

**TOWARD A THEOPOETICS OF POETRY**

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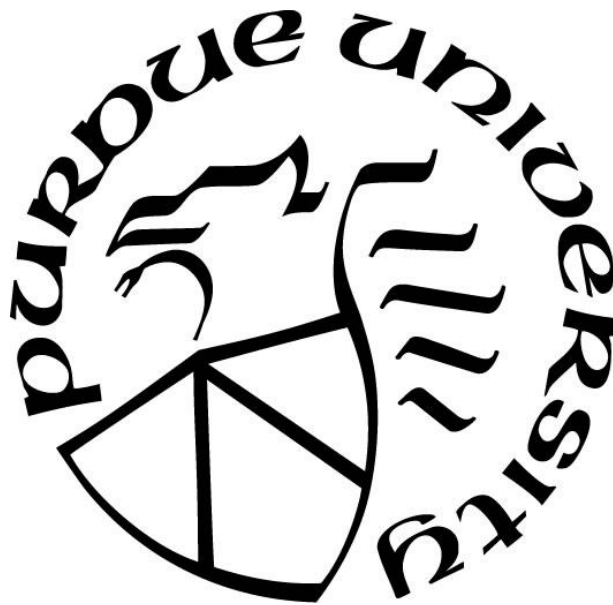
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After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,  
Finally shall come the poet worthy that name,  
The true Son of God shall come singing his songs.  
—Walt Whitman

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents Theopoetics, a theo-philosophical aesthetic movement that arose from the 1960's Death of God theology, as a hermeneutical framework that accounts for both embodiment and the numinous in poetry. Through an examination of the life and poetic works of the disenfranchised religious poet, Thomas Merton, and a more religiously nebulous poet, Denise Levertov. This paper will present two different perspectives from these poets who encountered the need to qualify the numinous in their poetry and subverted that qualification through a theopoetic process.

## INTRODUCTION

### **A Need for a Poetics That Engages Both Body and Spirit**

Within religious and poetic scholarship, there can be a possibility to demythologize or rationalize language and inspirational processes that engage the world primarily through mystery—to cage that which longs to be free. This need to systematize language might not intentionally mean to favor a particular articulation of scholarship over another, but this need to have a systematized understanding limits voices, perspectives, and ideas that are contrary in order to maintain consistency. Especially when it comes to matters of the “spiritual” or the “numinous,” ideas that cannot be explicitly nailed down, or ideas that contain a multiplicity of articulations, and may unintentionally be expressed as not essential within a systematic. This casting aside of the numinous is ever more dangerous within the realm of poetry as it often does not allow interpretations or explorations of a poem’s creation or meaning to communicate the numinous in an academically acceptable way.

Religious institutions, like churches or seminaries, fall into the possibility of focusing too closely on matters of the “spiritual” or the “numinous,” favoring perspectives, voices, and ideas that may unintentionally leave out the human body and, therefore, present articulations that do not contain a focus on the physical needs or longings of the common person. When applied to poetry, this hyper-focus on the numinous from a religious perspective, often leads to a crafting of poems that articulate little more than an “artful” sermon or doctrines repeated back to congregants in a different medium than a lecture.

In these spaces of either a hyper-focus on or even an explicit rejection of the numinous, an interpretive framework arises to engage with poetry in a way that accounts for both the body *and* the numinous without diminishing either. Theopoetics is a hermeneutical framework that accounts for the often-missed embedded expressions of the numinous within poetics while not diminishing the importance of the physical human experience in the understanding and interpretation of poetic works. A Theopoetic framework examines the world and the poets’ work and finds that there are articulations of the Divine grounded in human experience which inspire the poet to write “theopoetically” regardless of religious affiliation and belief.



Theopoetics as a framework presents a way in which poetry that engages the numinous can be experienced without footnote or qualification to any particular religious community and allows the poet to engage in the act of creation and inspiration without needing to deny or qualify the numinous to an academic community. This paper seeks to examine how the Theopoetic framework accounts for both the body and the numinous in poetry and presents a Theopoetic praxis through the poetry of Thomas Merton, a religious poet seeking a new expression of the Divine, and Denise Levertov, a more religiously nebulous poet who is seeking new ways to serve the poem itself. By explicating and examining Thomas Merton and Denise Levertov, this paper will present two different perspectives from these poets who encountered the need to qualify the numinous in their poetry and subverted that qualification through a theopoetic process.

# THEOPOETICS AS MEANS TO CREATE AND INTERPRET TEXTS

## Theopoetics History<sup>1</sup>

It is important to briefly overview the beginnings of the Theopoetics movement that founded the framework because within the idea, there are several strands of thought that cover a wide range of disciplines within theology and the arts. As archivist of the movement L. Callid Keefe-Perry claims, “There is no single [T]heopoetic perspective” (Keefe-Perry *Theopoetics* 596). To truly understand the significance of the framework and what it seeks to promulgate, one must first know why the movement was founded and what the Theopoetics scholars expect the framework to accomplish. Among the various understandings of what constitutes Theopoetics, scholars maintain that there must be an explicit connection to the body along with an implicit or explicit articulation of the numinous through aesthetics.

There is need for a connection between the body and the numinous, or put another way, of the Divine articulated in interacting with real-life experience in a Theopoetic framework. This developed out of a need to respond to questions posed by *Time Magazine*’s controversial 1966 cover that inquired “Is God dead?” It was presupposed by the articles in that issue that religion and spiritual discourse were becoming irrelevant and people were ready to move on to a more scientific understanding of the world. Scholars of religion were wrestling with ideas of how to refute this claim while also establishing a new way to engage with or understand the Divine. This wrestling with the idea of the death of God and its repercussions created the need for an organization to gather together scholars, poets, artists, and theologians to discuss what would be next for religious discourse and the arts. The Society for the Arts, Religion and Contemporary Culture (SARCC) was founded to answer such inquires, with some notable fellows being W.H. Auden, Joseph Campbell, Rollo May, Marianne Moore, and eventually Denise Levertov. It is within this cultural milieu that the process of creating a Theopoetics began.

<sup>1</sup> This section is heavily indebted to the work of L. Callid Keefe Perry, especially his book *A Way to Water: A Theopoetics Primer*.

## **A Generative Unfolding: Theopoetics as More than Theology in Hopper, Wilder, and Alves**

With each new Theopoetic scholar, the focus of the framework began to expand outward from a theoretical academic discipline, primarily focused on theological responses to language, into a new way to craft and interpret poetic texts. Through the contributions of scholars like Stanley R. Hopper, Amos N. Wilder, and Rubem A. Alves, whose articulations become a generative framework for the creation, explication, and evaluation of poetry which will provide language for the examinations of the poets to follow, eventually become characterized as Theopoetics.

Moving Theopoetics out of primarily a theological discipline into a poetic one demands that Stanley Hopper (1907–1991) articulate a terminology and present a purpose for the idea. He articulates a term, Theopoetics (or at times Theo-poeisis) and the term's purpose in a speech given at the Third SARCC Consultation in 1966 entitled "The Literary Imagination and the Doing of Theology." In that speech, Hopper presents a culture whose "interest in religious discourse is not what it once was because the vocabulary of theological conversation is so far removed from experience that it does not engage most people in a meaningful way" (Keefe-Perry 27). The idea was not to spruce up theology with bits of poetry or to make it more palatable for newer audiences. For the framework to move into the poetic and not just theoretical academic prose, the scholars had to ground language of the Divine or numinous in ways that would embody the culture and the times. In this way, Theopoetics was to become a call for a "deep aesthetic recalibration in which the terms of discussion would be reconfigured to shift from a kind of scientific mechanicalism toward an organic and embodied surplus of meaning" (Keefe-Perry 28). This, in Hopper's thought, is enacted by the artist through their imaginative ways of communicating and expressing "old" ideas in "new" organic and embodied ways primarily through the artist's use of metaphor.

