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GOD MAKING: AN ESSAY IN THEOPOETIC IMAGINATION

For Bill Richardson SJ, in Memoriam

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ABSTRACT
This paper looks at the phenomenon of theopoetic art. The word theopoetic dates back to the Patristic authors—referring to the making divine of the human and the making human of the divine—and has been radically revived as part of the recent religious turn in continental phenomenology and hermeneutics (Keller, Caputo, Nancy, Kearney). Looking at an example of religious art, Andrei Rublev’s Trinity, the author traces the development of the idea of “God making” from Jewish and Christian literature to contemporary debates on the relationship between the secular and the sacred.

Creation is a poem.

(Errnesto Cardinal, Cosmic Canticle)

Why is “making” considered a sacred activity for gods and mortals alike? Making something out of nothing. Making something in the image of something else. Creators making creatures while creatures in turn make their creators. Making out, making up, making and remaking worlds in one's image and likeness. In shapes and songs, paintings and poems, dreams and crafts. From the beginning to the end of time. One great game of holy imagination played with hands, mouths, ears and eyes. With bodies and souls. Art as divine-human interplay, again and again.

Theopoetics names how the divine (theos) manifests itself as making (poiesis). The term dates back to the early centuries, meaning both the making human of the divine and the making divine of humanity. As the poet scholar, Ephrem of Syria, wrote: “He gave us divinity, we gave Him humanity.” Or as Athenasius said in the fourth century: “God became human so that the human could become divine.” Catherine Keller puts it succinctly: “The term theopoetics finds its ancestor in the ancient Greek theopoiesis. As poeisis means making or creation, so theopoiesis gets rendered as God-making or becoming divine.”

Theopoetics carries an attendant claim that first creation calls for second creation—re-creation or creation again (ana): a double act where humanity and divinity collaborate in the coming of the Kingdom. This play of recreation goes by the name of “ana-theism.”
Most wisdom traditions involve an original story of creation—or cosmogony—which serves as paradigm for their subsequent spiritual narratives. In what follows I will draw mainly on Abrahamic and Hellenic narratives to trace a short history of theopoetics before illustrating the notion of sacred play with reference to the work of Andrei Rublev. My overall suggestion is that certain expressions of artistic imagination offer ways of responding to the call of creation which precedes and exceeds the abstract systems of philosophy and theology. Theopoetic imagination gives flesh to word and word to flesh. It works both ways.

1. Theopoiesis

a) The use of the term poiein—to make, shape or form—occurs often in the Bible in relation to divine creation. This theopoetic motif features from the start in Genesis (1:1, 1:7, 1:27) where we read, famously, that “In the beginning God created [epoiesen] heaven and earth” (1:1); or, again, “Let us make [poiesomen] man” (1:26). In Proverbs 8 (22–26), we witness the great primal scene of God’s creation [poiesis] of Wisdom:

The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was formed long ages ago, at the very beginning, when the world came to be [poiesis]. When there were no watery depths, I was given birth, when there were no springs overflowing with water; before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given birth, before he made [epoiesai] the world or its fields or any of the dust of the earth. … Then I was constantly at his side. I was filled with delight day after day rejoicing always in his presence. (Proverbs 8:22–29)

In the The Wisdom of Solomon, the formative power of Sophia is even more explicit:

God of my fathers and Lord of mercy, who by your Word [logos] made [poiesas] all things, and through your Wisdom [sophia] framed man … (9:1–2)

These early panegyrics of the divine play of Sophia echo the first book of Genesis where God creates humans in his own image and likeness. The original Hebrew term—yzr—plays on the mirroring between: (a) the divine Creator (yotzer) who creates (yazar); and (b) the human power to form and shape (yetzer) according to the secret alphabet of creation (yetsirah).² It is telling that the Lord did not make anything on the seventh day of genesis leaving it free for humans to complete. The unfinished Sabbath is a gap calling for perpetual recreation—in imagination and action. And Adam and Eve, as first creatures shaped from earth (adamah), deployed their power of “good imagination” (yezer hatov) to engender a human race capable of fashioning a kingdom in the image of their God.

This play of mutual recreation between human and divine is what we call theopoetics. It involves creatures co-creating with their Creator. In this view, God co-depends on us so that the promissory word of Genesis may be realized in embodied figures of time and space, image and flesh, art and action. Or as Thomas Mann aptly observes in Joseph and His Brothers: “God created for himself a mirror in his own image … as a means of learning about himself. Man is a result of God’s curiosity about himself.”³ But greater than curiosity was desire. For in forming the human, God bore witness to a gap within divinity, a sabbatical crack or fracture from which the life-drive of eros could emerge as desire for its other. God created because he desired a playmate. Someone to consort with, as we know from Hosea and the Song of Songs. Or as the contemporary Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel
Levinas, put it: “Dieu a créé l’homme car on s’amuse mieux à deux.” Creation is a love affair.

