

MY WAY TO THEOPOETICS THROUGH ERIUGENA

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Abstract

This piece charts the author's journey to theopoetics through the work of John Scotus Eriugena. Focusing on the key role played by Celtic mysticism in the development of a panentheist vision of things, the essay offers a poetical and ecological approach to our philosophical rethinking of divinity, nature and creation. It concludes with a tribute to the hilarious notion of a 'running God'.

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I first came to the idea of theopoetics while a young student at Glenstal Abbey in Ireland. The Benedictine monks possessed an ancient Russian Icon collection and were deeply conversant with the theopoetic theologies of John Scotus Eriugena and the early Greek fathers. One of the favourite quotes of my mentor, Abbot Patrick Hederman, was the Christological formula of the fourth-century Athanasius: 'God became us so that we might become God.'¹ Another was from Irenaeus: *Gloria dei homo vivens*—'The glory of God is the human fully alive.'

My first book, *La Poétique du Possible* (1984), explored the idea of co-creation as a liaison between a God who makes humanity and humanity who makes God, but it was not until the publication of *The God who May Be* in 2001 that I formulated my idea of divinity as a possibilising *theopotesis* of all beings (a notion deeply influenced by Nicholas of Cusa's understanding of God as *possest*). The basic thinking was this: divinity possibilises, humanity realises. God *is not* but *may be*—on condition that we show up and respond to the unconditional call for love and justice on this earth. More recently, I applied this core notion of co-creation to a number of writers (Gerard Manley Hopkins and Joyce) and artists (Andre Rublev, Antonella Da

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Messina, and Sheila Gallagher) in a piece called ‘God Making: Theopoetics and Anatheism’. This was published in a volume that I co-edited with Matthew Clemente in 2018 entitled *The Art of Anatheism: a text featuring several other essays on theopoetics by some of my closest intellectual interlocutors, including John Manoussakis, John Caputo, and Catherine Keller*. Indeed, I have had the honour of being in dialogue with Keller now for some years on the subject of theopoetics, most notably in our 2016 exchange in *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God*.² Keller has critically retrieved the concept of ‘theopoesis’ from her predecessors at Drew University, New Jersey—in particular Amos Wilder and Stanley Hopper—who conducted a series of influential conferences on the subject in the 1960s, bringing together existential phenomenology, left-wing Bultmannian theology, and the religion and literature movement. To this heady brew Keller has added daring dashes of new physics cosmology, mystical theology, and a feminist political theology of the earth.³ Her work has contributed to a very successful amplification of the theopoetic conversation in North-America and beyond.

Though my own current writing on theopoetics focuses largely on ‘anatheist’ literature and art, my initial introduction to theopoetics was, as mentioned, through the discovery of the ninth-century Irish philosopher John Scotus Eriugena. Here I learned that God was not some abstract principle or triumphal monarch but a force of creative love running through all things—a notion captured in Eriugena’s bold metaphor of the ‘running God’ (*deus currens*). Of which more below.

My first Benedictine mentor, Patrick Hederman, taught me that Eriugena was someone who paved a path beyond the binary opposites of dualist metaphysics (materialism versus nominalism) and theology (apophasis versus kataphasis). This opened a third way to God beneath and beyond the polarity of being and non-being. Hederman called this ‘teratology’—meaning a certain monstrous disruption of our normal logic of thinking which invites us to playfully and mystically imagine new ways of envisaging and experiencing the divine. By remaking language one could unmake and remake our conceptions of God. Hederman also taught me that Eriugena was a poet of play and *hilaritas*—key qualities of what I now understand by theopoetics.

My next exposure to Eriugena was thanks to my Dublin colleague and friend, Dermot Moran, in an essay he had written for a book I edited on *The Irish Mind* (1984). Moran taught me how boldly heretical Eriugena was in his ‘panentheist’ views on God as a live power in the natural world: ‘The accusation of heresy excluded Eriugena from the main western philosophical tradition for many centuries. Yet even in his own time he was regarded as an outsider, a *vir barbarus*, as the Vatican librarian terms him, an *advena* . . . a “famous Irishman” (*Scotum illum*). He stood out as a stranger in France.

