

Faith in the Enlightenment?

The Critique of the Enlightenment
Revisited

Edited by
Lieven Boeve
Joeri Schrijvers
Wessel Stoker
Hendrik M. Vroom



Amsterdam - New York, NY 2006

C. Mark Rothko
Untitled.
Signed and dated 'MARK ROTHKO 1959' (on the reverse)
Oil on paper laid down on panel
c/o Beeldrecht Amsterdam 2006

Cover design: Pier Post

The paper on which this book is printed meets the requirements of
"ISO 9706:1994, Information and documentation - Paper for
documents - Requirements for permanence".

ISBN-10: 90-420-2067-9
ISBN-13: 978-90-420-2067-2
©Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam - New York, NY 2006
Printed in the Netherlands

Poetics of a Possible God

Richard Kearney

I come in the little things, saith the Lord
–Evelyn Underhill

God, if God exists, exists not just for God but for us. And the manner in which God comes to us, comes to mind, comes to be and to dwell as flesh amongst us, is deeply informed by the manner in which we think about God – in short, how we interpret, narrate, and imagine God. This, I suggest, calls for a philosophical hermeneutics instructed by the various and essential ways in which God ‘appears’ to us in and through ‘phenomena’ and ‘signals’ to us in and through ‘signs.’ It is my wager in this essay that one of the most telling ways in which the infinite comes to be experienced and imagined by finite minds is as *possibility* – that is, as *the ability to be*. Even, and especially, when such possibility seems impossible to us.

But let’s be clear from the outset: I am not saying this is the only way, or even the most primordial way, just that it is a very telling way, and one which has been largely neglected in the history of western metaphysics and theology, in favor of categories like substance, cause, actuality, omnipotence, absolute spirit, or sufficient reason. So I am not proposing *posse* as some newly discovered (or recovered) Master Word – some extraordinary Meta-Code which might unlock the ancient Secret of divine nature or naming. God forbid! Our proposal is far more modest than that: namely, a tentative exercise in poetic conjecture about a certain overlooked aspect of divinity, seeking guidance on the way from phenomenological description and hermeneutic interpretation.

I will proceed by means of three concentric circles – *scriptural*, *testimonial*, and *literary*. Traversing this threefold ‘variation of imagination,’ I hope to identify some key characteristics of the God of the possible as it reveals itself to us poetically.

The Scriptural Circle

My efforts to rethink God as *posse* draw primarily from the biblical message that what is impossible for us is possible for God. This latter notion of messianic possibility is evident in many Scriptural passages. In

Mark 10, for example, we are told that while entry to the Kingdom seems impossible for humans, all things are made possible by God. The exact text reads: 'For humans it is impossible but not for God; because for God everything is possible' (*panta gar dunata para to theo*) (Mark 10:27). In a similar vein, we are told in St. John's Prologue that our ability to become sons of God in the Kingdom is something made possible by God: 'Light shone in darkness and to all who received it was given the possibility (*dunamis*) to become sons of God.' The term *dunamis* is crucial and can be translated either as power or possibility – a semantic ambivalence to which we shall return below. Further evocations of the possibilizing power (*dunamis pneumatos*) of the Spirit are evidenced in Paul's letters to the Corinthians and Romans; but perhaps most dramatically of all in the Annunciation scene where Mary is told by the angel that the '*dunamis*' of God will overshadow her and that she will bear the son of God – 'for nothing is impossible (*a-dunaton*) with God' (Luke 1).

In all these examples, divinity – as Father, Son or Spirit – is described as a possibilizing of divine love and logos in the order of human history where it would otherwise have been impossible. In other words, the divine reveals itself here as the possibility of the kingdom – or if you prefer to cite a *via negativa*, as the *impossibility of impossibility*.

A hermeneutical poetics of the kingdom looks to some of the recurring *figures* – metaphors, parables, images, symbols – deployed in the Gospels to communicate the eschatological promise. The first thing one notes is that these figures almost invariably refer to a God of 'small things' – to borrow from the wonderful title of Arundhati Roy's novel. Not only do we have the association of the Kingdom with the vulnerable openness and trust of 'little children,' as in the Matthew 10 passage cited above, but we also have the images of the yeast in the flour (Luke 13), the tiny pearl of invaluable price (Matt 13), and perhaps most suggestive and telling of all, the mustard seed (Mark 4) – a miniscule grain that blooms and flourishes into a capacious tree. The kingdom of God, this last text tells us, is 'like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade.'