Theopoetics is theoerotics.

It is important to repeat that both Genesis and Proverbs declare that God is relation. Not a self-subsisting remote substance but a relationship between two—Yahweh and Sophia, Elohim and Adam—through the medium of a third (the breath of language). Indeed, the fact that the Creator is also called by a plural name, Elohim, itself reveals that God is originally a community rather than some autonomous Supreme Being—“Let us make man.” Divine creating is divine speaking from the start, as evidenced in the Hebraic word play on the first and last letters of the alphabet in Genesis 1:1(4). The first word of Genesis is dialogue not monologue and this is echoed in the opening of St John’s Gospel which declares that “In the beginning was the word [logos] and the word was with God.” The preposition “with” (pros) here actually means “toward” or “before,” revealing a relation of face-to-face or person-to-person (prosopon): a dynamic liaison which mirrors the inaugural scene of Sophia (a feminine noun) playing before the face of the Lord (Proverbs 8). These Jewish and Christian claims to the primacy of relation between persons is later reinforced in the later Patristic figure of creation as a trinitarian dance (perichoresis). We shall return to this central point in our commentary of Rublev’s icon of the perichoresis below.

In Jewish Scripture, the leitmotif of theopoiesis extends well beyond Genesis and the Books of Wisdom to the Psalms and Prophets. Think, for example, of Isaiah 29:16 where the human creature is described as the clay of the potter, the handicraft of the craftsman, the art of the artist. Or, again, recall the Rabbinical and Kabbalistic commentaries on the making of Golems—human-like figures shaped from clay according to the Book of Creation (Sefir Yetzerah). One such version tells of how Abraham and his teacher, Seth, were invited by God to study the Sefir Yetzerah for three years “until they knew how to create a world.” But lest they succumb to the temptation of idolatry—like Enosh who worshipped his own clay image—humans were admonished not to replace God’s creation but only to repeat it—so as better to appreciate the power of divine making. It was good to experiment with the divine letters of creation as art, exploration, invention, but not to actually substitute God with an idol. If one yielded to the temptation of literal imitation, the Golem risked becoming a monster who turns on its creator. And so, to prevent such idolatrous destruction, the makers of Golems were exhorted to remove the “shem” (a parchment spelling emeth, meaning “alive”) from their creature’s lips so as to respect the difference between human and divine creation. The point was for humans to participate in divine yetzerah/poiesis in the right manner—namely: abiding by the Way (Torah) of the Creator (Yotzer)—rather than set themselves up as mini-Gods in their own right. According to Jewish wisdom, then, we are not divine makers but human makers—finite creatures called to collaborate with God in the completion of Creation.

In the later Christian tradition we find similar calls to cooperate in the coming of the kingdom by joining the Trinitarian dance of perichoresis, thereby repeating the original act of genesis. Such a collaborative theopoetics between the divine Logos and human action seeks to follow Christ the God-Man in completing the “New Creation” (Galatians 6:15). We read in Ephesians 2:10 that “we are the handiwork [poiema] created by Jesus Christ for good works … that we should live in them.” As such, Christianity may be understood as the historical-cultural task of carrying on and carrying out this “poem.” Whence the notion of Christ as Lord of the Dance and Supreme Artist—echoed in the vibrant Christian culture of image-making both in the iconography of Eastern Orthodoxy and the religious art of the
Italian humanist Renaissance and after. We will return to a discussion of this iconographic culture in Part III and ask the related question of how divine poiesis relates to human praxis.

b) It is worth noting briefly here that when, in the Greek philosophical tradition, Aristotle seeks a term for the divine mind, he chooses nous poietikos—the mind that “makes.” And in his Poetics (Peri Poietikes)—though now talking of human not divine making—Aristotle describes poetic creation as a mirroring-emplotting (mimesis-mythos) of life: an art of recreation involving, in Paul Ricoeur’s words, a radical “configuring” of our world. The term poiesis occurs in the very first line of Aristotle’s classic text and regularly thereafter, referring to the transformation of everyday haphazard events (one thing after—meta—another) into a meaningful configured plot (one thing because of—dia—another). And it is by means of such creative re-making of our experience that we achieve healing catharsis: namely a poetic distillation of our basic drives of “pity” (eleos) and “fear” (phobos) into compassion and serenity. Poetics, in short, involves a “creative redescription” of experience which replays our actions and sufferings in a storied way that issues in the pleasure and wisdom of art. Configured by the poetic work we, the audience, refigure our own lived existence. We refine our passions (pathemata) and are invited to become, in Aristotle’s terms, more serene and compassionate citizens of the polis.