This recalibration toward the experiential nature of language as a primary means to engage with the numinous is grounded in the culture and within the needs of the people within the Theopoetics framework. This shift is made explicit in the work of poet and scholar Amos Wilder (1895–1993), who posits that Theopoetics as a framework presents an artful and cohesive examination of the numinous in *both* Biblical and poetic exegesis. Wilder "picks up" the term "Theopoetics" from Hopper, believing the term to be a more adequate title for a theory he was crafting called "Mythopoetics." For Wilder, cultural mythologies undergird the language one uses, and when those myths are too familiarized, language becomes clichéd and needs revitalization. In

Wilder's thought, the poet and their imaginative explorations through metaphor guide the audience into new and experiential ways of engaging with the numinous. In Wilder's articulation, the newly termed "Theopoetics" is a framework that presents "a way toward that which bridges binaries, supplanting them not by the force of some unifying metaphysic or synthesis but through language that attempts to promote residences of experiential encounters with the Divine" (Keefe-Perry *Way* 39).

In articulations of the Theopoetics framework, scholars attempt to craft a theology that "speaks" poetically. The framework is also intended though to do the inverse, to craft poetry that "speaks" theologically. In not fitting into traditional modes of proof, the Theopoetics framework presents a means for reinvigorated theological exploration in a medium like poetry, where "God talk" might not be as prominent or "theologically orthodox" as in a religious institution. In this way, Theopoetics democratizes religious language and religious engagement by opening up the conversation to new perspectives, mediums, and groups who might otherwise be disenfranchised by an established religious viewpoint.

It is this inability to fit perfectly into traditional modes while also maintaining an academic rigor where Theopoetics establishes a poetic praxis where the poet can discuss and dissect the numinous without the constraints of traditional theological language. It is this lack of constraint that appeals to an innovator of the movement, the poet and theologian Rubem Alves (1933–2014). Alves believes a truer poetics and theology can be found in Theopoetic poetry, as it becomes a way to disrupt hierarchical systems around religion and poetry that would impose a particular view upon the writer. According to Keefe-Perry, Alves, "writes about Theopoetics in Theopoetics," in that he does not write in a traditional academic style (Keefe-Perry *Way* 9). Rather, he defends his arguments with anecdotal evidence and constructs his theological writing as if it were a poem. He believes that institutions, like the Church and the Academy, have monopolized discussions and interpretations of the numinous that have become a codified "orthodoxy." For Alves, "Truth appears when the world we familiarly know is subverted" (Alves 14). Subjects like the numinous and its relation to the arts, specifically poetry, might be dismissed if an idea posed is contrary to the "orthodoxy" of a particular institution, or might be disregarded as either too academic for the layman or too "common" to be accepted as something of note within the academy. Poetry, in its use of metaphor and myth, requires for Alves, a "reading [that] is a non-reading . . . empty word-cages with open doors, with the purpose of creating the void for the Word. . . . What matters is . .

. the words that you hear, coming out of your forgotten depths” (Alves 17). This allows poetry to be observed and interpreted but not to be treated like an animal in a zoo where there is no danger or mystery or freedom.

These three key figures of the movement, Alves, Hopper, and Wilder, thought “it was necessary that theological articulation do more than *talk* about God: it had to somehow also capture the experience of the presence of God, the radically disorienting encounter with the Christ whose kingdom is not of this world” (Keefe-Perry *Way* 48; emphasis added). Each, in their own way, looked at the state of Christian theology and saw that it was exclusionary, lacked depth or nuance, or was uninteresting to both the laity and the academy due to its easy answers disconnected from real-world issues that people faced. Through Hopper, the framework was grounded in the idea of the artist’s imagination as central to theological discourse. Through Wilder, the artist is defined as prophetic and given a wider role in presenting new and imaginative ways to engage the theological and the cultural aspects of society. Through Alves, the framework was given an example of how a Theopoetic praxis would look in academic discourse and in poetic expression.

Poetic language became the missing link needed to revive the religious life as it presents nuance and an artful articulation that avoids becoming cold, ossified, creedal statements. For scholars of Theopoetics, there is a reciprocal nature embedded in poetry where spirituality needs poetry to create wonder and newness through metaphor, and poetry needs spirituality to undergird those metaphors with intrinsic value. In other words, poetry presents an image. Spirituality baptizes the image as “sacred.”

Those outside the Theopoetics movement, like the poet Sylvia Plath, engage in aspects of this framework when hovering over this intrinsic connection between poetry and the numinous to articulate the value of poetry. For example, in her short essay “Context” she writes, “I am not gifted with the tongue of Jeremiah [the Biblical prophet], though I may be sleepless enough before my vision of the apocalypse . . . [poetry covers] the real issues of our time [that] are the issues of every time—the hurt and wonder of loving; making in all its forms . . . and the conservation of life of all people and all places” (Plath 65). Here, Plath uses words that have religious connotation, the Hebrew prophet “Jeremiah” and the eschatological term “apocalypse” to present an urgency (as Jeremiah ran out into the streets proclaiming a need for the people to change in the Biblical account) and weight (as poetry must connect to “the real issues” in these end times).

The notion that poetry has a “conservation of life,” that is to say, that it connects people to themselves and to others in the “hurt and wonder of loving,” implicitly demands that poetry have a “spiritual” component that accounts for and speaks to the “psyche,” or “spirit,” or “soul,” etc. Without this component, poetry only engages in half of the conversation of the human experience, ignoring that humans have both body and “soul,” as humans are more than just biological processes but Beings that engage with the numinous. What Plath is attempting to articulate in her essay is, unwittingly, a Theopoetic perspective—an aesthetics that accounts for the numinous without rejecting or diminishing the importance of the body.

As this movement progressed outward from understanding theology as its primary mode, Theopoetics became an interpretive framework for a multitude of aesthetic mediums, though the movement has yet to comprehensively articulate a Theopoetics of poetry.<sup>2</sup> This may be due to the concerns of the movement at the current moment, which are to reestablish that “God talk” should not fall into a reductionistic fundamentalism of purely dogmatic expressions and that theology does have a place in the overall human experience.

### **Theopoetics: A Definition**

Because there is not a single unified definition of Theopoetics, as Theopoetics is both a movement and a theo-philosophical examination of the arts, it is paramount that this paper define the idea before moving into an examination of how it applies to poetry. For the purposes of this paper, when used as a noun, Theopoetics will be defined as, “‘a method of interpretation . . . [which] seeks to articulate the spiritual meaning that comes to us in, by, and through a symbolic experience’ (in that the focus is on the image) which affirms a generative and embodied perspective on the world.”<sup>3</sup> Founders of the movement like Stanley R. Hopper and Amos N. Wilder use “Theopoetic,” “Theopoetics,” and “Theo-poeisis” (all distinguished in this paper by the upper case “T”) interchangeably as a container for the idea that a renewed engagement and

<sup>2</sup> As of this essay, there are only three essays that attempt to create a Theopoetic framework that is applicable to all poetry, two of which are Dave Harrity’s “The Theopoetics of Literature: An Aesthetic Statement, Part I&II” and Jeff Gundy’s *Songs from an Empty Cage: Poetry, Mystery, Anabaptism, and Peace* (which presents more of an Anabaptist view of poetry). There are, however, articles that focus on Theopoetics in the works of Wallace Stevens (cf. *The Way of Transfiguration* by Stanley Hopper) and Joy Harjo (cf. “The Gravity of Love: Theopoetics and Ontological Imagination” by Laurel C. Schneider). The emphasis in those essays is primarily *how* those poets are theologically Theopoetic and not an examination of how they are poetically Theopoetic.

