

UNTAMED WISDOM: POETICS OF DESIRE AND THE RENEWAL OF THEOLOGY AS AN ART  
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*“Have you never seen a sail faring over the sea, rounded and swelling and shuddering before the impetuosity of the wind? Like a sail, shuddering before the impetuosity of the spirit, my wisdom fares over the sea – my untamed wisdom!” (Friedrich Nietzsche)*

We have reached a place of crisis in both church and society, at least for many who inhabit churches shaped by the profound forces of modernity. It is a crisis of confidence in the power of the ancient symbols and in the coherence of biblical narrative, imaginative forces that have long carried the Christian faith. Not that these are no longer central in congregational worship and, often enough, in the wider national discourse: they remain identifying markers of our public culture. But our confidence in them has waned, and any hope that we might find a ready antidote to this crisis seems fickle. The imposition of authority will not gain this lost ground, and attempts to “re-imagine” these symbols or rewrite the scriptural narrative will not suffice. The root of the dis-ease is deeper and less amenable to such sincere attempts at adjustment: it is not primarily the consequence of secularization, at least in North America, but rather the measure of a broader cultural shift which Max Weber described a century ago as “disenchantment” (*Entzauberung*). Driven by a purpose-driven rationality, western cultures in modernity have shaped their identity and gauged their success by what Heidegger called a “calculative” thinking, a form that largely disregards the meditative or poetic. The poet Hölderlin, a primary inspiration for Heidegger’s aesthetics, already admitted that “The gods are [still] alive, but they are far above us now in another world,” and he wondered what use poets could possibly have in such “destitute times.”

What use, indeed? Amid the flurry of recent arguments in favor of narrowing the chasm that has long separated theology and the arts in modernity, several devote special attention to poetics and thus deserve particular mention. In a secular *apologia* for the arts as a legitimation of the theological, George Steiner in *Real Presences* (1989) offers what he calls “a wager on transcendence” in exploring the generative role that the arts have played in “translating” or “carrying over” something of this lost mythic world – or, as he puts it, the “self-querying inexplicability of mythical narration”; among the wide range of the arts engaged in this study, Steiner privileges the poetics of music with special emphasis because of the way it is “brimful of meanings which will not translate into logical structures or verbal expressions.” In the same year, Walter Brueggemann addressed his Beecher Lectures (published as *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation*) to the “crisis of interpretation” in which we find ourselves today, one driven by “our technical way of thinking [which] reduces mystery to problem” and is both the cause and consequence of “reduced speech” in church and society. And, more recently, Edward Farley in *Deep Symbols: Their Postmodern Effacement and Reclamation* (1996) laments the slow atrophy in modernity of symbolic truth, and wonders how we might recover this lost poetic intelligence through strategies of “reenchantment” – a theme poignantly explored in Morris Berman ground-breaking volume, *The Reenchantment of the World* (1981).

Each of these studies reminds us, in diagnostic and constructive terms, that we are living through an aesthetic impasse long in the making. At its heart it is nothing less than a crisis of imagination, which manifests itself for those in the church as a crisis of faith. Against the magnitude of these losses, compensatory strategies will hardly prove effective: little will be gained simply by commissioning paintings to decorate the empty walls of sanctuaries, choreographing dance within liturgies that lack physical movement or spiritual energy, or inserting a few lines of poetry into otherwise stolid pulpit prose. Of course, the arts have not stagnated in our times. But they have been largely marginalized in our public culture, and with the exception of music are too often present in our churches, if at all, as awkward and uncomfortable guests. Hölderlin’s question is still a provocation when he cries out, “And you, angel of our time, shall you rouse those who are unawakened?” Who, indeed? Our churches are in need of nothing less than an awakening of the arts, the recovery of the untamed wisdom of poetics as a neglected aesthetic in what Brueggemann has vividly characterized as our “prose-flattened” world. It is this crisis that locates the need for a project such as this.