One might be tempted to call this recurring motif of the kingdom as the last or least or smallest of things – a *micro-theology* to the extent that it resists the standard macro-theology of the Kingdom as emblem of

sovereignty, omnipotence, and ecclesiastical triumph. The frequent reference in the Gospel to the judgment of the Kingdom being related to how we respond in history, here and now, to the 'least of these' (*elachistos*) (e.g. Matt 25:40), is crucial. The loving renunciation of absolute power by Christ's emptying (*kenosis*) of the Godhead, so as to assume the most humble form of humanity (the last and least of beings), is echoed by the eschatological reminder that it is easier for the defenceless and powerless to enter the Kingdom than the rich and mighty. And I think it is telling – as Dostoyevsky reminds us in the Grand Inquisitor episode of the *Brothers Karamazov* – that the greatest temptation that Christ must overcome, after his forty days in the desert, is the will to become master and possessor of the universe. This is a temptation he faces again and again right up to his transfiguration on Mt. Thabor when his disciples want to apotheosize and crown him by building a cult temple there on the mountain (Luke 9). Instead, Christ proceeds to a second kenotic act of giving, refusing the short route to immediate triumph and embracing the *via crucis* which demonstrates what it means for the seed to die before it is reborn as a flowering tree which hosts all living creatures. As 'King,' he enters Jerusalem not with conquering armies but 'seated upon an ass's colt' (John 12). He upturns the inherited hierarchies of power, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah that he would bring justice to the world, not by 'shouting aloud in the street' but as a 'bruised reed that shall not break, a smoldering wick that shall not quench' (Isaiah 42:1-4).

But in addition to these *spatial* metaphors of the Kingdom exemplified by little things – yeast, a mustard seed, a pearl, a reed, an infant, the 'least of these' – a hermeneutic poetics of the Kingdom might also look to the *temporal* figures of eschatology. These invariably take the form of a certain *achronicity*. I am thinking here of the numerous references to the fact that even though the Kingdom has *already come* – and is incarnate *here and now* in the loving gestures of Christ and all those who give, or receive, a cup of water – it still always remains a possibility *yet to come*. This is what Emmanuel Levinas calls the 'paradox of posterior anteriority'; and it is cogently illustrated in an aphorism of Walter Benjamin which combines the spatial figure of the portal with the eschatological figure of futurity: "This future does not correspond to homogenous empty time; because at the heart of every moment of the future is contained the little door through which the Messiah may enter' (Benjamin 1979: 155f.).

As ‘eternal,’ the kingdom transcends all chronologies of time. Christ indicates this when he affirms that ‘before Abraham was, I am’ (John 8:58), and when he promises a Second Coming when he will return again. In short, the Kingdom is both a) *already* there as historical possibility and b) *not yet* there as a historically realized kingdom ‘come on earth.’ This is why we choose to translate the canonical theophany of God to Moses on Mt. Sinai (*esher ayeh esher*) not as ‘I am who am’ (*ego sum qui sum*) but as: ‘I am who may be.’ God is saying something like this: I will show up as promised but I cannot *be* in time and history, I cannot become fully embodied in the flesh of the world, unless you show up and answer my call ‘where are you?’ with the response ‘Here I am.’ (I explore this eschatological enigma of time in further detail in the conclusion below).

The Testimonial Circle

Our second hermeneutic circle explores a poetics of the kingdom in light of a number of testimonies recorded by religious writers down through the ages. This we might call the *testimonial* or *confessional* genre. Unlike ‘metaphysical’ thinkers who presuppose an ontological priority of actuality over possibility, these more ‘poetical’ minds reverse the traditional priority and point to a new category of possibility – divine possibility – *beyond* the traditional opposition between the possible and the impossible.

Let me begin with the pregnant maxim of Angelus Silesius: ‘God is possible as the more than impossible.’ Here, Silesius – a German mystical thinker often cited by Heidegger and Derrida – points towards an eschatological notion of possibility which might be said to transcend the three conventional concepts of the possible:

- 1) the epistemological category of modal logic, along with necessity and actuality (Kant);
- 2) the substantialist category of *potentia* lacking its fulfilment as *actus* (Aristotle and the scholastics);
- 3) the rationalist category of *possibilitas* conceived as a representation of the mind (Leibniz and the idealists).

All such categories fall within the old metaphysical dualism of possibility versus impossibility. But Silesius intimates a new role for the possible as a ludic and liberal outpouring of divine play: ‘God is possible as the more than impossible...God plays with Creation/All that is play that the deity gives itself/ It has imagined the creature for its pleasure.’ Creation here is

depicted as an endless giving of possibility which calls us toward the kingdom.