<sup>3</sup> This definition is an amalgam of several definitions taken from <https://artsreligionculture.org/definitions>, primarily the poet and Theopoetics scholar Jeff Gundy along with my own contribution.

awareness of the numinous within theology is found through the arts. When Theopoetic(s) is used as an adjective (distinguished in this paper by the lower case “t”), it will indicate that a “text . . . reveals some aspect of the divine” (Keefe-Perry *Theopoetics* 579). This means when applying Theopoetics as an interpretive theory to a text, line, phrase, stanza, piece, etc., that line or piece can be described as “theopoetic” in that it somehow communicates divinity through images.

A poem can be theopoetic in how it engages subjects or in how the piece is crafted. This means that a poet, whether conscious of it or not, in the act of creating or crafting a poem that employs themes, ideas, structures, or techniques which contain a theopoetic element, the poet is then crafting “theopoetically.” This use of Theopoetics as an adverb accounts for various creative processes in the development of a poem, including the author’s biography, as it is important to the theopoetic process. A Theopoetic framework examines the poet’s work to reveal either that the piece is theopoetic in *what* it communicates, or is theopoetically expressed in *how* the piece was created. Therefore, Theopoetics is not exclusive to one particular religious or nonreligious worldview and presents multiple points of entry into the framework as will be examined later in this paper.

### **A Theopoetics of Poetry: The Three Modes Which Make Poetry [T]heopoetic**

For a work to be considered theopoetic, a piece must include the three Theopoetic modes (Corporeal, Prophetic, and Mystical—which ground or embody divinity in a work) and include the sacred image (which observes divinity or its imprint in all things). In “The Theopoetics of Literature: An Aesthetic Statement, Part II” the poet Dave Harrity attempts to sketch an articulation of how Theopoetics would operate as an interpretive structure for literary works. He establishes three cyclical modes of operation (that can occur simultaneously) that all Theopoetic interpretations or articulations of a literary text must have:

1. *The Corporeal Mode* arrays creaturely experience and human interaction, aiming to maintain and reflect existential nature with nuance and complex variety;
2. *The Prophetic Mode* bears witness to and provides a clear vision of the way people value landscapes, resources, personhood, and dignity, both human and divine;
3. *The Mystical Mode* seeks to engage a transcendent and contemplative divine intelligence that is both within and without embodiment. (Harrity *Part II* 13)

These three modes present a matrix that informs how poems in this essay will be interpreted. If even one of the three modes is missing from a text, it cannot be considered a fully

“theopoetic” interpretation or articulation. Each mode presents a tether to either the numinous or the body. Theopoetics scholars posit that without the body—found intrinsically in the corporeal and prophetic modes—the poetic becomes utterly uninterested with what it means to be human. Without the body, a poem would instead focus on the trivial and would wander passed the bleeding body like the priest or the Levite on the way to a worship service or lecture. This disconnection can become a hierarchical and exclusionary poetics of “secret knowledge” which is only available to the few insiders who understand.

If the body lacks the numinous—found intrinsically in the “Prophetic” and “Mystical” modes—the poetic becomes purely a hedonistic enterprise that does not reflect upon anything numinous. This disconnection can become a poetics that chases after fame or accolades instead of attempting to explore or express something new. In this way, a poetics without engagement with the numinous in some capacity will only establish the poet themselves as “mythic figure” pontificating in some cases for a poetry of celebrity, or even in a more generous way, self-therapy, both of which do not lend themselves to good poetry.

### **[T]heopoetic Poetry Is not Devotional: Theopoetics Versus [T]heopoetry**

When discussing a Theopoetic interpretation of a text, one must also bear in mind that, “A theopoetic poem is not a devotional poem” (Harrity *Part I* 7). Theopoetics is not looking for explicit expressions of codified religious dogmas propagated as poetry. Theopoetics is, however, looking for poems that, “creatively suggest, ambiguously hint, generously intimate in ways that create space for the reader or the public to face the unknown, engage Mystery, to dream and be transformed” (Guynn 99). Scholars of the Theopoetic framework posit that the Divine and the human are *both* in constant progress, consistently needing to be reintroduced and reshaped. Therefore, poetry that seeks to poetically restate religious creedal statements is not Theopoetics.

Theopoetics challenges traditional understandings of what religion or spirituality can accomplish or be within the medium of poetry. Dr. Samuel Johnson once said, “All that pious verse can do is to help the memory, and delight the ear . . . but it supplies nothing to the mind” (qtd. in Jasper 11). As such, this overtly religious and more devotional style of poetry would be considered a “theopoetry,” not Theopoetics. The scholar David L. Miller argues that if a poem is merely “an artful, imaginative, creative, beautiful, and rhetorically compelling manner of speaking and thinking concerning a theological knowledge that is and always has been in [one’s] possession



and a part of [one's] faith . . . [then it is] . . . 'theopoetry,' i.e. . . . the poetizing of an extant religious faith or theological knowledge" (Miller 8).

Theopoetics, on the other hand, approaches poetry with a different idea in mind—that the text itself, regardless of its content, is an incarnational act of humanity and divinity meeting in the same “container” and revealing some new aspect of what it means to be human in relation to the Divine. Therefore, Theopoetics does not need to be explicit with a particular religious language to accomplish the task of poetically engaging the body and the numinous. In other words, the medium of poetry presents as itself an exploration of the numinous and the body through the use of images and devices unique to poetry like the enjambed line, with primacy given to the image or metaphor.

### **The Body as Valued and Coequal in Theopoetic Symbolism: Eucharist and Incarnation**

In the Theopoetic framework, words—whether read, spoken, or written down—are containers that hold divinity and humanity together. When crafting, explicating, or evaluating poetry, Theopoetics posits that words must be engaged in the same way one would engage a sacrament. “[W]ords . . . are to be eaten . . .” writes Rubem Alves, “No longer deal with words as ‘things to be used . . .’ [but instead] as ‘things to be enjoyed.’” (10). It is in the idea of Eucharist, where bread is transformed into body, and wine is transformed into blood, where scholars present the function of the Theopoetic framework in poetry. For Theopoetics scholars, blood connotes life and death, and in the Eucharist, both are held in tension as one must die to live and live to die. There is a transference or a reversal in the drinking of the “blood.” The Divine dies to then live amongst the human. This is where the image of the bread, or body, expresses itself. When one takes the bread, it is a re-enfleshment; one becomes reborn, clothed in new skin. It is the recognition that the body (or in poetry, the word) decays and needs renewal.

When one engages poetry from a Theopoetic perspective, one recognizes that the words on the page are “life-giving” and that each syllable spoken or read longs to be absorbed into one’s person. Alves claims, “My words are not addressed to the brain. They are addressed to the body. Words to be eaten . . . a Eucharistic meal” (10). The words express the absence of the author who cannot speak, yet the reader speaks the words of the absent author or thinks their thoughts as their brain reckons with the words on the page. For Alves, “The Eucharist . . . [is] an empty, silent space of our dreaming, before the Absent One . . .” (99). If the Eucharist is taken to be defined in more of a Catholic way, then the transubstantiated elements become literal body and blood. Therefore,

when one consumes the elements, one consumes the Sacred. This aspect of the Eucharist, from a Theopoetic perspective, translates itself into the poetic image where metaphor transubstantiates into something Divine that one must actively participate with and absorb into one's person to fully grasp the mystery that the image wishes to express. The Theopoetic perspective proclaims, "To know something is to feel its taste, what it does to my body. Things are nothing in themselves" (Alves 86).