This estrangement of theology and the arts across the wide arc of modernity is now shifting in decisive ways, a distinct if also subtle development that structures this study of poetics. It is my contention that the arts in modernity have carried on what modern theology has often neglected, continuing in an often secular voice the legacy described provocatively by the poet Wallace Stevens as “a mystical aesthetic.” In his remarkable collection of essays, published as *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and Imagination* in 1942, Stevens interpreted this aesthetic as “a prodigious search of appearance, as if to find a way of saying and of establishing that all things, whether below or above appearance, are one and that it is only through reality, in which they are reflected or, it may be, joined together, that we can reach them.” It is this “prodigious search of appearance. . .through reality” that occupies my attention in this project. As a study both historical and constructive in method, this probing of poetics reaches from the theological formulations of the late antique and medieval periods to the modernist movement in the arts, identifying an unexpected continuity of vision and discourse too often ignored in the interrupted conversation between contemporary artists and theologians – and generally neglected in the emerging academic discipline of theology and the arts.

*The outline for the book that will emerge from this study proceeds in four movements. In the first movement, I explore the theological seeds of this tradition of poetics beginning with Origen and Augustine in Late Antiquity and Pseudo-Dionysius in the early Middle Ages, and concluding with its flowering in Bernard of Clairvaux and the early Cistercians and in Dante’s remarkable fictional synthesis of the medieval world. I contend that this poetics, shaped by the yearning for the “God beyond God,” locates the “otherness” of presence – theology, properly speaking – in a dynamic not of *presence* and *achievement* but rather of *absence* and *desire*. In exploring this contention, I draw upon the provocative work of Denys Turner who argues in *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* for a fundamental reassessment of what we have come to call “mysticism” in modernity: he contends that this central theological tradition, as developed from the early fathers to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Carmelite reformers, was actually “*anti-experiential*,” not merely as “an intellectual critique of discourse” but also as “a practice which was expected to be embodied in a life.”*

Another historical reassessment, even more prominent in guiding the methodological approach of my project, is the daring critique of modernity as advanced by Michel de Certeau in *The Mystic Fable* (1992). He locates the transitions toward modernity as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century, pointing to the increasing “professionalization” during this period in the school theology of the universities; this marks a shift away from the use of rhetoric and toward dialectic (logic), and a preference for the *written* over the *spoken* word. In the midst of such profound cultural shifts, de Certeau suggests that “the spirituals and mystics took up the challenge of the *spoken* word” – in the form of a distinct poetics, or what he calls “wanderings,” which stood in stark contrast to the “technicalizing of society” and the ideology of conquest as these begin to reshape late-medieval western culture. The visionary traditions that begin to emerge and the proliferation of the arts in this transitional period distanced themselves from the dominant exertions of theology as an academic discipline, the former expressing a “nostalgia connected with the progressive decline of God as One, the object of love.” *The second movement* of this project turns to explore these transitions, laying particular emphasis on the translations of *eros* into new forms which these cultural forces both envisioned and promoted. Here, I focus on the harvest of visionary literature in the later Middle Ages, with special attention to the theological poetics of the English “mystics” of the period – i.e., Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Julian of Norwich.

*The third movement* of this project traces the displacement of poetics in modern theology, at least in those forms influenced by the pressures of the Enlightenment and the rising interest in historical studies. In the substance of this section, I turn to the arts, with particular interest in the movement known as “modernism.” As a way to frame the poetics of this emerging *mentalité*, I first explore two novellas: Gerhart Hauptmann’s *Michael Kramer* (1900) and Hermann Hesse’s *Peter Camenzind* (1093/4), works in which the poetics of desire finds central place; this brings me back to the beginnings of my intellectual formation, since these writings were at the center of the honors thesis I wrote in college. Only then do I