Presumably he coined the name, Eriugena, to express this curious phenomenon, an Irishman versed in philosophical wisdom.’ And Moran adds: ‘Irish traits (which) have been adduced include—his love of nature, his resistance to authority which reminds one of Columbanus, his use of imagery of sea voyaging and peregrination which recalls Brendan the Navigator (or Walafrid Strabo’s remark that wandering was “second nature” to the Irish). His love of learning might suggest a schooling in the famous monasteries of early Ireland.’⁴

I later learned that others—notably poets such as Joyce, Pound, Yeats, and Borges—had also admired the mystical theopoetics of Eriugena. Joyce mentions his mysticism in his famous lectures on the ‘Ireland of Saints and Sages’ delivered in Trieste in 1907; and Borges agrees heartily with Joyce. Commenting on what he sees as a mystic liaison between Eriugena, Berkeley, and Joyce, Borges has this to say about their theopoetic vision (in conversation with myself and Seamus Heaney in Dublin in 1982—on the centenary of Joyce’s birth): ‘As an outsider looking on successive Irish thinkers I have been struck by unusual and remarkable repetitions. Berkeley was the first Irish philosopher I read . . . followed by Wilde, Shaw, and Joyce. And finally there was John Scotus Eriugena . . . I loved reading his *De Divisione Naturae*, which taught that God creates himself through the creation of his creatures in nature . . . I discovered that Berkeley’s doctrine of the creative power of the mind was already anticipated by Eriugena’s metaphysics of creation and that this in turn recurred in several other Irish writers (whose thinking) is remarkably akin to Eriugena’s system of things coming from the mind of God and returning to him . . . (I loved) the idea that all genuine creation stems from a metaphysical nothingness, what Eriugena called the ‘*Nihil*’ of God, which resides at the heart of our existence . . .’⁵

Eriugena was a key figure of the Celtic intellectual diaspora of medieval Europe. In the ninth century he left Ireland for Laon in France, where he spent many years at the court of King Charles the Bald, writing his great theopoetic treatise on Nature (the *Periphysion*). His impressive oeuvre also counted a significant body of poems (full of Celtic puns and hilarities) as well as his monumental translation of the Patristic mystic, Denys the Areopagite, from Greek into Latin. But he was not alone. His band of brothers included many other Irish scholars, amongst them Sedulius Scotus, Martin Hiberniensis, and Fergus of Laon. Ezra Pound praises Eriugena and his migrant compatriots for their famous ‘wit’ known as *hilaritas* and for ‘bringing Greek learning and the eastern patristic traditions into the Carolingian world’.⁶ This merry troupe of Celts made up what Christopher Bamford calls ‘an ecumenical cosmopolitanism’—which he explains thus: ‘to be a “Celt” meant to be at home everywhere: it is to have the gift of languages, the ability to empathize and be at one with everyone and everything; it is to be dialogue incarnate,

conversation, to know the Word in the word'.⁷ Which sounds like a good account of what one might call a Celtic theopoetics.

Central to the *hilaritas* of Celtic theopoetics was the ability to embrace opposites and dance with dualities. Just think of the encircling animals and interlacing plants in great medieval illustrated Irish manuscripts like *The Book of Kells* or *the Book of Durrow*. Greyhounds, whirligigs, donkeys. Morning glory, fir trees, ferns. Strangers, gods, and monsters. A divine–human–animal–comedy if ever there was one. Or think of the impishly mischievous verses of the ancient Celtic bards. Or the vagina–gaping Sheilnagigs splayed over sacred Irish thresholds. When it came to philosophy, Eriugena's comic vision was somewhat more epistemological, to be sure: it meant replacing the standard metaphysical logic of either/or with a capacious dialectical logic of both/and. Here the old polarities of grace and nature, divine and human, infinite and finite, male and female, light and darkness, spirit and earth, were overcome in a daring eagle's flight—to use Eriugena's choice poetic metaphor when commenting on John's Gospel. This mystical flight went beyond the polar alternatives of apophatic and kataphatic theology and anticipated Cusanus' *coincidentia oppositorum* by many centuries; and it is also said to have influenced the later mystical dialectics of German and romantic idealism.