I suspect that the early medieval Jewish commentator, Rashi, had something like this in mind when he interprets Isaiah's God calling to his creatures – 'I cannot be God unless you are my witnesses.' He takes this to mean: 'I am the God who will be whenever you bear witness to love and justice in the world.'¹ And I believe that the Holocaust victim Etty Hillesum was gesturing towards a similar notion when, just weeks before her death in a concentration camp, she wrote: "You God cannot help us but we must help you and defend your dwelling place inside us to the last" (1996: 176). Both Rashi and Hillesum were witnessing to the *dunamis* of God as the power of the powerless. This, clearly, is not the imperial power of a sovereign; it is a dynamic call to love which possibilizes and enables humans to transform their world – by giving itself to the 'least of these,' by empathizing with the disinherited and the dispossessed, by refusing the path of might and violence, by transfiguring the mustard seed into the kingdom, each moment at a time, one act after an other, each step of the way. This is the path heralded by the Pauline God of 'nothings and nobodies' (*ta me onta*) excluded from the triumphal pre-eminence of totality (*ta onta*) – a kenotic, self-emptying, crucified God whose 'weakness is stronger than human strength' (I Corinthians 1:25). It signals the option for the poor, for non-violent resistance and revolution taken by peacemakers and dissenting 'holy fools' from ancient to modern times. It is the message of suffering rather than doing evil, of loving one's adversaries, of 'no enemies,' of 'soul force' (*satyagraha*). One thinks of a long heritage ranging from Isaiah,

¹ See Rashi 1997. It would be interesting to relate Rashi's rabbinical interpretation with Isaac Luria's Kabbalist reading of God in terms of a generous withholding or 'withdrawal' (*zimzum*) which invites human creatures to subsequently retrieve and reanimate the fragments of the 'broken vessels' of divine love which lie scattered like tiny seeds throughout the created universe. This reading, which exerted a deep influence on Hassidic thinkers as well as on philosophers like Simone Weil, seems to confirm our own account of God's refusal to impose himself on creation – as some kind of omnipotent fulfilled being (*Ipsum Esse subsistens*), Sufficient Reason or Supreme Cause (*ens causa sui*) – preferring to relate to humans in the realm of the 'possible' rather than the purely 'actual' or 'necessary.' I am grateful to my Boston College colleague, Marty Cohen, for bringing the insights of the Lurianic Kabbala to my attention. See, in particular, Cohen 1997.

Jesus, Siddartha, and Socrates to such contemporary figures as Gandhi, Havel, Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier, Ernesto Cardinal, Tich Nhat Hahn, and Martin Luther King, amongst others. The God witnessed here goes beyond the will-to-power.

Nicholas of Cusa, as already mentioned, offers some interesting insights into this eschatological God when he declares that “God alone is all he is able to be.”² Unlike the God of metaphysical omnipotence, underlying the perverse logic of theodicy which seeks to justify evil as part of the divine Will, this notion of God as an ‘abling to be’ (*posse* or *passet*) points in a radically different direction. Let us pause for a moment to unpack the phrase, ‘God is all he is able to be.’ God is an all-good God and is not able to be non-good, that is non-God – defect or evil. In other words, God is *not* omnipotent in the traditional metaphysical sense understood by Leibniz and Hegel. The Divine is not some being able to be all good *and* evil things. That is why God could not help Etty Hillesum and other victims of evil. God is not responsible for evil. And Hillesum understood this all too well when she turned the old hierarchies on their head and declared that it is *we* who must help God to be God.

Was Hillesum not in fact subscribing here to a long – if often neglected – biblical heritage? After all, if Elijah had not heard the ‘still small voice’ of God in his cave, we would never have received the wisdom of his prophecy. If a young woman from Nazareth had said ‘no’ to the angel of the annunciation, the Word would not have become Flesh. If certain fishermen, tax collectors and prostitutes had not heard the call to follow the Son of Man, there would have been no Son of God – and no Gospel witness. So too, if Hillesum and others like her had not let God be God by defending the divine dwelling place of *caritas* within them, even in those most hellish moments of holocaust horror, there would have been no measure of love – albeit it as tiny as the mustard seed – to defy the hate of the Gestapo. For if God’s loving is indeed unconditional, the realization of that loving *posse* in this world is conditional upon our response. If we are waiting for God, God is waiting for us. Waiting for us to say ‘yes,’ to hear the call and to act, to bear witness, to answer the *posse* with *esse*, to make the word flesh – even in the darkest moments.

² See Cusa 1980: 69. The original Latin reads: ‘Deus est omne id quod esse potest.’

I think of Dionysius the Areopagite who could be said to add to our understanding of this great enigma when he speaks, in Book 7 of the *Divine Names*, of a ‘possibility beyond being’ (*hyperousias dunameos*), a possibility which engenders our desire to live more abundantly and seek the good. ‘Being itself,’ he writes, ‘only has the possibility to be from the possibility beyond being.’ And he adds that it is ‘from the infinitely good posse (*dunamis*) of what it sends to them (that) they have received their power (*dunamis*)’ (Pseudo-Dionysius 1980: 182). I am tempted to relate this notion of an infinitely good possibilizing of God to another extraordinary passage in the *Divine Names* – this time Book 9, section 3 – where Dionysius writes of the God of little things:

