



BRILL

JOURNAL FOR CONTINENTAL
PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION 5 (2023) 119–124

JCPR
brill.com/jcpr

After Thoughts on After Gods

A Response to Hendel, Damen, Putt, and Hederman

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Abstract

Richard Kearney offers a response to the Scriptorium on his work and its relation to the poetic imagination.

Keywords

atheism – Kearney – poetics – theopoetics

I am very honored to respond to these four excellent papers on atheism and literature. One common question shared by my interlocuters is whether atheism is primarily a philosophical or a theological term. Hederman, Hendel and Putt take it generally as both, while Damen concludes by wondering why I continue to position myself as a philosopher, asking provocatively: 'Might Kearney consider coming out of the closet as a theologian?' The answer is no. Or to put it more accurately, not quite. Not because I am in any way against theology but because 1) I am, to be honest, rather theologically illiterate, having no competence in dogmatics or biblical studies and having never read Rahner, Von Balthasar or Bultmann (amongst others); and 2) because while I am very open to what is called philosophical theology or theological philosophy, I myself try to observe (not always successfully) the hermeneutic distinction between the two disciplines, after the manner of my mentor Paul Ricœur. It is a distinction going back to Husserl and Heidegger, who, for methodological reasons, separated the phenomenological question of being – why is there something rather than nothing? What are the 'things themselves'? – from the theological question of how something came from nothing in the first place. Theology answers

the question by invoking Revelation: there is something rather than nothing because the book of Genesis reveals to us that Elohim created the world in seven days. In short, the beginning of theology is the end of philosophy, and vice versa. Both are, of course, entirely legitimate disciplines with different methods and presuppositions. And both can, I believe, enter into productive and engaging dialogue (as I try to do, in my modest way, following my Paris teachers, Ricœur, Levinas, Derrida and Breton). But the dialogue is between different questions – the question of being and the question of God – rather than a soliloquy of the same. Of course divinity can reveal itself in and through Being (what I call ‘theopoetics’), and Being can open spaces for the advent of divine revelation (in the eschatology of the sacred). Granted. But they are not univocal. They are equivocal or polyvocal, at best. And that makes for many creative hermeneutic cross-overs and translations, each time honoring the distinct hermeneutic paths and bridges one traverses at any moment.

To borrow from Levinas, ‘*On s’amuse mieux à deux*.’ Two modes of questioning – philosophical and theological – are better than one. But I am no purist; I favor intellectual promiscuity over intellectual apartheid. Instead of calling for a rigid separation between the two discourses I endorse a practice of mutual combustion and hybridity – what post-colonial scholars call *métissage*. And maybe that is another name for a phenomenology of religion – tracing epiphanies of the sacred in our everyday lives as a poetics of possibility rather than a dogmatics of certainty.

Let me try to illustrate these remarks by taking some examples from my commentators. All four engage with works of literature to articulate the wager of atheism. Hederman and Putt choose Wallace Stevens, Hendel chooses Philip Larkin and Enrieke Damen chooses Sharon Olds. One question shared by all four is this: how epistemological is the atheist wager? On the face of it, atheism follows the Pascalian calculation concerning the existence or non-existence of God. Hendel notes, for example, how atheism is defined in terms of an ‘inaugural instant of reckoning at the root of belief’, a space ‘where we are free to choose between faith and nonfaith’. But he quickly adds that it is more than a matter of epistemological speculation – ‘a gnashing of convictions’ or ‘arid calculation of reason’. The real aim of atheism is not intellectual conjecture or cool agnosticism but a passage beyond scruples of belief and disbelief altogether to a ‘space where the sacred can be re-figured’, that is re-imagined, and, finally, re-lived. The process of refiguration is what invites an embrace of poetic imagination. And Hendel engages the poetries of Philip Larkin – as well as Auden, Hopkins and Hardy – as powerful dramas of such atheist reimagining. H reads them as literary journeyings beyond the suspension of faith and non-faith to a new kind of relation with the sacramental and the sacred. But