c) Before concluding our preliminary note on theopoetics, let me recite what I consider to be a telling example from modern religious literature. Gerard Manley Hopkins was a Jesuit poet who combined a Scotist-Aristotelian aesthetics of singularity (haecceitas) with a Biblical-Ignatian belief in the inherent divinity of “all things.” He describes the moment of literary epiphany as a recreation of creation; or as he puts it—an art of “aftering and seconding,” a motion of “over and overing” which replays secular experience as sacred. Hopkins speaks of a retrieval of past time that, like Proust, repeats forward, proffering new life to memory, giving a future to the past. This poetic revisiting involves a detour of distance and disenchantment after which we may return to our first experience in a new light, in a second naivete, over and over. Freud calls this temporal retrieval nachtraglichkeit; and although he is speaking of “trauma,” the same après coup structure is operative in poetic “wonder”: both terms come from a “wound” of shock or surprise which explodes our normal sense of time and space. In Hopkins’ work, this wounding expressed itself in a series of dark sonnets which prefaced his poetic epiphanies:

“I wake and feel the fell of dark not day …”
“O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there …”

Traversing such dark nights of the soul, the poet returns to a celebration of ordinary things as micro-theophanies:

Flesh fade, and mortal trash
Fall to the residuary worm; world’s wildfire, leave but ash:
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond

A Catholic author, Hopkins performs a sacramental reimagining of everyday experience. But this notion of holy repetition is not confined to any other particular religion. It extends to any poetic movement of returning to “God after God.” God again after the loss of God.
As in the replay of a child’s game, “gone, back again.” “Fort/Da.” We learn young that what disappears as literal comes back again as figural—that is, as sign and symbol, as a second presence in and through absence. And by symbol here we do not mean untrue or unreal. The return of the lost one—in the case of religion the lost God—may well be the most “real presence,” theopoetically speaking. It may in fact be a more powerful and moving presence precisely because of the detour through separation and letting go. This involves a new notion of time—kairological rather than chronological—a time which traverses and reverses time, as in the Eucharistic formula: “we do this in memory of Him until he comes again.” Theopoiesis is about coming back again (ana)—creating again time after time. In a word: ana-poiesis. Theopoetics is anapoetics.

2. Anatheism

“Ana” is a prefix defined in the Shorter Oxford English dictionary as: “Up in space or time; back again, anew.” So understood, the term supports the deeper and broader sense of “after” contained in the expression “God after God.” Ana opens a semantic field involving notions of retrieving, revisiting, reiterating, repeating. But, as already mentioned, repeating forwards not backwards. It is not about regressing nostalgically to some prelapsarian past. It is a question, rather, of coming back “afterwards” in order to move forward again. Reculer pour mieux sauter!

So it is in this sense that we use the term ana-theism as a “returning to God after God”: a critical hermeneutic retrieval of sacred things that have passed but still bear a radical remainder, an unrealized potentiality or promise to be more fully realized in the future. In this way, ana-theism may be understood as “after-faith,” which is more than an “after-thought” or “after-affect.” After-faith is eschatological—something ultimate in the end that was already there from the beginning. And that is why the “after” of ana is also a “before.” A before that has been transposed, so to speak, into a second after. As Sophia says when she plays before the face of the Lord: “Before he made the world I was there … constantly at his side … filled with delight, rejoicing always in his presence” (Proverbs 8: 26–29). And this Hebraic sense of of ana-chrony is echoed in Jesus’ claim: “Before Abraham was I am.”

But let us be clear from the outset: anatheism is not a dialectical third term which supersedes theism and atheism in a sort of Hegelian synthesis or final resolution. True, anatheism contains a moment of atheism within itself as it does a moment of theism. Or to be more precise: anatheism pre-contains both—for it operates from a space and time before the dichotomy of atheism and theism as well as after. The double “a” of anatheism holds out the promise but not the necessity of a second affirmation once the “death of God” has done its work. But it differs radically from Hegel’s “negation of the negation,” which sees the return as an ineluctable synthesis or sublation (Aufhebung). In contrast to such a theodicy, the “ana” of theopoetics is always a wager—a risk that can go either way. It is a matter of discernment and decision on our part. A replay of wisdom, again and again. The event does not take place behind our backs, irrespective of our agency, like Hegel’s dialectic of Absolute Spirit. There is no “Ruse of Reason.” Anatheism is not some predetermined dialectic leading to a Final Totality. It is not about Upper Case Divinity. Au contraire! Anatheism has nothing to do with Alpha-Gods or Omni-Gods. It is about re-imaging—and re-living—the sacred in the “least of these.” It is lowercase from beginning to end.
Anatheism concentrates, therefore, on unrealized or suspended possibilities which are most powerfully reanimated if one also experiences a moment of a-theism; the “a-” here being a gesture of abstention, privation, withdrawal, negation. A moment which is less a matter of epistemological theory than a pre-reflective lived experience of ordinary lostness and solitude—a mood of Angst or abandon, an existential “dark night of the soul” which everyone experiences at some moment in their lives. Even Christ on the Cross or weeping for Lazarus. This privative “a” of atheism is indispensible to anatheism. But in “a-n-a” we have two As. And the second “a” is the “not” of the “not.” The yes after the no which repeats the first yes of creation. The double A-A of anatheism. A reopening to something new. A dance of twelve steps and more. After all.