God is said to be small as leaving every mass and distance behind and proceeding unhindered through all. Indeed the small is the cause of all the elements, for you will find none of these that have not participated in the form of smallness. Thus, smallness is to be interpreted with respect to God as its wandering and operating in all and through all without hindrance ‘penetrating down to the division of the soul, spirit, joint and marrow’, and discerning thoughts and ‘intentions of the heart’, and indeed of all beings. ‘For there is no creation which is invisible to its face’ (Heb 4, 12). This smallness is without quantity, without quality, without restraint, unlimited, undefined, and all embracing although it is unembraced.³

³ Pseudo-Dionysius 1980: 188. For a further exploration of the link between negative theology and our micro-eschatology see Breton 2002: 8-11, 49-50, 60-70, 80-91, 112-114. See in particular Breton’s radical claim that we must give to God the being he has not, qua thirsting, kenotic, crucified stranger (*ibid.*: 121-122). The *dunamis* of God is here identified with the *germen nibili* or ‘power of nothing’ which reveals itself as a ‘double nothingness’ and powerless which liberates those oppressed by the power of *ta onta*, sowing the seed of non-being epitomized by the Beatitudes so that the eschatological tree of love and justice may flower and flourish (*ibid.*: 80-84 and xxiv-xxvi). For it is in and as a ‘seed of non-being’ that, in Eckhart’s resonant phrase, “God becomes verdant in all the honor of his being” (cited in *ibid.*: 80). See also here Hildegard de Bingen’s notion of divine ‘greening’ or ‘viriditas,’ note 6 below. A more post-modern take on this notion of a micro-eschatology is hinted at in Žižek 2000: 146-7: “the ultimate mystery of love is that incompleteness is a way *higher than completion*...Perhaps the true achievement of Christianity is to elevate a loving (imperfect) Being to the place of God – that is, of ultimate perfection.”

Is this extraordinary passage by Dionysius not a passionate invitation to embrace a micro-theology of the kingdom? Is it not a solicitation to embrace an eschatology of little things – mustard seeds, grains of yeast, tiny pearls, cups of water, infinitesimal everyday acts of love and witness? It appears so.

Moreover, I think it is just this kind of micro-theology that Gerard Manley Hopkins had in mind when he records God's grace in small and scattered epiphanies of the quotidian – when he speaks, for example, of God's 'pied beauty' being manifest in various 'dappled things,' from 'finches wings' and 'rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim' to 'all things counter, original, spare, strange;/Whatever is fickle, freckled - who knows how?" (*Pied Beauty*). For Hopkins, it is not the mighty and triumphant Monarch that epitomizes the pearl of the kingdom ('immortal diamond') but, contrariwise, the court fool, the joker in the pack, the least and last of these. Here is Hopkins' take on the eschatological kingdom:

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.

Hopkins' deity is one of transfiguration rather than coercion, of *posse* rather than power, of little rather than large things.⁴ An echo perhaps of

⁴ See the illuminating reading of Hopkins in Hederman 2002: 131f. It is important to note that this micro-theological emphasis on God as less rather than more is not confined to the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is also to be found in much of the Buddhist and Hindu wisdom literature. See, for instance, the following passage from Krishnamurti: "The silence which is not the silence of the ending of noise is only a small beginning. It is like going through a small hole to an enormous, wide, expansive ocean, to an immeasurable, timeless state" (1969: 109). Interestingly, one of the 'siddhis,' the powers that a yogi/yogini may acquire, is to become as small as an atom. The Taoist master, Lao-tse, spoke from a similar perspective in *Tao Te Ching* when he wrote: "Know the high/But keep to the low/Become a valley/To all under heaven./As a valley provides in abundance,/Give in constant Virtue;/ Return to natural simplicity" (ch. 28); or again in ch. 34 when he writes: "The Great Way flows everywhere/...It clothes and feeds all things,/Yet does not claim/To be their lord./It asks for nothing in return. /It may be called the Small...So too the wise may become great,/By

Dante's deity in the *Paradiso* who is described as a tiny, indivisible point of light in contrast to the towering figure of Lucifer in the final Canto of the *Inferno*. But in our shift of registers from theology to poetry we are already embarking on our next circle of readings.

The Literary Circle

In our third and final hermeneutic circle – the *literary* – I include a number of passages, which offer more explicitly poetic epiphanies of the possible. This amplification of our investigation to embrace a literary poetics extends the range of reference to take in soundings of *posse*, which transcend the confessional limits of theism or atheism, enjoying as they do a special liberty of imagination – a 'poetic licence' to entertain an unlimited variation of experience. As Emily Dickenson rightly observed, "possibility is a fuse lit by imagination," a belief which informs her imaging of the eschatological possible:

I dwell in possibility –
 A fairer house than prose –
 More numerous of windows –
 Superior – for doors...
 Of visitors – the fairest –
 For Occupation – This –
 The spreading wide my narrow Hands
 To gather Paradise –

