire without consummation? MacKendrick also sees this problem with the analogy, and answers directly, citing Catherine Keller:

Theological truth . . . cannot be captured in propositions, no matter how correct. But neither does it happen without propositions. . . . Theology, not the truth it seeks, comprises a shifting set of propositions, frayed and porous at the edges. . . . To propose is not to impose, but to invite. A proposition may be more like an erotic appeal than a compelling argument: we get propositioned!42

What MacKendrick suggests via Keller is a methodological parallel to Kearney’s anatheism and Wilder’s theopoetics. As anatheism is neither atheism, theism, nor some synthesis of the two; and as Wilder asserted that Scripture was to be taken “neither literally nor symbolically,” but theopoetically; so too does MacKendrick conceive of theology as seductive. It is neither rigid nor without form, but a kind of writing “at the very edge of writing’s possibility,”43 a kind of writing that “pulls itself apart even as one pulls it all together.”44 MacKendrick’s articulation of seductive theology is also the articulation of theopoetics: a response to the intersection of the apophatic and mystical drive toward a reverent silence in which we accept that nothing produced from our humanity will ever fully capture the divine, and the cataphatic and cognitive desire

42. MacKendrick, Divine Enicement, 41.
43. MacKendrick, Fragmentation and Memory, 2.
44. Ibid., 6.
to cry, sing, scream, and explain the various joys, glories, and terrors of the world.

MacKendrick is perhaps simply reminding us of something already captured in the wisdom of the Hebrew language, as recorded in Genesis. Knowing God can be less about being able to control and name the experience and more like the kind of knowing when Adam knew (יָדָא) Eve, and she conceived. Perhaps instead of conceptualizing theological discourse as an attempt to grasp and hold God, we might conceive of it as touching God, as tracing the hollow of the Divine's collar bone not to clasp and claim, but to feel where we end and it begins. Theology as seduction reminds us that when we give in to our desire for fixity and objectification we may be closing off the possibility of a deeper desire. We allow ourselves to lose God behind some prop cardboard cut-out of God, mistaking the menu for the meal, and forgetting that music is the stuff of sound and motion, not marks of ink on paper.

I titled this section “(A) Seducing God” in an attempt to capture MacKendrick's both/and gesture. It is both the case that (1) God is a seducing God (if the Divine is a reality, and yet we only apprehend the barest of God's traces ... then what a tease God is!) and that (2) we often try to seduce God, working to make God come closer to us or trying to find out what God needs to let us move closer ourselves. There is a kind of resonant libration in MacKendrick's position, an intellectual oscillation between cataphasis and apophasis, word and silence, immanence and transcendence. We desire to both simultaneously be drawn toward God and to take pleasure in the desire before contact, allowing it to last infinitely. As MacKendrick puts it, "the enticement of the infinite is precisely an enticement without end ...."45 This tension, this eternally vibrant undulation is masterfully depicted in MacKendrick and is a vital mark of the theopoetic as well.

An Enticing Wager

While much of Christian theology has functioned to mine both testaments for various ethical exhortations, seeking to uncover or interpret directives by which the Christian might most properly live her life, theopoetics invites us deeply into the register of the aesthetic. This is not to

say that theopoetics does not engage ethical concerns, but rather that its method does not lend itself to issuing a diktat. When Scriptures are approached with a theopoetic perspective they are “released from the fate of being either a rather muddled and frequently inaccurate history or pedantic and often puzzling prescription.” Moreover, rather than simply being a freeing hermeneutic for the reading of Scripture, theopoetics can be the lens for not just sacred texts, but also for “theophanies of the simple and familiar.” Theopoetics is an invitation to give more time and attention to reading the world and word.

The power of the poetic for theology is not in the exercise of certain aesthetic skills but in the intention to draw people into an engagement besides reason. One does not come to be a poet through mere mastery and appreciation of technique. That person becomes Kierkegaard’s critic. A poet is she who has developed those skills and yet has never let them fully dominate her, turning again and again to the world and the limits of her longing, allowing her cries and songs to be put into words: poetry as distilled life. To the extent that an individual has been taught that poetry is a certain kind of form with certain rules that uses certain literary devices to produce certain meaning through metaphor and simile, theopoetics is nothing more than a rather staid genre-study. On the other hand, when the notion of poetry is not slavishly tied to technique, but rather is taught as “imaginary gardens with real toads in them,” there is something being cultivated that is of use to the theologian. The theologian with a poetic sensibility must not write with a blind eye to her longings and the world which calls out to be noticed, calls out and whispers, reminding us of God.

The theopoetic theologian does not search revelation or theology as if they are manuals to success from which doctrine and ethics can be wrung out and extracted. This may be important to human thriving and flourishing, but it is the work of ethicists, law-makers, and managers, not those entrusted with “drawing forth desire with an eye to continuing so

46. A number of writers have explicitly addressed the connection between theopoetics and ethics. See especially Wilder’s Theopoetic, 23–27; Guynn’s “Theopoetics and Social Change”; and Gouizuta’s “U.S. Hispanic Popular Catholicism as Theopoetics.” Each of these are taken up in chapter 8’s section, “Spiritual Formation and Service.”