Bamford celebrates this mystical dance of opposites in his commentary on Eriugena's Homily on the Prologue to St John—entitled *The Voice of the Eagle: The Heart of Celtic Christianity*. He claims that Eriugena possessed an 'implacable, impeccable ability to tolerate contradiction and paradox; but also, sheer chaos and confusion'.⁸ There was no light without darkness, Eriugena believed. His theopoetic vision saw the creation of nature as a dialectic arising from non-being into being and returning to a divinity before and beyond being. *Creatio ex nihilo* meant just that. *Ex nihilo* understood as the fertile chaos of *chora*, the tossing tumult of *tohu bohu*, light emerging from the inner womb of the cave, the 'formless void' of 'the waters' described in Genesis 1. (Catherine Keller and other feminist advocates of ecological theopoetics have much to say about this.)⁹ Eriugena himself 'makes no opposition between being and consciousness or consciousness and nature. These are complementaries within a single unity, poles of a unique process whose ground is divine consciousness and whose existence is divine procession'.¹⁰ In this sense, Eriugena thought philosophy (based on human thinking, *mens*) and theology (based on divine revelation, *logos*) were commensurable within an overall theopoetic dialectic. And he intuited a similar relation between cosmology and anthropology. Christ was cosmic—co-existing with nature from the beginning of creation to the end of time (Proverbs 8); the sun and earth were his spreading wings. *Theos* was *theosis* and *theosis* was *poesis*: the making human of the divine and the making divine of the human.

This theopoetics of natural and human creation may be seen—in part at least—as a distinctly Celtic quality of thought, certainly as I first came across it in my native Irish intellectual culture. There is a deep love of the earth in Celtic mystics, as Bamford notes, ‘understood in the largest sense as coextensive with the cosmos; we may think here of the modern Celt, Teilhard de Chardin, whose love of geology and the rockstuff of the earth led him to a profoundly “enChristed” understanding of evolution. Such is the “Celtic” Earth into which Christ incarnated and with whose destiny he united himself, when from his broken body on the cross, blood and water flowed forth into the broken body of the earth, making him forever the Spirit and the earth his body. It follows from this that nature and the sensuous world are *sacramental*; that is, things, beings, and events as *theophanies*, manifestations of the divine. *Everything in God, God in everything*’.¹¹

Yet to say God is *in* everything is not to say God *is* everything. God is in being but at the same time beyond being. In short, God is not nature (pantheism) but is everywhere in and through nature (pan-en-theism). The creator creates creatures from nothing and is in the creature but is not of the creature. ‘Divine wisdom is the creating cause of all things, is created in all things that it creates, and contains all things in which it is created.’¹² John O’Meara comments on the pantheist controversy of theopoetics thus: ‘Should we say then that God is all things and all things are God? Eriugena explicitly confronts himself with the charge of pantheism. He would not do so if he did not feel that he had given apparent grounds at least for it. But neither would he have done it if he did not feel that he could exonerate himself from it.’¹³ The same things that exist in God as potency (that is, the monad) exist in nature as actual—the two are only separated by the ‘nothing’. The darkness of the cave. The crack between God and nature that unites and divides at once. Eriugena’s God is a cracked God—a trickster, playmaker, joyous creator. Just like the ludic figures depicted in the marginalia of the great Celtic illuminated manuscripts, ferried by Irish scholars to ancient libraries of the European continent, where they can be found to this day. Nowhere more famously than in the special section of *scripti scottici* in St Gallen Monastery library in Switzerland. Here one witnesses visual-verbal theopoetics at its mischievous best.