The French author, Rabelais, had his eye on a similar paradise when he affirmed the possibility of life through death, yea-saying to his last moments as he jubilantly declared: "J'avance vers le grand possible!" In his remarkable novel, *Man without Qualities*, the Austrian writer Robert Musil offers a further perspective on the eschatological *posse* when he claims that "possibility is the dormant design of God in man" – a design waiting to be awakened by our poetic dwelling in the world. Our true vocation in history, for Musil, is one of utopian invention. It involves an

becoming small." Even Winnie the Pooh knows this as in the following passage: "It is hard to be brave," said Piglet, sniffing slightly, 'when you're only a Very Small Animal.' Rabbit, who had begun to write very busily, looked up and said: 'It is because you are a very small animal that you will be Useful in the adventure before us'" (See Hoff 1992).

audacious surpassing of given reality towards imagined possibility. Here is the passage in full:

One might define the meaning of the possible as the faculty of thinking all that *might be* just as much as what is...The implications of such a creative disposition are huge...The possible consists of much more than the dreams of neurasthenics; it also involves the still dormant plans of God. A possible event or truth is not just the real event or truth minus the 'reality'; rather it signals something very divine, a flame, a burning, a will to construct a utopia which, far from fearing reality, treats it simply as a perpetual task and invention. The earth is not so spent, after all, and never has it seemed so fascinating (cited in Kearney 1984: 4).

The metaphor of fire – with its allusions to both the burning bush (Exod 3:14) and the Pentecostal flame of speaking tongues – is also explored by Wallace Stevens in a poem addressed to the philosopher, George Santayana, entitled 'To an Old Philosopher in Rome.' Here again the correspondence between the simple (indigent, small, inconsequential) and the eschatological (the kingdom) is conveyed by the figure of a candle flame which illumines the real in the light of the 'celestial possible.' The pneumatological call to speak in tongues commits itself to a poetics of the poor and unremembered. Stevens writes:

A light on the candle tearing against the wick
 To join a hovering excellence, to escape
 From fire and be part of that of which
 Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible...
 Be orator but with an accurate tongue
 And without eloquence, O, half-asleep,
 Of the pity that is the memorial of this room,
 So that we feel, in this illumined large,
 The veritable small...
 Impatient for the grandeur that you need
 In so much misery, and yet finding it
 Only in misery, the afflatus of ruin,
 Profound poetry of the poor...
 It is poverty's speech that seeks us out the most.

But it is doubtless the Prague poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, who composes one of the most inspiring invocations of the gracious power

of *posse* in the conclusion to his *Letters to a Young Poet*. Here the eschatological promise of a coming God is combined with the erotic expectancy of a waiting lover. "Why don't you think of him (God) as the one who is coming," he asks his youthful correspondent, as

one who has been approaching from all eternity, the one who will someday arrive, the ultimate fruit of a tree whose leaves we are? What keeps you from projecting his birth into the ages that are coming into existence, and living your life as a painful and lovely day in the history of a great pregnancy? Don't you see how everything that happens is again and again a beginning, and couldn't it be *His* (God's) beginning, since, in itself, starting is always so beautiful?

Then Rilke poses this crucial question:

If he is the most perfect one, must not what is less perfect *precede* him, so that he can choose himself out of fullness and superabundance? – Must not *he* be the last one, so that he can include everything in himself, and what meaning would we have if he whom we are longing for has already existed? As bees gather honey, so we collect what is sweetest out of all things and build Him.

Rilke ends this remarkable passage with a call to vigilant attention and expectancy. Messianism at its best. The metaphor of the flowering, flourishing mustard seed is brought to a new poetic intensity. "Be patient," Rilke counsels the young poet, "and realize that the least we can do is to make coming into existence no more difficult for Him (God) than the earth does for spring when it wants to come."⁵

⁵ Rilke 1984: 61-63. The emphasis here on the earth as correspondent for divine eros highlights, once again, the incarnational tendency of theo-eroticism. The earth is full of the seeds of the divine (what Augustine, borrowing from the Stoics, called *logoi spermaticoi*), incubating within the finite historical world like latent potencies waiting to be animated and actualized by the infinitely incoming grace of God as transcendent *posse*. If one removes transcendent *posse* from this equation, one relapses into a purely immanentist dialectic (evolutionary materialism or, at best, process theology). On the other hand, if one ignores the immanence of terrestrial and human potencies, one is left with an inordinately inaccessible and abstract deity – a sort of acosmic alterity without face or voice (e.g. deism or deconstruction). A hermeneutical poetics of divine *posse* tries to preserve a delicate balance between these opposite extremes.

Here we return to the ‘pregnant sense of the possible’ – to cite Kierkegaard – the interweaving of the divine and the human in patient prayer and longing. And this eschatological desire, as Rilke vividly reminds us, is not confined to human existence but involves, by extension, the entire expanse of the terrestrial universe as it awaits, yearns and prepares itself for the coming *prima vera*.