So, I repeat, the ana- is not a guarantee of ineluctable rational progress. The end of religion brings us back to the beginning of religion—to a fore-time preceding the division between theism and atheism. And in this respect, we might think of John Keats’ famous definition of poetic faith as a “willing suspension of disbelief,” a returning again to Adam’s experience on the first day of creation when everything was fresh and up for grabs, when anything could happen, for better or worse. Keats calls this originary moment of not-knowing “negative capability”—“the ability to experience mystery, uncertainty and doubt, without the irritable reaching after fact and reason.” And it has echoes, I think, of Kierkegaard’s famous “leap of faith” in Fear and Trembling. A sacred repetition—not to be understood as a regression to some original position but as an originary disposition of openness to the radical incoming Other. Abraham has to lose his son as given in order to receive him back as gift; he has to abandon Isaac as possession in order to welcome him back as promise. Isaac is not Abraham’s (as extension, acquisition, property, projection); he is another’s, another, a gift of the Other (the return gift of what Kierkegaard calls the “Absolute”).

In short, theopoetic faith is a retrieval of something after you’ve lost it. It involves the repeating of the former as latter, of the earlier as later—a replay which surpasses the model of liner time as one moment succeeding another in favor of a time out of time: an epiphanic moment (Augenblick or Jetzzeit) where eternity crosses the instant. “Ana” is a prefix that seeks to capture this enigma of past-as-future, before-as-after.

To say this is not, however, to deny that ana also involves historical time. Far from it. Infinite time is in-finite, as Levinas reminds us; it traverses finite temporality and cannot exist without it. As such, ana-theism in its current manifestation does indeed coincide with a concrete historical situation that comes after the death of God, culturally, socially and intellectually. It is marked by the announcements of Nietzsche, Marx and Freud, by the atheist exposés of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the modern critique of Ideology and so on. It’s something that very much expresses a typical modern anxiety in the face of what Max Weber terms the “disenchantment” of the world, the desacralizing of society, the general malaise of the abandonment of God and loss of faith. In this sense anatheism is indeed an historical-cultural phenomenon which engages with our contemporary secular humanist culture. But not in any teleological manner, i.e. in the sense that we were ignorant and have now seen the light—that all faith was delusion and we are finally free at last! For anatheism, losing the illusion of God (as sovereign superintendent of the universe) offers the possibility of re-opening oneself to the original promise of the sacred Stranger, the absolute Other who comes as gift, call, summons, as invitation to hospitality and justice in every moment. In sum, as someone or something that was lost and forgotten by Western metaphysics—and needs to be recalled again. And here, I think, we
can move from the *historical* formulation of the anatheist question—what comes after the disappearance of God?—to the more *existential* one: how do we experience this today in our concrete lived existence?

This is why anathéism calls not for new theories as such but for new “examples” and “testimonies” of the anatheist moment in art and action. It is why anathéism needs theopoetics: scriptural, literary, visual portraits of lived abandonment and disillusionment followed by a turning (what Socrates called *periagoge*, what Augustine called *conversio*). The negative moment of letting go is, let me repeat, indispensable to a proper appreciation of anathéism. Without it we have cheap grace—God as comforting illusion, quick fix, opium of the people. I often think here of Dostoyevsky’s sense of faith through radical alienation (“true faith comes forth from the crucible of doubt”) or the “dark night of the soul” powerfully depicted in the mystical poetry of John of the Cross’s or Gerard Manly Hopkins, mentioned above; or of Christ’s radical sense of abandonment on the Cross. These are all concrete moments of emptying (*kenosis*) which open the possibility of a return to the inaugural moment of anathéism: the wager of yes to the Stranger. This primal wager is first and foremost an existential one—not a purely logical one à la Pascal (which is more a wager of knowledge than of flesh, epistemological rather than ontological). The anatheist wager—to turn hostility into hospitality—signals the inaugural moment of all great wisdom traditions. And with respect to Abrahamic theopoetics specifically, it invites us to recall certain “primal scenes” of hospitality illustrated in many great works of religious art: namely, Abraham and Sarah as they encounter the strangers in Mamre; Mary faced with the stranger called Gabriel; the disciples meeting the risen stranger at Emmaus.19 “Transcendence as Creativity: Vocation in Andrei Tarkovsky” in *The Yearbook on History and Interpretation of Phenomenology*. Theopoetic art is exemplary of human-divine co-creation but it is not exclusionary (or elitist). Everyone is called to participate in the art of on-going *poiesis* in many different mansions, great and small, sacred and secular, miraculous and banal. Every time anyone acts, speaks or makes one is participating, for better or worse, in the creation or de-creation or re-creation of the Kingdom. Which brings us to the final part of our reflection—anathéism as theopoetic art.