Speaking of the theopoetic interplay between creator and created, between invisible maker and visible made, Eriugena himself writes: ‘we should not understand God and the creature as two things removed from one another, but as one and the same thing. For the creature subsists in God and God is created in the creature in a wonderful and ineffable way, making himself manifest, invisible making himself visible’ (678 C).¹⁴ But precisely because the divine nature is above and beyond being, it is also different from what it creates within itself. ‘Nothing (*nilhil*) is the ineffable, incomprehensible and

inaccessible clarity of the divine goodness, which, because it is above being, is unbeknown to all intellects and, while it is contemplated by itself, is not, was not and never will be. Hence it is called 'darkness'. . . . The divine goodness, which is called 'nothing', descends from itself to itself, as it were from nothing to something'.¹⁵

As I mentioned at the outset, one of the most powerful and intriguing metaphors used by Eriugena to communicate the mystery of *theopoiesis* is that of 'running'. God is a divine relay runner between nothing and something, between creating and created—the *deus currens* par excellence.¹⁶ Eriugena's metaphor of the 'running God' is an apt expression of the theo-poetic notion of creation as a giant river of love coursing through all things, human, animal, mineral and divine. Here is how he plays with the Greek etymology to make his metaphorical point. 'When *theos* is drawn from the verb *theo* (I run), it is rightly interpreted as the one who runs (*currens recte intelligitur*). Because God runs across everything that exists and is never impeded, he fills all in his course, as in the verse of Scripture: 'his word runs with swiftness' (Psalm 147).¹⁷ And Eriugena develops this metaphor of the *deus currens* as follows: 'If God is therefore called the one who runs (*currens dicitur*), it is because he causes everything that exists to run from a state of non-existence to a state of existence.' And again: 'The world is unfurled from one end of the world to the other, and he runs with haste across all existing beings, that is to say that the Word creates them all instantaneously, and that the Word becomes all in all. And then even as the Word continues to subsist in itself . . . it is unfurled across all existing being and this extension itself is constitutive of all things.'¹⁸

Eriugena concludes his reflections on divine running (*curare*) by linking the usually separate notions of making (*facere*), seeing (*videre*) and being (*esse*). 'In God the act of running through everything that exists is no different from his act of seeing everything that exists, but everything that exists is produced (made) concurrently by his running and by his seeing (*sicut videndo, ita et currendo fiunt omnia*).'¹⁹

The overall import of Eriugena's message is, I believe, that the divine is not to be understood as a static metaphysical Idea—hiding away in some transcendental heaven—but as an integral part of all created things: theo-poetics incarnate. Or as Hopkins so aptly describes it in his poem 'God's Grandeur': 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God/It will flame out, like shining from shook foil'.²⁰ Hopkins, a Jesuit poet, developed a quintessential theo-poetics celebrating the inherent divinity of all beings, 'counter, original, spare, strange'.²¹ He identified the cosmic Christ with a divine potency within all mortal things, not only human eyes and limbs, but kingfishers, wells, stones and dragonflies:

... Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I dó is me: for that I came.*

... Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—
Christ—for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.
(‘As Kingfishers catch fire and Dragonflies draw flame’)²²

Most of Hopkins' theopoetic epiphanies were written while teaching in Dublin (in the same national university as Joyce); and he, like Joyce and Eriugena before him, was also considered 'cracked' (psychotic-neurasthenic) by many of his contemporaries and met with ecclesiastical censure for his writings. Not a single volume of his work appeared during his lifetime.