Hendel also rightly acknowledges that anatheist imagination can only go so far. It opens portals to everyday epiphanies, but it does not finally decide the matter of how re-figuration transforms our world – not just by *seeing* it anew it but by *living* it anew. That return from text to action, from *poiesis* to *praxis*, is a bridge too far for the poet. Poetics can bring the horse to water but cannot make it drink. A poem never stopped a tank, as Heaney reminds us. Poetics needs to be supplemented by ethics for the anatheist movement to be completed. Poets are not actors or activists. They dispose and propose but it is up to the reader to enact imaginary possibilities – the stuff of poetics – in the real world of action.

Damen – in a paper originally delivered at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht in the summer of 2022 – pursues the question of sacramental imagination as a laboratory of possibilities which ‘opens the door to a more embodied and carnal understanding of Kearney’s hermeneutics’. She sees the origins of anatheism in a *‘poétique du possible’* which ultimately invites a leap of ana-carnation in lived experience. To imagine poetically is to create the freedom to dwell poetically – to follow the call of *ana* to ‘go out upon the earth, go to and fro, and up and down, in it’. In her reading of Sharon Olds’ dazzling poem, Damen demonstrates how the anatheist imagination is committed to retrieving the extraordinary (divine) in the ordinary (profane), to discovering transcendence in the immanence of our incarnate existence.

Hederman and Putt, for their part, demonstrate how the poetry of Wallace Stevens epitomizes the central drama of anatheism. Hederman does so by arguing that Paul Mariani’s religious reading of Stevens comes closer to what the poet was fundamentally about than Helen Vendler’s more formalist and linguistic interpretation (where, to juggle with Yeats, ‘words alone are certain good’). Reviewing stories about Stevens’ late deathbed conversion, Hederman does not rely on these to make his point, but looks to the poetry itself which, he suggests, points beyond itself to a higher and larger anatheist mystery, in tune with the ‘supreme fiction’ that ‘Imagination and God are one’.

Putt concludes the colloquy with a close reading of Steven’s later poems as dramatic illustrations of anatheism and of Marion’s phenomenology of revelation. Let me refer here to some of his subtle moves. Putt, like Hederman, recognizes the threefold cast of ‘poet, believer and lover’ at work in Steven’s anatheist imagination. All are beholden to ‘a fiction of the absolute’ in different ways, but share a passion, nay, obsession, for this absolute which is no mere fantasy. Stevens’ ‘Supreme Fiction’ is greater than the subjective mind that imagines it. It is not solipsism but the very ‘the idea of God as this world’s capital idea’ – and one which could ‘occupy a school of rabbis for the next few generations’. Note that Stevens does not say a school of literary critics or semioticians.

He contends that the idea of God may take difference forms of life as well as multiple semiotic forms in an endless 'substitutability of names'. His claim for the ultimate unity of God and poetry, to the extent of seeing the latter as a medium of salvation, is more than nomenclature, a play of signifiers. Poetry is like religion – a secular version of the sacred – in that it constantly 'discovers and invents order and meaning'. And the verb *discover* is crucial, for there is more to order than the human mind can conjure. It is something we see and hear as 'aboriginal phenomenologists' (another name for atheist poets). Stevens is not a theologian interested in the apologetic pursuit of theistic proofs nor a sceptic engaged in the dogmatic refutation of such proofs. His poetics operate beyond epistemological propositions, beyond scruples of verification and falsification. And in this sense it enacts an atheist dialectic between 'after-faith and after-God', where both seek each other out in 'an asymptotic series of reoccurrences in which neither (faith nor God) may ever be absolutized in a fixed closure of meaning'. Poetics precedes and exceeds epistemics.