This means that good poetry must take on flesh; it must embody what it articulates in the image. If the body is ignored, or if any other interpretive framework or view places a higher priority upon either the mind or spirit over the body, Theopoetics would claim that that view might be insufficient in capturing the true essence of any text—as it leaves out key components, such as the spiritual or the body. With Theopoetics, there is an "insistence on the importance of fleshy experience and the validity of the vision of [the] marginalized" through the use of poetry (Keefe-Perry *Way* 54). Returning to Plath's statement of poetry covering "the real issues of our time" (Plath 65), a Theopoetic understanding of that statement would claim that one must embody the needs and views of the people by crafting poetry that engages with the body and its needs not as a distant "god" set apart and devoid of suffering or longing but as an incarnate Divine human, "God in flesh." Within Christian theology, this act of incarnation, this process, can be termed "incarnational" which demands that one embody the needs of the people *and* live a Divinely connected life. This is what Theopoetics scholars would claim a good poem must do; it must live among the people as Divine word in flesh.

For Hopper and Wilder, Theopoetics is animated by Heidegger's notion that "man dwells poetically upon the earth" (Heidegger 213). But Alves modifies that idea, adding that "The magical, secret universe [i.e. the numinous] . . . is hidden inside our flesh" (Alves 51). A Theopoetic framework as enhanced by Alves, claims that man does not merely externally dwell poetically upon the earth, but man also *internally* dwells poetically upon the earth. A Theopoetic framework presents a view of poetics that accounts for this internal and external dwelling in its terministic screens of incarnation and Eucharist.

## **The Numinous as Valued and Coequal: “Inspiration” and Religious Perception**

It is with these two symbols, Eucharist and incarnation, that Theopoetics is able to account for the numinous underpinnings within poetry. Whether the inspiration is a “Muse” or “Martians,”<sup>4</sup> whether the poet is Muslim, or Hindu, or Buddhist, or Episcopalian, Theopoetics takes the poet at their word when describing their process and does not try to categorize it as the “subconscious” or “a response to some political stimuli.” As Wilder articulates:

Modern poets . . . can speak of alterations of consciousness, oneiric states, of openings, illuminations, and epiphanies, all associated with knowledge and power. Those who are no longer at home with such categories as inspiration or transcendence, or such symbols as the Spirit, the soul, the muse, or the Word, still find ways of testifying to the dynamics of the self . . . All such [aversion] of secular initiation involves some kind of extra normal perception . . . corresponding to what used to be called inspiration or possession. (Wilder 58)

Theopoetics accounts for these “oneiric states” in ways that other theories cannot because Theopoetics understands these states are “incarnational” expressions where the poet and poem, the fleshy humanity of the poet and the numinous inspiration of the poem become one. The reader must then “take and eat” the inspired enfleshed words of the poet on the page. This means the poem becomes an expression endowed with Divinity that is made to be absorbed. Therefore, within the Theopoetic framework, there is room for the gods, or the Muse, etc. to be named as the “imaginative awakening” (also known as the Spirit) that prompts the poet (who is human) to work because it is believed that it is all different articulations of the same thing.

## **The Sacred Image: Theopoetics and Metaphor**

If Theopoetics accounts for both the inspiration or action of the numinous and the incarnation or renewed embodiment, then how one engages with the poetic image drastically changes. “We should recognize,” writes Amos Wilder, “that human nature and human societies are more deeply motivated by images and fabulations than ideas. This is where power lies and the future is shaped” (Wilder 2). The poet recognizes that through the image the dead are called to life again.

When the poet turns their gaze toward a particular object, they open that object up to its true nature and allow all to see the animation upholding all things and endowing them with

<sup>4</sup> The term “Martians” as means of inspiration comes from the poet Jack Spicer.

divinity. David L. Miller establishes that when one engages in a Theopoetic reading of the sacred image, “one is not viewing poetry as mere metaphor, simile without the word ‘like,’ which would be the expression of the likeness of like things, ignoring difference” (10). For Miller, the expression of likeness is a “weak reading” (10) for if that was what a metaphor is, it would merely “constitute a re-inscription of objectivization and of the onto-metaphysical tradition in which Being is viewed as a being or God as an idol” (Miller 10).

A Theopoetic reading of metaphor instead focuses on an idea posed by Philip Wheelright known as “diaphor.” As Hopper explains, “the poiestic . . . presents a movement (phora) through (dia) experienced particulars placed in juxtaposition, thus ‘producing new meaning,’ or fresh recognitions” (Hopper 287). The object then, does not become an inactive objectivized “god” but rather, something that one enters into, and like the poet, recognizes that, “Everything is holy! everybody’s holy! everywhere is holy!” (Ginsberg *Howl*).

The focus on diaphor provides a distinctive of the Theopoetics framework as the diaphoric “presupposes three steps: the step back . . . the step down, and the step through” (Hopper 295). Each of these steps accounts for the breaking of an idolatry of the image that would long to formulize the poetic and solidify it into a doctrinal prose. The first step requires reverence. It demands that the poet, or the reader, or the scholar see the sacrality of the image and, therefore, understand the image’s place among that which is and reveals the holy. The second step accounts for a deconstruction of the image. It recognizes that the holy cannot be entirely contained or known. Therefore, the idea represented by the image cannot be caged. The idea must be able to run wild or else the poet or the scholar will turn that image into a zoo animal and, therefore, that image will become clichéd.

The first and second steps are emblematic of the incarnational aspects of the Theopoetics framework, as they glorify and magnify the image as something that is to be sacred. But it also invites an emptying, a pouring out for the redemption of things. As Hopper confers, “. . . The Poet stands at the point where the ‘vertical’ and the ‘horizontal’ cross. He is a man who must walk boldly or naïvely into the abyss . . . he must attempt there . . . a reconciliation of opposites . . . He will be wounded for our collective transgressions and bruised for our psychical iniquities” (Hopper 88).

It is the final step of diaphor where the Theopoetics framework is able to truly embody its Eucharistic practice. As Hopper explains, “Sacrality does not reside in the symbol as such; it is

through the symbol that the sacrality of things is resurrected and its presence renewed. The proper opposite of the sacred is not the secular; it is the profane” (Hopper 297). This is why clichéd metaphors or images disgust the poet, because they are profaned language that has ignored what was or is truly sacred about an image or a word. The word or image has been transmuted back into a mere object and is no longer something to be eaten and enjoyed but rather to be used and discarded. As Amos Wilder puts it, “The redemptive operations of [the Divine] can be most cogently conveyed not by unreal heavenly scenarios but by mundane similitudes and challenges, by aphorisms and paradoxes that shock our assumptions and transform our outlook” (Wilder 76). The mundane explicated by the poem opens the connection point for Divinity and humanity to meet and acknowledge one another. It is there where everything is revealed as sacred.

One clear example of the Theopoetics framework in action resides in a recollection that Allen Ginsberg had in an interview where, upon reading the poet William Blake, he heard what he believed to be the actual voice of the poet and was convinced that this voice was, “bringing him into a deepening understanding of the poem and the universe . . . and [Ginsberg] recognized that this existence, ‘existence’ itself, was God, that this was ‘that sweet golden clime,’ [the speaker sought after and] that he was the son of a creator who loved him” (Ginsberg *Verbatim* 15).

In this moment, Ginsberg was reading aloud words and ingesting them into his body. These words then reverberated into his very essence, and he began to taste these words and enjoy them, seeing them as good. The words then led him into an experiential knowing of the Divine Presence in the world, in himself, and in things. He was able to truly experience both the rational and the supernatural in one moment, through a poem.