47. MacKendrick, Divine Enticement, 203.


49. Moore, Complete Poems, 267.
to draw."\textsuperscript{50} Theopoetics does not supplant theology as another, replacement discipline, but functions as an insistent reminder that if we are truly trying to develop an invitational stance to God we must be willing to entertain the strange and uncertain, hoping that at times, that which reveals itself will in turn invite us in with suggestions of more to come.

Scripture seduces in its promise of the secret of signs: it promises truth itself, and it tells of the materialization of that truth. It tells in words we know through our senses the story of word and flesh, speaking and world. And because bodies and words alike arouse and sustain our desires, so too, so much more, does the body of a text about the body that somehow is the book, the text that tells us how meaningful the sensuousness of our world is . . . \textsuperscript{51}

If theology is only to be considered as "nothing but abstract propositions about God's truth presented to the intellect for its purely cognitive assent,"\textsuperscript{52} then I am both uninterested in theology as a discipline and believe that theology is not of much use to the church. If, however, it can be acknowledged that theology "has always been, at its height, a spiritual activity,"\textsuperscript{53} then what counts as theological cannot be solely intellectual or cognitive: we were created as finite, embodied beings and our theology should reflect that. Theology is not merely an exercise of the mind, but an expression of faith that serves best when it strikes us as true beyond more than the intellect, when it discloses its truth bodily, does more justice to the symbolic and prerational, and ceaselessly evokes "the sensuousness of our world."

Theopoetics seduces us, leading us away from what is certain while it entices us with what might be,\textsuperscript{54} awakening and arousing an awareness for the minute particulars which might not quite fit within our current schema for the world. Eventually, though, as we shift our attention from the theopoetic text, or the anatheistic moment, we will be brought back again to where we were before we began, required to confront the reality that there are experiences that simply refuse to comply with our

\begin{itemize}
  \item MacKendrick, \textit{Divine Enticement}, 29.
  \item Ibid., 203.
  \item Mongrain, "Von Balthasar's Way," 57.
  \item Von Balthasar, \textit{Epilogue}, 121.
  \item The etymologies of "seduce" and "enticer" are very interesting in this regard: (Latin: se- "aside, away" + ducere "to lead") as well as (Old French: enticier "to stir up [fire]").
\end{itemize}
vision and hope for the world. Whether through their abject horror and
atrocity, through their category-shattering beauty and awe, or the sudden
profundity of the mundane, there are experiences that lead us away from
what we thought was sure and we must reassess. Then, arriving again
at the site of our convictions, which look different now in the light of
our enticement, we come to that “primordial wager,” the “reopening of
that space where we are free to choose between faith or nonfaith.” This is
theology cast as a spiritual activity, a plunge into a space of recalibration
and a request that we make the wager as a wager, understanding that it is
exactly because we enter into belief unsure that it becomes faith.

Taking Inventory

Throughout Way to Water an attempt has been made to note how each
of the authors considered has contributed to an understanding of the
effect of theopoetics. Methodologically this followed Marshall McLuhan’s
enjoiner that, when investigating a form of media, one should begin by
cataloging its effects, working backwards to arrive upon its nature only
after seeing what it does. Before moving on to consider how Kearney
and MacKendrick assist in the articulation of the nature and function of
theopoetics, let us consider the effects which have already been noted.

Chapter 1: Leads us into a new language where theologies are
not rigid, logical assertions, but ecstatic expressions that plunge
us into an experience of mystery and a primal being; a theology
that is “not theo-logic but theo-poiesis.”

Chapter 2: Bridges the fractured, chaotic, and fleshy experience
of life with the oftentimes removed and “ossified” attempt to create “scientific texts” out of theological articulation.

Chapter 3: Re-opens the senses and affirms the role of the body
in theological discourse, encouraging dialogue and reminding
us that the tongue—that primary organ of discourse—is for lan-
guage, yes, but also for taste, and for sex.

Chapter 4: Destabilizes and decenters, seeking out the “vari-
ous powerful contenders of an alleged ‘orthodoxy’ of content,
method, and direction of thought,” and revealing “the various
deep-lying, multiple voices hidden underneath.”
Chapter 5: Causes a cyclical motion that critiques and deconstructs any system that attempts to self-enclose or claim eternality, and—in the wake of that constant deconstruction—puts forth a new thing, a new try, a new response to what might be God.