My daughter, who brought this passage to my attention, told me this was a God she could believe in! Could I disagree?

Conclusion

So much depends then on what we mean by the *possible*. If one defines possibility according to established convention as a category of modal logic or metaphysical calculus – then God is closer to the impossible than the possible. But if one seeks, as I do, to reinterpret the possible as eschatological *posse*, from a post-metaphysical poetical perspective, the stakes are very different. For now we are talking of a *second* possible (analogous to Ricoeur’s ‘second naiveté’) *beyond* the impossible, *otherwise* than impossible, *more* than impossible, at the *other side* of the old modal opposition between the possible and the impossible. And here we find ourselves closer to the Kierkegaard’s ‘passion for the possible’ as portal to faith.

I think that it is crucial to recall here the telling distinction between two competing translations of the Greek term *dunamis*. On the one hand, we have the metaphysical rendering of the term as *potestas/potentia*, that is, as a potency understood in terms of an economy of power, causality, substance – what Levinas calls the economy of the Same (or Totality). On the other hand, we have an eschatological rendering of *dunamis* as *posse/possest*, that is, as a gracious and gratuitous giving, which possibilizes love and justice in this world. It is this later interpretation of *dunamis* that I have been seeking to promote in my three hermeneutic detours through the poetics of the possible (for more depth and detail, see Kearney 2001).

In triumphalist accounts of the kingdom, the advent of the Messiah on the last day is often described in militaristic terms – as sublimely apocalyptic rather than lovingly vulnerable, as ‘almighty’ rather than solicitous, as coercive rather than caring. By contrast, the divine *posse* I am sponsoring here is more healing than judgmental, more disposed to accept the ‘least of these’ than to meet out punishment and glory. If God can prevent evil from happening by re-creating the historical past, as a

theologian like Peter Damian once suggested, He is by implication a God of theodicy: namely, a God who has the power to decide whether history unfolds as good or evil. To me, this sounds like *potestas* rather than *posse*. A far cry from the divine power of the powerless which Etty Hillesum invokes when she summons us to help God to be God in the face of violence and war. A world away from the God of little things.

*

Sometimes I have been asked what would happen to the God of the Possible if we were to destroy the earth? How can God's promise of a kingdom on earth be fulfilled if there is no earth to come back to? What might be said of the existence of God in such a scenario? There are a few observations I would like to make here by way of conclusion, surmises that claim the poetic licence of a free imaginative variation!

First, I would say that as eternally perduring and constant (that is, as faithful and attentive to us in each *present moment*), God would live on as an endless *promise* of love and justice. This would be so even if we fail or frustrate this covenant by denying its potential for historical fulfilment *on earth*. In this case, God would be like a spouse abandoned by a spouse – to take up the bride/bridegroom analogy from the *Song of Songs*: A lover forsaken. Or to borrow a metaphor from Hildegard of Bingen, the *posse* would be like a tree deprived of its greening (*viriditas*).⁶ If denied its

⁶ I am grateful to my wise friend and teacher, Peggy McLoughlin, for this reference and the quotes below. Here is one verse:

O most noble greening power (*O nobilissima*)
 Rooted in the sun,
 Who shine in dazzling serenity
 In a sphere
 That no earthly excellence
 Can comprehend.
 You are enclosed
 In the embrace of divine mysteries,
 You blush like the dawn
 And burn like a flame of the sun.

For her, the energy that drives the universe – which she calls *viriditas*, or the greening force – is also the power of the Living Light, which is Love-caritas. The expression of this in the creation is music. The original creation was a miracle of equilibrium, of perfect harmony, which the Fall disturbed; the incarnation restores a new harmony – indeed the Word of God is music itself, and the soul of mankind if symphonic: *symphonia est anima*... Here she finds

ultimate incarnation in the last days, the possible God would be like a flowering seed arrested before it could come to its full flourishing and fruition on the earth. It would still be *adventurus*, but no longer *futurus*. The divine advent would be deprived of an historical, human future but would remain, in each moment, enduringly faithful in spite of all. It would still be a 'yes' in the face of our 'no.'

Second, as eternal *memory* (past), the divine *posse* would preserve all those eschatological 'moments' from the past where the divine was incarnated in the flesh of the world every time (as Christ and Isaiah taught) someone gave a cup of cold water to someone else. In kairological as opposed to merely chronological time, these instants would be eternally 'repeated' in divine remembrance. This could be expressed in the adage: "The good that men do lives after them, the evil is interred with their bones" (to juggle with a line from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*). It would be in keeping with the repeated assurances of the biblical deity to remember the faithful who lived and died in history: e.g. Isaiah 49: 14-15: "Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you." And it would also be consonant with the contrary commitment to erase the memory of evil: "The Lord is close to the broken hearted/ The Lord confronts the evildoers/ To destroy remembrance of them from the earth" (Psalm 34). There is then a deeply eschatological character to the biblical injunction to 'remember' (*zakhor*). And this character is what translates God's mindfulness of creatures into a form of 'anticipatory memory' (the term is Herbert Marcuse's), which preserves a future for the past. As Psalm 105 tells us, "He remembers forever his covenant which he made binding for a thousand generations – which he entered into with Abraham." In other words, the promise made at the beginning of time is kept by the divine *posse* as an 'eternal' remembrance of both the historical past and present right up to the *parousia*.