## **Two [T]heopoetic Entrances: Merton and Levertov as Emblematic of the Framework**

Theopoetics began as a movement to reinvigorate religious discourse within philosophy and the arts, grounding religious experience in the everyday and combining it with new expressions of the Divine through poetry. Theopoetics then becomes a medium for those who wish to engage with subject matter surrounding the numinous without sacrificing the poet’s authentic experience to connect with a particular audience’s understanding of the Divine.

One can enter into Theopoetics via a religious tradition, where one now finds once-stirring images and myths have become stale and, therefore, the writer desires to reinvigorate or reimagine these images and myths in presenting them in a new or different way. This is the path of Thomas

Merton, who throughout his poetic career attempted to re-contextualize, revitalize, and integrate forgotten ancient traditions, images, and practices to a contemporary audience who needed a re-introduction to the numinous. One can also enter into Theopoetics through the “secular.” Through this entrance, one finds traditional explanations for the inspiration and purpose of poetry as articulated by various poetic “schools” insufficient and therefore seeks new articulations on the poem and the poets’ role. This is the path of Denise Levertov, who throughout her poetic career attempted to inspire poets to seek the truest expression of the poem without catering to an audience that may possibly demand too much out of the poet instead of the poem.

While Merton is a poet who explicitly presents and explores his faith within his poetry, he becomes disillusioned by the demand from the religious community to craft poems that David L. Miller terms “theopoetry.” As stated previously, this means that Merton’s poems must express an “artful, imaginative, [and] creative . . . manner of speaking and thinking concerning a theological knowledge that is and always has been in [his faith tradition’s] possession and a part of [an orthodox articulation of] faith” (Miller 8). This disillusionment presents Merton as a poet whose entrance into Theopoetics comes from a need to escape the constraining images of codified religious faith.

Denise Levertov, on the other hand, as explored later in this paper, does not explicitly present where she stands on matters of faith in her earlier works but expands the understanding of Theopoetics scholars around what constitutes Theopoetics in rearticulating the movement to an audience grounded in poetry rather than theology. She even becomes a fellow of SARRC, articulating new ways for the framework to engage with myth and poetry. In this way, Levertov presents the ability for Theopoetics to be recursively read into poetry written by a poet that may not subscribe explicitly to a religion.

## THEOPOETICS AS EXPLORED IN THOMAS MERTON'S WORK

### Reluctant Theo-poet: Thomas Merton as a “Religious” [T]heopoetic Example

The poetic corpus of the Trappist Monk Thomas Merton (1915–1968), is emblematic of theopoetically engaging the numinous in an embodied way while being in the midst of a struggle between codified religious metaphor and an attempt to craft new ways of seeing and engaging with the Divine. Merton's poetic corpus reveals an explicitly religious entrance into Theopoetics that demands transformation from mere “religious poetry,” which focuses on “ready-made” images that carry the weight of the poem by giving into doctrinal conceits, to Theopoetics which explores the numinous in a new way.

Before Thomas Merton became a monk, he was a student at Columbia University engaging with poetry at a variety of different levels. He was in the midst of creating a Master's thesis on the poet William Blake and was writing poetry of his own. Merton was exploring ways to communicate the spiritual considerations that he found in Blake but in his own way, sowing seeds of what would eventually become a need to articulate the numinous theopoetically. Merton's growth into writing theopoetically, is an explicit example of how religious poetry can prompt one to explore the numinous in new ways and that embodies the poet's particular context.

It was during this time that Merton became a Catholic and this new-found influence began to mix into a dialogue with different perspectives on how the poet should engage with ideas of the numinous. These poems would become published in a collection entitled *Earlier Poems*. Here, Merton extrapolates a theme that would become pervasive in all of his poetry: wrestling with being “in between” faith traditions, attempting to reconcile or recontextualize them. It is in this collection where Merton's driving myths begin to crash and mold together in an amalgam of old metaphors and new ones. From a Theopoetics perspective, Merton is longing for a different way to articulate the numinous in a way that truly embodies what it means to be human.

At this time, Merton still engages with previous myths and metaphors found in his worldview outside of the “new” symbols of his Catholicism in poems like “From the Second Chapter of a Verse History of the World,”<sup>5</sup> where a minotaur opens up the poem with a monologue.

<sup>5</sup> All poems from Thomas Merton come from *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* published by New Directions unless stated otherwise.

While the poet is still leaning on these myths and symbols, there is discomfort in these “old” myths that will eventually turn the poet against the meaning of those images as he encounters a Catholicism which leads him toward the theopoetic:

Your shoes untie, your mantle you unwitch  
Your stocking is all runs, you gaudy bitch  
Sang to his muse some poet, but I don't know which. (13)

The speaker indicates an unraveling of the muse in the image of untying shoes, which might imply that “some poet” is tripping over their muse. This muse’s “mantle” being “unwitch[ed]” creates a sense of stepping out of a trance into something “new.” The old way or “muse” is “gaudy” and does not reflect the simplicity that Merton will step into as a monk. The poet presents a need for a new myth, image, or metaphor to communicate the act of inspiration. Throughout the poem, the speaker witnesses mythic figures die and crescendos with a stanza that states:

The official poems read over  
the loudspeakers  
were particularly mediocre. Art  
was confounded to no end;  
verse, for the moment, was hushed.  
Rhetoric had gone dead. (14)

It is here in the poem where Merton begins to enter into the death of God (or rather the death of the gods), a movement that is distinctly Theopoetic in that it does not entirely deconstruct and disregard the numinous. Rather, Merton makes a theopoetic turn in declaring that, “Rhetoric had gone dead.” From that death, he seeks an opportunity for a resurrection of language, a new heaven and a new earth. Throughout the poet’s career, Merton returns to this death and need for resurrection, incorporating new myths, images, faith traditions, and poetic techniques to communicate something “new” through something dead. This is reflected a few poems later in this same collection in a work entitled “Tower of Babel” where the speaker states, “History is a dialogue between / forward and backward / going inevitably forward” (21).

In this poem, Merton embodies one of the chief characteristics of the Theopoetics framework of revitalizing the religious imagination by stripping away “dead” images (engaging in the death of God) and using what remains to craft new “lively” images. Or, as Amos Wilder would frame it, “To defend the imagination in the life of faith one has almost to begin over again with some new name for it” (Wilder *Theopoetic* 41). Merton’s defense of the imagination then is a “dialogue between / forward and backward.” Put another way, it is a back-and-forth between old dead images whose meanings no longer matter, and new meanings that are created out of those old



images. Wilder expands upon this point by saying, “All the fables or myths, including religious faith, are seen as imprisoning except as they may be drawn on as cyphers for the pure extramundane dream of creativity with its two aspects of iconoclasm and transcendence” (Wilder *Theopoetic* 35). In a Theopoetic framework, the poet must be willing to smash deeply held and cherished images and turn their remains into a mosaic that bares a new transcendent meaning. As the poet states words, “are a means of locomotion // along an infinite horizontal plane / created by the history which they themselves destroy” (21). If the poet does not intervene by crafting new images, the only thing that will be left is an endless destruction in search of a means to engage with Divinity. That is why Theopoetic poetry engages both the body and the spiritual, as it must present ways to engage the vertical plane of the numinous that do not reject or diminish the “infinite horizontal plane” that humanity is in dialogue with.

### **New Wine in Old Wineskins: The Religious Image as Unintentional Cliché**

Merton’s poetic work shifted heavily when he became a Trappist, using religious images with “ready-made” associations that drew too heavily on the previously established religious image. It is here where, Merton, like Samuel Johnson before him, begins to encounter a distaste around the nature and misconception of “religious” or “devotional” poems as “poetic sermon,” or as Miller would claim, a distaste for “theopoetry.”