3. Theopoetic art: anatheist imaginings

Let me conclude with an example of theopoetic art. Elsewhere (*Anatheism and Reimagining the Sacred*), I have explored the role of anathéism in a number of literary writings, from Hopkins and Proust to Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Here I propose to look at a painting which, I believe, powerfully illustrates this phenomenon—Andrei Rublev’s *Trinity*.

My suggestion is that works of art and imagination are more likely to express the superabundance of meaning, seeded by the on-going process of theopoiesis, than the purely conceptual systems of speculative metaphysics and dogmatic theology. The polysemantistic excess of theopoetics epitomizes the continuous creation of God which, in Teilhard de Chardin’s words, “prolongs itself in history and culture.” Paintings are more embodied than doctrines. Art is more incarnate than dogma. Orthopoiesis—like its twin orthopraxis—precedes orthodoxy. Indeed it is important to recall that theory is itself a derivation of poiesis, and only retain its pedagogical force by acknowledging its creative origin in the latter.20 More simply put: images are more powerful than ideas because they are more sensible, more tangible, more down to earth. They invite us to a “carnal hermeneutics” of sight,
sound, taste and touch. They move and mobilize our being. And here we should not forget that the Latin word for Sophia is *sapientia*, reminding us that primal wisdom originally comes from *sapere*, to savor and taste. The savvy of imagination precedes all speculative *savoir*. And it is important to recall that theopeoetic imagination is not confined to high art but more commonly manifests itself in ordinary ritual cultural practices around icons, statues, paintings and moving images.

**Andrei Rublev’s Trinity**

![Andrei Rublev's Trinity](image)

*Trinity, Andrei Rublev (1370–1430)*

We begin with an icon. When Rublev painted the Trinity in 1425 he did not try to represent Father, Son and Spirit as abstract divinities but rather as three human-like persons sharing a meal at a table. To be moved by the Trinity, Rublev realized, we need to be able to sense it, see it, touch it (Oriental Christians touch icons with their foreheads, lips and hands). And to this end, he resolved to embody the mystery of divine relation in a created work of art, where paint, volume, form and style configure something invisible as visible. He made an image which told a story, bearing out the teaching of Church Father, John of Damascus, that we “need the Gospel in one hand and the painted expression of the same in the other, because the two have equal value and should receive equal veneration” (*Epistles*, II, 171).

Rublev was a Russian Orthodox monk who, faithful to both the apophatic tradition of discretion and the kataphatic tradition of embodiment, did not try to paint God as some
transcendent Form. Instead he painted the three strangers who visit Abraham and Sarah in Mamre (Genesis 3). The primal biblical scene exemplifies the Trinity as a drama of lived hospitality: the original title of the icon was “The Hospitality of Abraham”, referring to how Abraham responded to the three strangers who appeared out of the desert not with hostile fear but by hosting a lavish meal. In the sharing of food from an open bowl—depicted at the center of Rublev’s painting—the event marks a space, a chalice, a chora, a womb, where a future child is conceived: Isaac.

Rublev revisits the inaugural drama of Abrahamic hospitality to manifest the mystery of a Triune God. In the making and sharing of food, the divine becomes human and the human divine. Once they participate as guests in the feast, the “three” strangers, Genesis tells us, become “one.” Three in one and one in three. Human as divine and divine as human. The impossible made possible.