Having considered the literature of the majority of the major theopoetics thinkers in the academy, this chapter explored Kearney and MacKendrick, whose work provided key theological understandings for “enticement” and “wager,” ideas that seem in resonance with previously noted theopoetic effects. With all this in place I can now consider a definition that attempts to succinctly and evocatively capture a sense of each of the effects cataloged. To this end, I propose Definition 1: theopoetics is the roughing up of our ideas of God through an enticing wager on God, the results of which are at least dialogue and at best an encounter with the Divine. If MacKendrick is correct in her framing of theology as seduction, this definition should feel somewhat underwhelming: we have arrived at a completed culmination, and so the enticing promise of that fulfillment has come to a close. This destination seems less that what we’d imagined it to be.

Yet, I do not claim that everything addressed thus far easily collapses into that phrase—indeed, what an ironic gesture that would be! What I am suggesting is that, as a shorthand, that phrase is a useful pointer toward the important markers of the theopoetic. Theopoetics “roughs up” those patterns of thought and naming that lead us into objectivizing our experience of the divine and lessening the potential for the acceptance of future experience. It does this by means of a wager that if we hang up as many of our preconceptions as possible and invite in the stranger we may be greeted with news that Sarah will bear a son, that the impossible will spill over into the real. We accept this wager and make the invitation because we are courting God, because though what we usually experience is but a mere trace of the Divine, it is nonetheless enough to compel us forward into desire. Even if the wager is “lost,” and nothing responds to our invitation, we’ll at least have the story of the time we thought we heard a knock. Then, in sharing that story we may find that others have their own stories of knocks in the night, and perhaps it is the case that the wager wasn’t lost like we thought it was . . . .

I think about theopoetics like a gyroscope, whose massive moving center is the means by which the object as whole can be kept upright.
Our tendency, where God is concerned, is to overemphasize a particular quality of divinity at the exclusion of other aspects in what I understand as a misguided attempt to name and claim God. The result in every circumstance is an off-balanced worldview: too rigid or too permissive, too individualistic or too exclusive. Instead, I am proposing that theopoetics is always in motion, stable because it is in motion. When we say “yes,” we invite in the other of the text and the world with a hermeneutic of humility, wanting to speak out against injustice and for righteousness, but also accepting that God might well be calling us to move toward better words and ways of seeing. So perhaps, in writing words that are already unsaying themselves I’ll offer instead—or additionally—Definition 2: theopoetics is believing in a manner akin to the way the evening primrose flowers: bold and fleeting in the dusk, new blossoms bursting forth only as tomorrow nears, always dancing with the setting of the sun.

To the extent that theopoetics can provide a way in the wilderness that leads to Living Water, it is because there was a path beyond the desert all along, a narrow ridge that remained hidden when we thought we were looking for steel cables and spires to save us. Theopoetics may indeed be a bridge between the aesthetically experiential and the systematically theological, but if so, it is certainly not a bridge in the sense of a constructed and lumbering artifact built mid-desert and destructive to the fragile systems of life already present there. The bridge of theopoetics is as much an interior discovery of a path as it is the creation of a theological method that provides a possible way out of the desert of criticism. What I want is a way toward water. I do not need an artiface of contrivance and engineering if it does not give me that.

When we cry, “I believe, help my unbelief!” perhaps the inflection should be such that we are lamenting our belief, saddened by how shallow it is, how much it limits our experience. Perhaps we might want to entertain that it is not, “I really do (and want to) believe, help rid me of unbelief!” but rather, “I believe and that believing stops me from seeing the fullness of what is in front of me. Help encourage my unbelief so that it breaks that which keeps me from seeing what is truly here!” or perhaps even, “I persist in employing a strong metaphysics that objectivizes thinking and speaking such that I can only see what has already been said, help me move away from abstraction toward experience, from theology to theo-poetic.” Perhaps. And perhaps a better way would be one that is itself endlessly spinning, as in Definition 3:
[Theopoetics is] an acceptance of cognitive uncertainty regarding the Divine, an unwillingness to attempt to unduly banish that uncertainty, and an emphasis on action and creative articulation regardless. It also suggests that when the dust has settled after things have been said and done in the name of God, the reflection and interpretation to be done ought to be grounded in dialogue and enacted with a hermeneutic of hospitality and humility, an acceptance of cognitive uncertainty regarding the Divine, an unwillingness to attempt to unduly banish that uncertainty . . .

As a Christian thinker, what is most compelling about theopoetics for me is its insistence upon the incarnational, not just in content, but in method. Theopoetics accepts the limitedness of humanity and affirms that there is a possible power in our words without having to pretend otherwise. It is a language of mutuality, dually calling us all forth toward God as poets and readers of this world. It is the language of theology spoken in the accent of someone whose first tongue is not academic but sensual, whose dialect betrays an origin of flesh, and whose tone suggests that at any moment we might be caught up in some grand dance.

Why should we encourage the development of poetic sensibilities in theological discourse? Because we were all—even theologians and pastors—made to dance, not merely think of dancing. Because when we close our eyes there is a gripping duende to the music of this world, which makes us want to cry and make love. Why theopoetics? Because I believe we owe it to ourselves and to the hope of our God to live and write and pray as if the world was a gift and each other a reminder of that which gives.