Thirdly and finally then, qua eternal *advent* (future), we might say that even though we would have deprived the divine *posse* of its future realization as a kingdom *come on earth*, we could not, by such an act of self-destruction, deprive God of the possibility of starting over again. Nothing *good* is impossible to God. And rebirth in the face of death is

the dynamic expression of the love of God and his promise to bring mankind back to him, the expression in the body of the green-growing grace of *viriditas* (see O'Grady and Wilkins 2002).

good. As in any nuptial promise or pledge, each partner can speak for him/herself only: God can only promise for God, not for us. We are entirely free to break off *our* part of the promise at any time. And if we do, if we engage in collective self-destruction (God forbid!), why should God not have a 'second chance'? Is not *posse* after all, the possibility of endless beginning?

Of course, the *posse* of the kingdom is not just a promise for humanity as a universal community (to be reassembled as the mystical body of Christ on the last day, according to the Patristic notion of *anakephalaoisis*/Recapitulation). *Posse* is also and equally a promise for each unique self whose singular good – but not evil – will be preserved eternally in the recollection of the *deus adventurus*: like each glistening speck of dust in a comet's tail or each glint of plankton in the nocturnal wake of a ship. But if we destroy the earth we also refuse the possibility of each of these recollected and resurrected selves returning to a 'new heaven as new earth' on the last day. Such selves would return with *posse* – as part of the eternal promise – but without the *esse* of a Second Coming. That is why Dante had a great poetic insight into the character of divinity when he describes Beatrice descending from Paradiso to help her beloved (if errant) Pilgrim on his journey through the hermeneutic circles of faith.

*

Several of the above remarks and conjectures find textual support, I believe, in the 'Palestinian formula' of eschatological memory (*eis anamnesin*) prevalent in late Jewish and early Christian literature. The formula finds one of its earliest inscriptions in Psalm 111: "the righteous will be for eternal remembrance"; and again in Psalms 37 and 69, where the memory of God refers not just to creatures remembering their Creator in rituals and liturgies but also to the Creator recalling creatures, making the past present before God in a sort of eternal re-presentation which endures into the future and beyond. Likewise, in Ecclesiasticus, we find the repeated prayer that God might mercifully remember his children. As the biblical commentator, Joachim Jeremias, observes, such remembrance is an "effecting and creating event which is constantly fulfilling the eschatological covenant promise...When the sinner 'is not to be remembered' at the resurrection, this means that he will have no part in it (Ps. Sol. 3.11). And when God no longer remembers sin, he

forgets it (Jer. 31.34; Heb. 8.12; 10.17); this means that he forgives it. God's remembrance is always an action in mercy or judgment."⁷

The notion of eschatological memory is, as noted, also frequently witnessed in New Testament literature where it takes the form of a double 'repetition' – looking to past and future simultaneously. In the Eucharistic formula – 'do this in remembrance of me' (*eis ten emen anamneisin*) (Luke 22.19; Paul I Cor 11.24) – the proper translation of the repetition injunction, in keeping with the Palestinian memorial formula, is this: "Do this so that God may remember me" (Jeremias 1977: 252). The appeal to divine memory during the Eucharistic sharing of bread and wine may be seen accordingly as an echo of the third benediction of the grace after Passover meal which asks *God to remember the Messiah* – a benediction which is followed in turn with a petition for 'the remembrance of all thy people': "may their remembrance come before thee, for rescue, goodness" (Glatzer 1953: 63). The remembrance of past suffering is thus tied to the hope for the advent of the *parousia* – for Jews the entry of the Messiah to Jerusalem, for Christians the return of Christ on the last day. The petition for repetition – in the *kairological* rather than *chronological* sense – may be translated as: "God remembers the Messiah in that he causes the kingdom to break in by the parousia."⁸

This allusion to a bi-lateral temporality whereby divine memory recalls the *past as future* is further evidenced in Paul's gloss on the Eucharistic remembrance formula: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes*" (*achri ou elthei*. See I Cor. 11:23-25). Indeed the use of the subjunctive term *achri* refers often in the New Testament to the arrival of the eschaton (Rom. 11:25; I Cor. 15:25; Luke 21:24). The crucial phrase here – 'until he comes' – may thus be read in light of the liturgical *maranatha* (come lord!) invoked by the faithful in their prayers for the coming of God. So rather

⁷ See Jeremias 1977: 249. I am indebted to two of my colleagues at Boston College, Gary Gurtler and John Manoussakis, for bringing these comments and references by Dionysius and Jeremias to my attention.