I fully endorse Putt's refusal to let the apophatic character of atheism dwindle to the level of a pedestrian agnosticism. 'The I-don't-know of non-knowing', he rightly insists, 'cannot be reduced to the epistemological confession of mere ignorance or the voluntaristic passivity of avoiding a decision.' Indeed, it is for this reason that I have recently preferred the term 'anacarnation' to that of atheism, namely, to avoid the overly credal controversies of believing this or that. Atheist faith is more of a believing-in than a believing-that – a *fidens* or *confidens* in transcendence embodied in immanent beings, before me here and now. Anacarnating in the 'thisness' of singular faces and places, again and again. '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' (Hopkins). It is ultimately less about belief statement than lived experiences. Or as Richard Rohr puts it: 'Authentic Christianity is not so much a belief system as a life-and-death system that shows us how to give away our life, how to give away our love, and eventually how to give away our death. Basically, how to *give away* – and in doing so, to connect with the world, with all other creatures, and with God' (Richard Rohr, *Contemplation and Action*, Feb 24, 2023).

Putt describes the asymptotic process of atheism as a sort of 'eschatology' – though not necessarily in a strictly theological sense (Ricoeur, for example, uses eschatology as a philosophical term independent of dogmatics). But I would add the term 'ontology' to this equation, as when I define the 'God Who May Be' as 'onto-eschatological'. The reference to being (*on*) is important here, for it sustains a commitment to our being-in-the-world here and now, as well as to the not-yet of the eschaton. Atheism is not just a deferral of

possibilities still to come (asymptotically or eschatologically) but also an act of sacramental imagination and action in the lived incarnate moment – albeit a moment which is never fixed once and for all but forever renews itself at each moment of time. It is the infinite anacarnating itself in every finite moment infinitely. The eschaton revealing itself in the real presence of everyday epiphanies. As in Walter Benjamin's notion that every instant of present time is a 'portal through which the Messiah may enter' – anatheistically, anaphatically, anacarnately. Or as T.S. Elliot puts it in a famous phrase from *the Four Quartets* (cited by Putt): to embrace the sacred in the profane in the moment is 'to arrive where we started from and know the place for the first time'.

Putt and Hederman are correct, in my view, to correlate my anatheist theo-poetics with a poetics of the 'supreme fiction'. They recognize both as ways of amplifying the horizons of denominating divinity by expanding the vocabulary for God so as 'to capture dimensions of the sacred that may get lost in an attenuated discourse'. This is what Stevens calls the 'necessary angel of earth' who enables us to see the world again and again (*ana*). Not in a circle but in a spiral. It is a question of theo-poetics surpassing and refiguring the language of theology in a new semantics of the sacred. (I appreciate that when Putt uses the terms 'theology' or 'God' in his reading of anatheism he puts them in inverted commas.) But, I repeat, theo-poetics is not just a transformation of language but of reality itself, a transformation of both word and flesh which points beyond literalist fundamentalism and groundless nihilism. It testifies to an order of meaning which is forever prefigured and refigured in an endless 'poetics of the possible'. Real presence and eschatological absence in dialogue. A dialogue suspended between the ethical call of the present – 'where are you?' – and the messianic call of the future – 'when will you come'? And here I am very grateful to Damen for tracing the connections between my first published work *Poétique du Possible* (1984) and my later project of a carnal hermeneutics of the sacred, explored in *Anatheism* (2012), *Reimagining the Sacred* (2014), *Touch* (2021) and *Anacarnation* (2022). To which I might add *Radical Hospitality* (2022), where the messianic other takes the form of the stranger knocking at the door of the present moment, inviting us to host him/her as guest. The danger with the Heideggerean and Derridean deconstruction of the 'metaphysics of presence' is that it risks neglecting the incarnate present in the name of some disincarnate futurity. It risks sacrificing today on the altar of tomorrow.

Against the 'seduction of certainty' which can so easily lead to a theodicy of causal explanation and triumphal exclusion ('Our God is the only God' – *In Hic Signo – Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*), anatheist poetics affirms a supreme yes in the wake of the purgative no. It signals something wondrous after the 'nothing

that is not there and the nothing that is'. I leave the last word to the master of supreme affirmation-after-negation, Stevens himself:

'After the final no there comes a yes
And on that yes the future world depends,
No was the night. Yes is the present sun.'

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