Merton relied on the “ready-made” religious image because when it is employed, it presents the religious reader with stock images that will automatically illicit piety, devotion, or connection with the Divine. According to Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr’s companion to Merton’s poetry published by New Directions, a large portion of the poet’s overall works, “derive their inspiration from the incarnation, with such events as proliferate from it—the Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, [and the] Passion. In [Merton’s] first three [collections] the Virgin Mary’s role is [also] paramount. . . .” (Lentfoehr 79). Images like these can become a shorthand for particular emotions, ideas, or dogmas that the poem would then have to serve if the poem is to be cohesive. This is the very essence of cliché. In this way, explicitly religious poetry becomes a sermon instead of an exploration, a congealed prose with a particular theology imposed upon the piece instead of a poetic free-flowing exploration

Merton crafts a distinction between verse that is merely “devotional” opposed to true “religious” poetry, which presents the reader with a poetic expression devoid of cliché, that induces

an authentic religious experience. In his book *Bread in the Wilderness*, Merton details that, “Religious poetry—as distinct from merely devotional verse—is poetry that springs from a true religious experience . . . Devotional poetry is verse which manipulates religious themes . . . But the experiential content of the poem is at best poetic only. Sometimes it is not even that” (Merton *Bread* 627). Devotional poetry caters to an audience simply to pacify the reader into a non-threatening or unchallenging view which merely restates back to the audience their codified dogmas and images of the Divine. In Merton’s thought, authentic religious poetry induces an experience where one is truly able to engage with the numinous deep within the reader’s body to where they are connected with the Divine, with themselves, and with others. Devotional poetry, engages with the poetic and with the spiritual but does so through using images, ideas, and doctrines that are expected or present little to no need for the reader to absorb the poem in their bodies. For Merton, “Much of what passes for ‘religious’ verse is simply the rearrangement of well-known devotional formulas, without any personal poetic assimilation at all” (Merton *Bread* 627).

Merton’s distinction of devotional and religious verse, if put through the vernacular of a Theopoetics scholar, would sound a lot like David L. Miller and his distinction between Theopoetics and theopoetry. As stated previously, theopoetry articulates an “artful, imaginative, creative, beautiful, and rhetorically compelling manner of speaking and thinking concerning a theological knowledge that is and always has been in [one’s] possession and a part of [one’s] faith” (Miller 8). It does not, however, craft as Theopoetics does, poetry that is a “radical challenge to religious discourse and understanding” (Miller 18).

It is in crafting poetry theopoetically, using the lexicon or images of the Christian faith while also defamiliarizing them, that will produce an authentic religious and poetic experience. This is exactly what Merton aspired to do, and is apparent in poems like “With the World in My Blood Stream,” where the poet writes:

While the frail body of Christ  
Sweats in a technical bed  
I am Christ’s lost cell  
His childhood and desert age  
His descent into hell. (617)

The devout audiences that would fully understand the religious allusions in this poem, would demand that the images not conflict with their previously established dogmatic understandings of their faith tradition. Merton seeks to counter this perspective by articulating in his later work explicitly that poetry incorporates a multivocality of perspectives which presents to the reader a

renewal of body and spirit and reflect the reader's true nature in the Divine image. As the poet continues in "With the World in My Blood Stream,"

Ancestors and Indians  
Zen masters and Saints  
Parade in the incredible hotel . . .  
Toward recovery and home. (616)

However, the demand from the strictly religious audience that does not appreciate an ecumenical stance or exploration of the numinous in a "new" way creates a disconnection or division between the poet and the poem. On the one hand, the poet that desires to write about religious ideas or present material that explicitly engages with the numinous also seeks to maintain an audience and, therefore, must either compromise authenticity or risk offending the target audience. On the other hand, the poems, which from a Theopoetics framework are inspired by the Divine, demand the freedom to be whatever and say whatever the poem demands from the poet. This requires the "religious poet" to be open to content that may or may not fit orthodoxy or the accepted views of a strictly religious audience who are looking for art that agrees with their doctrines or dispositions.

Theopoetics as a theology is consistently lamenting the idea that humanity believes that the Divine can be encapsulated in a few creedal statements or that one can claim to know everything about the Divine like Merton's audience did. It is because of this audience that Merton nearly quit writing poetry, having a gap of nearly ten years between his collections *Tears of the Blind Lions* and *The Strange Islands*. This gasp propelled him to move in a theo poetic direction out of necessity. In his collection *Tears of the Blind Lions*, the book opens with an epigraph by Léon Bloy that would make Theopoetics Scholars cheer "amen" stating, "When those who love God try to talk about Him, their words are blind lions looking for springs in the desert" (196).

The demand from the religious community for a poetry that fits perfectly into and espouses particular doctrines or dogmas presents the poet with a problem that Theopoetics specifically addresses. In writing theo poetically, one is able to articulate and engage with the numinous without adhering to particular "ready-made" images, doctrines, or dogmas that would cloud the poem. This idea appeals to Merton toward the end of his life as he begins to seek a poetics that expands outward from previous religious images into new territory. As Professor emeritus of English at Georgia State University and Merton scholar, Victor A. Kramer, claims "This expansion [of Merton's poetic career] . . . provides a key to Merton's poetics . . . the writer stopped worrying about his

image and reputation” and therefore began to live into new metaphors without apology (Kramer 380). Merton’s Theopoetics fully expresses itself in his final book of poetry entitled *The Geography of Lograire*. There, he divides the book into four sections—South, North, East, and West—with each presenting a different philosophical or theological perspective that accounts for the “otherness” of the numinous without alienating or neglecting the body and oppressed communities. In this book, Sister T r se Lentfoehr notes, “the imaginative country of . . . ‘Lograrie,’ . . . [which] is Merton’s creation . . . become[s] in Merton’s dream and poetic invention a species of myth. Each division . . . has its own specific structural orchestration proceeding by contrast as to the movements of a symphony” (Lentfoehr 116).

In this text, Merton leans into the “death of God,” to rename and reimagine God while also giving space to embodied experience in stating that:

As all things were let out of God:  
So shall they all give up their Being, life and  
    happiness  
Unto God again  
Though the clothing dissolve and come to nothing . . .  
Yet the inward man still lives . . . (522)

Here, God is “emptied,” and from that emptying, humankind is also emptied of what theologian and SARRC board member Paul Tillich would call “the Ground of our Being.” Yet, the people return to the numinous, which appears different due to the change of “clothing” and therefore “the inward man still lives.” It is in this book where Merton presents the idea that a poetry of embodiment accounts for different religious communities, speaks for poor and oppressed peoples, and presents poems that “combine spiritual passion with sound sense” (477), that do not ignore or sanitize explorations of the numinous.

Thomas Merton’s poetic corpus presents an explicitly religious rejection of the need to craft poetry that holds to the “ready-made” image as it carries the weight of the poem by giving into doctrinal conceits or artful sermonizing. Merton instead subverts the “ready-made” in writing theopoetically. This means the poet does not need to give into the unintentional clich s of one’s faith tradition to create lasting or good poetry, rather one needs to craft a poetry that incorporates the body and proclaims new ways of seeing or metaphors that engage with the numinous differently. The poems must stand in the gap between the Divine and the human, not present the Divine to the human as if the poem were a doctrinal document or credal statement.