Rublev’s icon features three persons circling around a table, each offering its place to the other in a gesture of endless hospitality. Their roles as father, son and spirit, are not depicted in terms of hierarchy or seniority but as equal partners in an open-ended dance. The dance is not self-regarding but opens onto a fourth person—an empty place at the base of the table where a stranger is invited, an outsider welcomed, a guest hosted: humanity in the person of each viewer of the painting itself. That is why a small rectangle still marks the lower part of the circle where a mirror once looked out—at us looking in. A mirror revealing to us that we are the reflection of divinity, made in its image and likeness—the fourth dancer invited to the dance.21

This dance motif is captured in the original Greek term for the Trinity—Perichoresis—meaning to dance around. The three persons circle around (peri) a receptacle (chora) which may be read as a bowl of hospitality, a eucharistic chalice, a womb of natality (Sarah prefiguring Mary for the Christian monk, Rublev). This latter reading is significant for in early Christian churches, such as the Monastery of Khora in Constantinople, we find icons and frescoes depicting Mary bearing Jesus in her womb with the inscription Chora tou Achoratou: the Container of the Uncontainable.22 The chora at the center of the dance may thus be seen as the core of finitude at the heart of in-finity—the chalice-womb of bread and wine which hosts the human to come, the child to be born again and again. Chora thus marks a space of endless possibility for endless life, a site of eros and creation, of play and feasting. A feminine space where the three persons of the Trinity give birth to each other and to a fourth: each human who participates in the visual dance. As the medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart, puts it:

Do you want to know
what goes on in the core of the Trinity?
I will tell you.
In the core of the Trinity
the Father laughs
and gives birth to the Son.
The Son laughs back at the Father
and gives birth to the Spirit.
The whole Trinity laughs
and gives birth to us.23
The term *perichoresis* is translated into Latin as *circumincessio*. This word can be spelled with a “c,” meaning *cessio-cedo* (ceding, releasing, letting go, offering one’s place to the other); or it can be spelled with an “s” meaning *sessio-sedo* (sitting, assuming one’s place, immanence). This movement of persons around the *chora* thus performs an act of inflowing-outflowing, ebbing-flowing, approaching-departing, *kenosis-hypostasis*: a two-step dance in which divinity invites humanity to join. And this ingenious word play between *cedo* and *sedo*, of one step forward and one step back, finds a telling linguistic equivalent in the double entendre of the age-old greeting *adieu*. The double a-dieu with which the persons greet each other may be said to dramatize what we call the two A’s of ana-theism. First, *A-dieu* as welcome (as in original Latinate usage, *ad-deum*), meaning an opening towards (*ad*) the other. And second, *A-dieu* says goodbye (as in later usage, *ab-deo*, meaning a releasing or letting go).

Emmanuel Levinas explains this by saying that the original act of Creation is an act of love which leaves open a gap for the coming and going of the other—a gesture captured in the simple phrase “after you / après-toi”. This is the “aftering” of Ana which is the first word of hospitality. As at a meal where one offers food to the guest who becomes a host to another guest in turn. Or as in dance where one retreats to let the other move in—ceding one’s space so that the partner can succeed one in a circular movement, a mutual participation where, in Yeats’ words, we can “no longer tell the dancer from the dance” (*Among School Children*). It is this perichoretic dance around (*chorein*) the still point of the turning world which opens onto the fourth person still be come, again and again, dying to itself and rising again, passing away and rebirthing in a ceaseless motion of rebeginning. Forever arriving and departing in the persona of strangers (*hospes*) who ask for bread and water, and receive it in turn. (Christ identifies himself as this *hospes* five times in Matthew 25, just as later he will reveals himself as a Lord of the Dance. Emmaus meets eschaton in the banquet of the Kingdom.)

But let us return to the icon itself. If the devil is in the detail so is the divine. We have already noted that in Rublev’s painting the three persons are not presented doctrinally as Pater, Filius and Spiritus but as the three strangers who share food at the table of Abraham. They are seated in a circle and wear three different colored robes. Gold, blue and green. This visual differentiation into three primary colors represents the three aspects of the Holy One. As Richard Rohr explains in *The Divine Dance*:

**Gold:** “the Father”—perfection, fullness, wholeness, the ultimate Source. **Blue:** “the Incarnate Christ”—both sea and sky mirroring one another. … Christ wears blue and holds up two fingers, telling us he has put spirit and matter, divinity and humanity, together within himself. The blue of creation is brilliantly undergirded with the necessary red of suffering. **Green:** “the Spirit”—the divine photosynthesis that grows everything from within by transforming light into itself (Hildegard of Bingen called this *viriditas*, or the greening of all things.) The icon shows the Holy One in the form of Three, eating and drinking, in infinite hospitality and utter enjoyment between themselves.

Many spectators of Rublev’s three Abrahamic strangers at Mamre may have thought not only of the three persons of the Trinity but also of the three visiting kings at Bethlehem, or the three guests at Emmaus where the divine, as risen stranger (*hospes*), returns to share bread with his two disciplines. These great scenes of visitation and hospitality were often conflated in Orthodox icons, suggesting how Rublev’s perichoresis may operate as a form of visual palimpsest pregnant with serial beforeings and afterings. Or to use more technical language, an “overdetermined signifier” inviting multiple semantic successions and
repetitions. Each viewing of the Trinitarian image signals a new visitation, a new rereading of the original scene. Hence the importance, as noted, of the rectangular mirror-frame at the base of Rublev’s circle, serving as portal welcoming each spectator to the table—asking not just for vision but participation, not just for seeing but for moving and being moved, touching and being touched, loving and being loved, hosting and guesting.