turn to focus greater attention on a group of modernist poets, a movement shaped by an aesthetic Nathan Scott has aptly characterized as “transcendence downward.” Here I explore how several of these poets – Rainer Maria Rilke, Wallace Stevens, and T. S. Eliot among them – discover and express in their writings an erotics largely absent in the theology of their day – viz., as a longing for or reaching toward what cannot easily be spoken, the endless working with words which “after speech, reach/ Into the silence” (Eliot). They stand as the secular heirs to the earlier mystical artists of the apophatic, drawn into and through language by an imagined experience of “otherness,” of an alterity that lies within and yet always beyond the grasp of speech. Such expressions of poetics constitute what Simone Weil called “decreation,” a theme Stevens took special pains to highlight in his writings on aesthetics. While this is not of itself a sufficient measure of mysticism, whatever this word finally means in modernity – and this project will focus quite deliberately on this important question – it is clear that without such a poetics there is nothing we might properly call mystical, an impoverishment felt in worship as in every dimension of the properly theological enterprise.

What emerges from this study, and this constitutes *the fourth movement*, is a constructive call for the recovery of a theology shaped by a poetics of desire, one that will not refuse to understand its vocation as launching “a raid on the inarticulate,” as Eliot described it. But this refusal comes at a steep cost: What if theology itself, following the presumption of this study, is really unavoidably and instinctively poetic – that is, if it is still to be properly *theological* at heart? This is a central issue animating a rising chorus of theological and philosophical voices within and beyond the late-modern academy; a renewed attention to poetics promises to bring theological thinking and research once again into closer proximity to the arts. For artists have long shared Nietzsche’s preference for an “untamed wisdom,” one rooted in embodied practices: against all those inflicted with “the spirit of gravity,” the “murderers of ecstasy,” as he called them, he stood for laughter, for poetry, for the dance: “Only in the dance,” he concludes, “do I know how to tell the parable of the highest things.” And they desire, with Nietzsche, to seek beauty “where I must will with all my will; where I want to love and perish that an image may not remain a mere image.” Theologians and artists shaped by such convictions, poetic thinkers like Nietzsche, will no longer accept the banishment Plato decreed for poets in his *Republic*. And, with him, they refuse to embrace the cynicism that dominates the unpoetical world of modernity, resisting the stultifying pressures of a culture “in which imagination is no longer all-powerful. Where if you had/ to write the whole thing down, you could” (Jorie Graham, “Covenant,” in *Never: Poems* [2002]). They refute the cold logic of minor ambitions, knowing that we live in what Heidegger has called “the age of the world’s night.” Musing upon Hölderlin’s brooding question about the use of poets in such a time, Heidegger suggests that “we must think of this world’s night as a destiny that takes place this side of pessimism and optimism.” It is the question of this destiny, and the poets’ refusal of silence in the face of this terrible mystery, that frames this final section of this project.

In construing the relationship of theology and the arts through a poetics of desire, we begin to discern a common literary strategy which joins the critical and the imaginative, the historical and the aesthetic. Such convergences locate poetics as a “mystical aesthetic” familiar to both medieval mystics and visionaries, modernist artists, and those among us who long for an “untamed wisdom” in our search for a place of dialogue that might be both critical and constructive in turning toward the “real,” as Stevens put it. In excavating the historical and cultural foundations for this poetics, the present study points to an existing dialogue between medieval theology and its mystical variations, on the one hand, and the contemporary arts, on the other. But it builds on this foundation by creating space for *a new conversation* between theologians, artists, and all those who find themselves languishing at the boundaries where the heritage of symbol and myth meets the yearning for what Nietzsche simply called “new speech.” As such, it answers Stevens’ almost evangelical call for “the conversion of our *Lumpenwelt*,” inviting us to cultivate a neglected or altogether lost poetics in church and society. It is thus not simply one more constructive argument regarding theological method, though it is surely this: it is, more importantly, an apology for a mystical aesthetic, a call to renew theology as an art – and to advance the art of theology.