## THEOPOETICS AS EXPLORED IN DENISE LEVERTOV'S WORK

### Waiting for the Name of God: Denise Levertov as “Secular” [T]heopoetic Example

Stanley Hopper presents in *The Way of Transfiguration* that, “the poet . . . must go out into the open, into [the] ‘between,’ there to await the new name of God” (Hopper *Way* 95). The poet Denise Levertov is, for Hopper, the embodiment of this statement as her biography, poetic and literary works engage within this liminal space of sacred and secular, the embodied and the numinous. Though Levertov herself never claimed to be a figurehead of the Theopoetics movement, she exemplifies the very essence of Theopoetics in her presentation of the need for a new image and a new myth, not an abortion of all myth to appease the rational. Levertov does not come from the tradition of explicitly religious poetry that needed a revival as Thomas Merton did. However, she does come from a poetic tradition that, at the time, was attempting to articulate the role of the poet and how that poet is “inspired” in their poetry.

Denise Levertov (1923–1997) was born into a family whose father was Jewish but eventually became an Anglican clergyman. He would discuss with her Martin Buber’s *Tales from the Hasidim*, which would be a reoccurring influence on her poetry. Her mother was Welsh and read to her out loud the works of religious figures like John Bunyan. Her religious upbringing presented her with a lexicon of religious images but also with an eventual rejection of particular religious dogma. Throughout her life, Levertov would wrestle with religious questions brought about by the faith of her father that would eventually be recontextualized to become her own.

### A Rejection of a Well-Worn Path: Receptivity to a Theopoetic Process from Inside Poetry

“I believe,” Denise Levertov writes, “in inspiration, to which intelligent craft serves as midwife . . . I believe in the obligation to *work from within*” (Levertov *New* 240; emphasis added). Poetry is not a medium that requires one to endanger oneself to find inspiration or that one must have some extraordinary life to be a good poet or to write a good poem. For Denise Levertov, what makes a good poet is one who can perceive the extraordinary in the ordinary. In her essay “Anne Sexton: Light Up the Cave,” Levertov establishes two conceptions of poetics that are damaging to the lives of poets and would become points of contention that cause her to reject some of the established schools of poetry in search for a new way of engaging with poetics.

One point of contention surrounds how poetry “happens”<sup>6</sup> within inspiration, the other is what poetry does as a creative act. For Levertov, the poem is an act of creation that requires the poet to have “energy derived only from being passionately in love with life and with art” (Levertov *Light* 85). In the 1960’s, one of the more popular conceptions for the poetic life which still lasts today is that of “the artistic temperament” where the “troubled artist” produces poems primarily out of their pain and the public’s longing to participate in that pain.

The understanding of some consumers of poetry and of certain poets, both previous and contemporary, have advocated for the idea of the tortured artist as the means of inspiration. This is contrary to a Theopoetics framework, which advances that poetic inspiration is a Divine encounter and does not require the artist to torture themselves to “appease the gods.” In “Anne Sexton: Light Up the Cave,” Levertov presents the tragic suicides of the poets John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton with a heavy emphasis placed on the latter as emblematic of a misguided public perception of what the poet does and how they receive the poems. It is Levertov’s belief that commodifying the poet’s pain to “enhance” inspiration is what caused the poets’ downfall, as they had to bring themselves into darkness for a populous that demanded even more darkness. The author writes, “The manifestations . . . of private anguish are exploited by a greedy public . . . greedy for emotion . . . second hand . . . starved of the experience of community. Concurrently . . . a creative person . . . internalizes [the] exploitive, unwittingly becoming self-exploitive” (Levertov *Light* 83).

It is this self-exploitation that Levertov believes will damage the poet, causing them to embrace a view of their work and of themselves as either being purely a product for public consumption or purely a manufactured myth—a pop icon. “Anne Sexton herself,” Levertov writes, “was unable to separate her depression and her obsession with death from poetry itself, and because precisely her most enthusiastic readers and critics encouraged that inability” (Levertov *Light* 85).

In this essay and others, Levertov’s antagonism toward critics and consumers encouraging a self-destruction for the sake of art is palpable and articulates something closer to a theopoetic view of inspiration. She asserts that the job of the poet in writing poems is not to destroy themselves in order to create a new way of seeing for the reader, but rather, “Writing the poem is the poet’s means of summoning the divine; the readers may be through reading the poem, or

<sup>6</sup> Poets like William Stafford in his book *Writing the Australian Crawl* and Richard Hugo in *The Triggering Town* make claims that poems just come to the poet if they are open to the poem and allow it to speak.

through what the experience of the poem leads him to . . .” but this leading is not self-destructive (Levertov *Poet* 47).

In this way, poems become theopoetic, and are, therefore, generative—creating words that when read, spoken, or experienced, create in the body an awareness of Divinity through images revealing something “new.” The inspiration and action of poetry is also not self-expressive for Levertov. She writes in her collection of essays *The Poet in the World* that, “Poetry that is merely ‘self-expressive’. . . is not even ultimately utile to the greatest degree, for while it temporarily ‘relieves feelings’ or builds ego, it does not, cannot, give the writer—and . . . fails to give the reader—the deeper satisfaction of a work of autonomy and gratuitousness” (Levertov *Poet* 95). It is here where Levertov begins to differ with poets like Ginsberg as she was not appreciative of the stream-of-consciousness “let it all out” style of poetry that became an unintentional byproduct of the Beat movement. This is also the reason why Levertov denounced drugs as a medium of inspiration as they did not present a poetics from within but rather created distortions that the poet must discern through means of stream-of-consciousness writing.

Levertov, in her view of inspiration, was more in line with Theopoetics scholars like Amos Wilder in his claim that, “Any fresh renewal of language or rebirth of images arises *from within and from beyond our control*. Nevertheless, we can help prepare the event, both by moral and spiritual discipline and by attention to the modes and vehicles of the Word” (Wilder *Theopoetic* 6; emphasis added). For Levertov, anything that detracts from serving the poem—celebrity, ego, marketing, etc.—must be eliminated. This approach to poetry demanded that she search for new modes of expression and for a new poetics that did not treat poetry as commodified therapy marketed off of the poet’s personality with a need for stories of wild lifestyle to amass an audience.

From a Theopoetics perspective, it is the poem that reveals truth. Levertov would rephrase this statement articulating that it is the poem that is primary for the poet *because it reveals*. This is what Levertov longed to establish within poetry in the public consciousness but could not find an adequate audience or language that would articulate the idea fully. She states, “the poet is a priest; the poem is a temple; epiphanies and communion take place within it. The communion is triple: between the maker and the needer within the Poet; between the maker and the needers

outside him . . . and between the human and the divine in both poet and reader”<sup>7</sup> (Levertov *Poet* 47). The poet has a “religious” or “spiritual” role in the very act of creating and sharing their poetry. There have been articulations by both scholars and poets that concur with this idea,<sup>8</sup> but where scholars and poets differ is in how and why the poet can function in this role. Levertov, who, at the time of writing the essays in *The Poet in the World*, was not practicing in any religion, yet she asserts that the poet’s role is to point to the Divinity or the Sacred image found in the poet, the poem, and its inspiration. This idea of poet as priest who reveals the numinous through the Sacred image becomes a fixture of her poetics and will become more defined throughout her life. A major turning point which presented Levertov a new way to fully articulate the role of the poet happened in 1967 through the expression of the Theopoetic framework at a conference.

### **Theopoetic Encounters: Hopper, Levertov, Merton, and Wilder**

Levertov’s focus upon the poem being a medium in which “epiphanies and communion” take place, and the poet as servant to the poem, enhances the Theopoetic framework by inspiring those in the movement to rephrase and reframe discussions around myth’s role in Theopoetics along with recontextualizing for poets the movement’s three modes.