If we take the portrait of God in Rublev’s icon to heart, we have to admit that “In the beginning was the Relationship.” Far from being a picture of narcissistic self-regard—a self-loving-love, a self-thinking-thought, a self-causing-cause, ens causi sui—the perichoresis of three persons expresses the desire for a fourth. Returning to the theme of the mirror at the base of the icon, Rohr writes:

The gaze between the Three shows the deep respect between them as they all share from a common bowl. Notice the Spirit’s hand points toward the open and fourth place at the table. Is the Holy Spirit inviting, offering, and clearing space? … If so, for what, and for whom? At the front of the table there appears to be a little rectangular hole. Most people pass right over it, but some art historians believe the remaining glue on the original icon indicates that there was perhaps once a mirror glued to the front of the table. It’s stunning when you think about it—there was room at this table for a fourth. The observer … and all creation.27

This radical openness to the other, the stranger, the guest, signals the deeply ecumenical nature of Rublev’s icon, now displayed in Christian Churches of almost every denomination; but this icon also extends, as suggested, the interreligious radius in its visual superimposition of the primal images of Judaism and Christianity—the three strangers of Abraham and the persons of the Trinity. This Jewish-Christian interplay in turn invites hermeneutic readings of the Chora-chalice at the heart of perichoresis as both Sarah’s womb and Mary’s womb open, in each case, to an “impossible” child: Sarah is barren, Mary is a virgin. Or more exactly, the chora incubates a divine possible (dunamis) beyond the impossible (adunaton) of the humanely possible. And it is interesting to recall here that the same terms used in the Septuagint to describe Sarah’s exchange with the Strangers who visit Mamre (Genesis 18:14) are used to describe Mary’s exchange with Gabriel in the Gospel of Luke (1:30). “Nothing is impossible to God.” Hearing the respective annunciations of a future child, Sarah laughs and Mary says Amen. In both inaugural scenes, an impossible child is conceived. Isaac to Sarah, Jesus to Mary. Both miraculous natalities reside at the heart of the Trinitarian dance.

Rublev’s icon of the periochoreis, I am suggesting, offers a theopoetic artwork which reveals the trinitarian mystery of creation in a manner which goes deeper and wider than any treatise of theoretical theology—and is thereby more affective and effective in its testimony to the work of divine poiesis. Indeed, one might add that Rublev’s picture of reciprocal inclusivity between persons is not just a hermeneutic bridge between Jewish and Christian hostilities but also between these and other non-Abrahamic wisdom traditions celebrating triple divinities and trimurtis who are equally welcome at the table. Rublev’s perichoresis is a revolutionary gateway to interreligious hospitality.28

4. Conclusion

So, let me conclude by repeating the question motivating my reflections throughout: why do we need art to recover God after God? Why look to poetry and painting rather than doctrine and theology? Why is Creation a matter of making as well as revealing? Because, we hold, poetics is the first bridge between word and flesh. Theopoetic imagination is the Janus-face looking back to Creation and forward to the Kingdom. It is the medium and
membrane that moves us, that makes ideas of Triune divinity touch our lives, reminding us that abstract disputes about Filioque’s and other dogmas—dividing our churches for centuries—are but footnotes to the real work of theopoetics: us “making” God as God makes us. When it comes to divinity poiesis, not theoria, has the last word. Orthopoiesis trumps orthodoxy. In the beginning God creates Sophia. In the end, Sophia recreates God.