⁸ Jeremias 1977: 252. One might see a repetition of the eschatological forgetting and remembering from the finite human perspective in Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Purgatory Canto 28) where the Pilgrim encounters the two inexhaustible streams of the garden, *Lethe* and *Eunoe*, of which the former washes away all memory of sin while the latter retrieves the memory of good deeds and life-giving moments.

than remembering the death of God as no more than a historical event of the past, the remembrance formula can be said to celebrate it as an eschatological advent – that is, as the inauguration of a New Covenant:

This proclamation expresses the vicarious death of Jesus as the beginning of the salvation time and prays for the coming of the consummation. As often as the death of the Lord is proclaimed at the Lord's supper, and the *maranatha* rises upwards, God is reminded of the unfulfilled climax of the work of salvation until (the goal is reached, that) he comes. Paul has therefore understood the *anamnesis* as the eschatological remembrance of God that is to be realized in the *parousia* (Jeremias 1977: 253).

It is with this in mind that Luke speaks of the eschatological jubilation and 'gladness' (*agalliasis*) which characterizes the mealtimes of the earliest Christian communities (Acts 2.46).

In sum, the close rapport between the Eucharistic request for repetition and the Passover ritual suggest that for both Judaism and Christianity the Kingdom advent is construed as a *retrieval-forward of the past as future*. The remembrance formula might be interpreted accordingly as something like this: 'Keep gathering together in remembrance of me so that I will remember you by keeping my promise to bring about the consummation of love, justice, and joy in the *parousia*. Help me to be God!' Or as the Coptic version of the formula goes: 'May the Lord come... If any man is holy, let him come. *Maranatha*. Amen.'

The above conjectures operate, for the most part, in the realm of hermeneutical poetics, which enjoys a certain imaginative liberty vis-à-vis the strictures of theological dogma, speculative metaphysics, or empirical physics. Though, I hasten to add, a fruitful dialogue remains open with all three disciplines.

*

Let me end with a final eschatological image from the poetics of the kingdom – the invitation to the feast. 'I stand at the door and knock, says the Lord. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and sit down to supper with him, and he with me.' The great thing about this promise of an eschatological banquet is that no one is excluded. The Post-God of *posse* knocks not just twice but a thousand times, nay, infinitely, ceaselessly, until there is no door unopened, no creature, however small or inconsequential, left out in the cold, hungry, thirsty, uncared for, unloved, unredeemed. The Post-God keeps knocking and

calling and delivering the word until we open ourselves to the message and the letter becomes spirit, the word flesh. And what is this message? An invitation to the kingdom. And what is the kingdom? The kingdom is a cup of cold water given to the least of these, it is bread and fish and wine given to the famished and un-housed, a good meal and (we are promised) one hell of a good time lasting into the early hours of the morning. A morning that never ends.

Bibliography

- Benjamin, Walter. (1979). "Theologico-Political Fragment" (1921). In: *One Way Street and Other Writings*. London: NLB.
- Breton, Stanislas. (2002). *The Word and the Cross*. Trans. Jacquelyn Porter. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Cohen, Marty. (1997). 'Sarach's Harp.' *Parabola* 22.
- Cusa, Nicholas of. (1980). *Triologus de Possest*. In: *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Glatzer, Nahum N. (ed). (1953). *The Passover Haggadah*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Hederman, Mark Patrick. (2002). *Anchoring the Altar: Christianity and the Work of Art*. Dublin: Veritas.
- Hillesum, Etty. (1996). *An Interrupted Life*. New York: Owl Books.
- Hoff, Benjamin. (1992). *The Te of Piglet*. London: Egmont.
- Jeremias, Joachim. (1977). *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Kearney, Richard. (1984). *Poétique du Possible: Phénoménologie herméneutique de la figuration*. Paris: Beauchesne.
- (2001). *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- (2005). "Enabling God." In: *After God: Richard Kearney and the Theological Turn in Continental Philosophy*. Edited by John Manoussakis. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Krishnamurti, Jiddu. (1969). *Freedom from the Known*. San Francisco: Harper.
- O'Grady, Selina and John Wilkins (eds.). (2002). *Great Spirits 1000-2000: The Fifty-Two Christians who Most Influenced their Millennium*. New York: Paulist Press.

- Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. (1980). *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*. Trans. J.D. Jones. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.
- Rashi. (1997). *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary*. New York: Mesorah Publications.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. (1984). *Letters to a Young Poet*. Trans. Stephen Mitchell. New York: Vintage Books.
- Žižek, Slavoj. (2000). *The Fragile Absolute or Why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* London/ New York: Verso.