A thousand years before Hopkins, Eriugena presented us with a theopoetics of nature understood as both phenomenal appearance (*phainomenon/apparitio*) and metaphoric making (*logos apophantikos*). 'Running' was the startling poetic figure he chose to describe the divine current of creation coursing through all things. In suggesting that *physis* (nature) was *poiesis* (making), Eriugena was not only affirming the panentheist poetics of Celtic Christianity but also echoing his favourite passages from Abrahamic Scripture where we read of the divine as a running brook (Psalms), a running deer (Song of Songs), an electrical current of lightning running through the sky (Luke 17), and a beloved disciple running to the tomb of Christ in order to witness the return of life; or Paul who runs the race of life to the finish (2 Tim. 4). So too deity runs like a lightning, life-giving river through creation—connecting and reconnecting all persons and things—from beginning to end. That is my favourite image of theopoetics.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Patrick Hederman's most recent books include *The Opal and the Pearl* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2017) and *Living the Mystery* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2019). He delivered a keynote address on 'Eriugena, Mythopoetics and Teratology' at the Mystical Theology Network conference at Boston College, April 2019, to be published in the conference proceedings, edited by Sheila Gallagher and Louise Nelstrop (forthcoming, Routledge, 2020).
- ² Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmermann (eds), *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Richard Kearney and Matthew Clemente (eds), *The Art of Anatheism* (London, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018); Richard Kearney, *Poétique du Possible* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984); Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).

- ³ Catherine Keller develops her vision of theo-poetics as a fertile conversation between mystical theology, process philosophy, ecology and the new physics in a number of recent works, including *The Cloud of the Impossible* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), *Intercarnations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017) and *The Political Theology of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). I would also like to mention here the remarkable work of Callid Keefe-Perry, another contributor to *The Art of Atheism*, Chair of ARC: Arts, Religion, Culture, and author of the excellent volume, *Way to Water: A Theo-poetics Primer* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).
- ⁴ Dermot Moran, 'Nature, Man and God in the Philosophy of John Scotus Eriugena', in Richard Kearney (ed.), *The Irish Mind: Exploring Intellectual Traditions* (New York: Humanities Press, 1984), p. 93. For more on the Celtic nature of Eriugena's thought see also John Manoussakis' Foreword to John Gavin, SJ, *A Celtic Christology: The Incarnation according to John Scotus Eriugena* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).
- ⁵ Seamus Heaney and Richard Kearney, 'Borges and the World of Fiction: An Interview with Jorge Luis Borges', *The Crane Bag* 6.2 (1982) 71–8, pp. 75–6.
- ⁶ Mark Byron, *Ezra Pound's Eriugena* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 253–4.
- ⁷ Christopher Bamford, *The Voice of the Eagle: The Heart of Celtic Christianity* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfame Books, 2000), p. 49.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- ⁹ Other contemporary feminist theologians who have much to contribute to this debate on mystical theo-poetic creation include Cynthia Bourgeault, Barbara Brown Taylor, and Illa Delio.
- ¹⁰ Bamford, *The Voice of the Eagle*, p. 58.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- ¹² John O'Meara, *Eriugena* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1969), p. 49.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ See Emmanuel Falque's illuminating commentary on this idea in 'God Phenomenon: John Scotus Eriugena', in *God, The Flesh and The Other: From Irenaeus to Duns Scotus* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), pp. 47 *et seq.* Plato may well be one of the origins of this bracing mythopoetic metaphor of the running God, when, in a passage in *Cratylus*, he suggests this etymology for 'theos':
- Socrates: 'My notion would be something of this sort: I suspect that the sun, moon, earth, stars, and heaven, which are still the Gods of many barbarians, were the only Gods known to the aboriginal Hellenes. Seeing that they were always moving and running, from their running nature they were called Gods (*Theous*) or runners (*Theontas*); and when men became acquainted with the other Gods, they proceeded to apply the same name to them all. Do you think that likely?'
- Homogenes: 'I think it very likely indeed.' In brief, 'theoi' (gods) is ultimately derived from the verb 'theo', meaning to run, and designating motion.
- ¹⁷ Cited Falque, *op. cit.*, p. 66.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ 'As Kingfishes catch flame and dragonflies draw flame.' Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 128.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 129.