Notes

1. These quotes are from Catherine Keller, “Theopoetic Becomings: A Brief, Incongruent History.”
2. See the chapter on the “Hebraic Imagination” in Kearney, The Wake of Imagination.
3. Ibid., 37.
4. Emmanuel Levinas in Kearney, Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers. See also Aviva Zornberg, The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis. Just as a certain Jewish teaching claimed that the Torah (Law) existed before the Creation of the world, so too the spirit of loving Wisdom (Sophia) may be said to serve as an originary act of divine pro-creation (Proverbs 8). This finds a Christian variation in Paul’s claim in Ephesians (1:4) that Christians exist in a loving relation with Christ before the foundation of the world—and ever since in the work of ongoing creation, incarnation and salvation (Romans 8). A notion of a primal Cosmic Creative Christ revisited in Colossians 1:15: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth.” The Trinitarian relationship of Father–Son–Spirit as a primordial dance of mutual co-creation finds expression in the Patristic notion of perichoresis which first arose in fourth-century Cappadocia, a theme we explore in the final part of this paper.
5. Perichoresis, or the divine dance of Trinitarian relation, was there from the beginning. See Rohr, The Divine Dance. While perichoresis is primarily a Christian image of the Trinity it is important to note, as we shall below, that Rublev’s famous image portrays the Trinity in terms of the Jewish Bible scene of three strangers visiting Abraham and many other passages in the Torah and Psalms depict God in terms of imaginative figures and metaphors—nursemaid, shepherd, eagle, lion, father, burning bush, still small voice, etc. See also Numbers 12:8 where Moses is reported as seeing the “image” (doxa) of the Lord. It is telling, I think, that one of the most powerful contemporary paintings of the three strangers visiting Abraham at Mamre—after Rublev—is that by the Jewish painter, Marc Chagall.
8. Ibid., 133–8.
9. See Paul Ricoeur on Artisotle’s account of poetics as catharsis and narrative emplotment in Time and Narrative, Vol 1, ch. 2.
10. See our discussion of Hopkins’ anatheist poetics in Kearney, Anatheism: Returning to God after God (11–12); in “God after God: an Anatheist Attempt to Reimagine God,” Reimagining The Sacred, 6–18. See also the recent essays, “Secular Epiphanies: The Anatheistic Hermeneutics of Gerard Manley Hopkins”; and “Épiphanies: Hopkins, Scotus, Joyce.”
12. Ibid., 41.
15. Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling.
16. For philosophical interpretations of this epiphanic moment see Kierkegaard’s treatment of the “Instant” (Augenblick) and “Repetition” (Wiederholung) and Heidegger’s ontological readings of these terms in Being and Time as well as the later deconstructive readings by Derrida and Caputo. See also Walter Benjamin’s related reading of the Messianic time of Jetzzeit, and Giorgio Agamben’s reading of the eschatological “time that remains.”
17. For kairological and eschatological notions of ana-time, see Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro- Eschatology.

18. On the critique of onto-theology as a double forgetfulness of Being and God see the deconstructive readings of Heidegger, Derrida and Caputo and our own hermeneutic treatment of this theme in Kearney, Poétique du Possible, and The God who May Be.

19. On celebrated theopoetic paintings of hospitality and strangers, in addition to those analyzed in this paper, see also our mention in Anatheism of Botticelli’s Cestello Annunciation (1490), Rembrandt’s famous etching series of Emmaus and Chagall’s Abraham and Strangers. One might also include films here, citing such classic examples as Babette’s Feast (based on story by Karen Blixen) and Andrei Tarkovsky’s Andrei Rublev. On the notion of artistic making (icon making and bell making) as a divine call to human co-creation—which excludes no-one—see Jana Trajtelova and Anthony Steinbock.

20. On the derivation of intellectual concepts from imagination, see Kant’s argument for the primacy of transcendental productive imagination in The Critique of Pure Reason, Schelling’s claim that philosophy and theology are derived forms of an “unconscious poetics of nature” or Nietzsche’s argument that metaphysics is a form of masked mythology—“an army of mobile metaphors”—that has forgotten its own mytho-poetic origin (a point later developed by philosophers such as Heidegger, Derrida and Ricoeur).


22. On the depictions of the divine mother and son as “chora achoraton,” see Kearney, Strangers, Gods and Monsters, 191 f. I am grateful to John Manaoussakis for this reference. See also the more common ritual formulations of Mary as Bearer and Mother of her Creator, e.g., “Blessed are you, O Virgin Mary, who bore the Creator of all things: You became the Mother of your Maker” (Entrance Antiphon of the Catholic Feast of the Virgin Mary, October 8).

23. Eckhart, Meditations with Meister Eckhart, 129. In The Divine Dance, Richard Rohr explores the liberating gender implications of this perichoretic dance between the three persons.

24. See my previous treatments of perichoresis in “God or Khora?” in Kearney, Strangers, Gods and Monsters (in critical debate with Derrida and Caputo) and later in Anatheism and Reimagining the Sacred. See also the recent work on the Trinity and perichoresis in Falque, St Bonaventure and God’s Entrance into Theology, and Beattie “On the Matter of God: Conversations in the Khora,” 59–80. While Beattie offers a powerful feminist reading of the Trinity and Chora, she misreads my own hermeneutic interpretation of Chora in “God or Khora?” I hope that I have clarified my position in this paper.

25. See our treatment of the deus ludens and homo ludens in Kearney, Poétique du Possible. For our previous work on hospitality and the stranger, see Anatheism and the sacramental imagination/eucharistics essays.


28. On the interreligious power of this work and other non-textual icons and rituals, see not only Rohr but also Hederman, “Cinema and the Icon”; and the recent work of Moyaert, “Toward a Ritual Turn in Interreligious Theology.”

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