Myth would eventually become an important aspect of the movement the more the movement began to recognize the generative power of myth in poetics, and part of the reason is because of Levertov presenting at the 1967 conference on the topic of “Myth in Religion and Literature” held by the Church Society for College Work. The topic was chosen due to the idea that society, particularly in the realm of theology, was becoming increasingly skeptical towards the supernatural and of myth. Her influence upon the Theopoetics movement is palpable,<sup>9</sup> as she

<sup>7</sup> I am aware that there may be some contention around the idea of the “poet as priest” as it can insinuate a hierarchical structure with the poet placed above all receiving some “secret knowledge” from the Divine. This is not the case within Theopoetics as it seeks to democratize religious expression. The metaphor of “priest” with Theopoetics is dealt with in the “kenosis” or emptying of God. This is its own theological subcategory within Theopoetics but is implied with the “death of God.” In Levertov’s example the priest must serve the people but also must tend to the poem. The poem is of the most importance. In representing the poem in the image of “temple,” Levertov is implying the Judeo-Christian conception of temple which is the physical manifestation of God “presenced” with God’s people. In this view, the priest is merely one who presents language to aid the people in worship, but it is the people who enact the liturgy. In Christian theology, liturgy literally means, “the work of the people.” This view of the poem as presence of the Divine and the poet as presenter to the people who then enact communion is the view that I am taking for this point in the paper.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, *How To Read A Poem* by Edward Hirsch or *Allen Verbatim* by Allen Ginsberg.

<sup>9</sup> This point is understated by secondary sources surrounding the biographies of both Levertov and the Theopoetic archivists as Levertov’s explicit involvement with religion was not necessarily favorable among her contemporaries.



asks those attending the conference to rethink the possibility of myth, and unintentionally prompted the scholars to begin to think theo-poetically in their reexaminations of the potential of myths by expressing the same ideas but stated differently through poetry. By the end of the conference, both Amos Wilder and Stanley Hopper see Levertov as a poet actively engaging reciprocally in a Theo-poetic process and whose work presents also enhances the Theo-poetics framework.

Levertov also presents a glimmer of what the Theo-poetics Movement would look like in future iterations—as a multivocal community that embraces the other and provides space for all to engage with the numinous poetically—in being the “only woman” to present at the conference and “distribute materials on conscientious objection to conference participants” after speaking (Greene 91). Though she was the only woman presenting at that time, the movement and scholarship of Theo-poetics has widened drastically since then. Levertov, in presenting conscientious objection materials at the conference, also contributed to the widening of the movement’s understanding by demanding that the ideas of the movement not remain theoretical but that the scholarship must embody the needs of the people in the very crafting of poetry.

From the onset of her poetic life, as it is well documented in her essays, she was aware, that her status as a woman, as an immigrant who fled the horrors of World War II after serving as a nurse, and being culturally Jewish demanded social action and a conscious awareness of the oppressed. She could not sit on the sidelines spouting sorrowful poetry. If she were to write poetry at all, and to write poetry she believed to be good, she would have to risk something by speaking out for the other. Otherwise, in her belief, “people who write banal poetry . . . usually seem to be the same academics who talk a liberal line concerning education and politics . . . but who, when it comes to some crucial issue . . . will not commit themselves far enough to endanger their own security” (Levertov *Poet* 98). Even at this conference of theologians, Levertov believed it to be important to respectfully remind the group that not everyone thinks the way they do. In this way, she stands in the gap between the religious and the nonreligious and creates poetry that connects to both by respecting each audience in their own language but challenges both the religious and the nonreligious to see perspectives not of their own.

Though she was not aware of it at the time, Levertov was engaging in a key aspect of Wilder’s thought, and thus the Theo-poetics framework, as he claims, “[T]he Christian imagination must go halfway to meet the new dreams, mystiques, and mythologies that are gestating in our

time” (Wilder *Theopoetic* 1). This proclivity of Levertov’s to stand in the gap and serve both the inspired poem and oppressed peoples regardless of the audience positions Levertov earlier in the place that Thomas Merton wanted to be but ultimately could not achieve in his lifetime. Her ability to be, “ecumenical to a degree no doubt scandalous to the more orthodox” (Levertov *New* 244), as she states later in her life, allows her to stand in the gap of the religious and irreligious without much pause.

Although she did not identify with any religion at the time of the conference, she “offered a coda to her presentation indicating that she believed the rites and traditions of religious orthodoxy could have a positive poetic advantage, but that the reality was that most poets were agnostics or atheists” (Greene 91). This need to discover common ground while also advocating for marginalized voices deeply impressed those in attendance. Her ability to be conversant within theological discourse was shocking to many, as Levertov began to speak to ideas that many in the academy were wrestling with in the undertaking of reinventing theological discourse at the time. Amos Wilder recalls in his text *Theopoetic*, that both she and the poet Robert Duncan, who also presented, were, “outstanding representatives of a major direction in contemporary poetry . . . [who] immediately arrested [the audience’s] attention . . . [as] the poets of course assumed and demonstrated the use of myth in their work while the theologians insisted on the death of myth today” (Wilder *Theopoetic* 85).

For Wilder, the “major direction in contemporary poetry,” and subsequently his idea for the future direction of theological discourse was a “matter of reversing the process of disenchantment, since the modern secular world has become disenchanted. The modern world has lost the sense of the sacred. We forfeit the imaginative dimension” (Wilder *Imagining* 21).

### **A Theopoetic Restructuring: Levertov’s Revitalization of Myth and Image**

In using poetic language that would revitalize or create new images, Theopoetics as a framework responds to the to the problem of dead or codified images surrounding topics of the numinous. For poets in religious environments, like Thomas Merton, a religious audience may possibly create a predicament for the poet where one either caters to a dying audience that wants the “old time religion,” or a new audience that is disenfranchised by dead fundamentalisms. The response outside of Theopoetics at the time began to fall into a new codified systematic that began to espouse demythologizing or eliminating the supernatural in the Christian narrative in order to

cater to a modern context disenchanted or disinterested with the Divine. The scholars of the Theopoetics framework proclaim that it is the revitalization of myth, not the devitalization of myth that will embolden discussion and engagement with the numinous. Levertov was articulating this need to revitalize myth as one outside the religious tradition looking in, inadvertently espousing Wilder's Theopoetic articulation to theologians who did not yet fully understand the need for Theopoetics.

Theopoetics, as a movement, is sympathetic to the belief that the faith needs to be "updated," but does not fully engage with demythologizing religion, as that would essentially create a faith that diminishes the numinous aspects of existence. Theopoetics rather seeks to reinvigorate reception of the numinous through the use of "new" images used poetically. In this way, the ideas that Levertov propagated in her speech entitled "The Sense of Pilgrimage," mirrors Wilder's hope for a Theopoetic in its articulation of the need for a new myth, not an abortion of all myth.

In this speech, Levertov asserts an ideology in agreement with the central idea of both Theopoetics and the "demythologizing" proponents when she states, "Myth remains alive only when it retains its capacity to provoke a deep level, the 'shock of recognition' and a sense of personal relevance" (Levertov *Poet* 84). However, she makes a theopoetic turn in the latter half of the continuing statement in claiming, "Even when cut off from tradition, the correspondences that, if [the poet] holds open the doors of his understanding . . . cannot but perceive, will form images that are myth. The intellect, if not distorted by divorce from the other capacities, is not obstructive to the experience of the mysterious" (Levertov *Poet* 84).

Articulating that myth as a "correspondence" allows the poet the means to "open the door" to "experience the mysterious," Levertov demonstrates the need for a Theopoetic framework given that Theopoetics seeks the "shock of recognition and a sense of personal relevance." According to Wilder, the conference attendees were mesmerized by this formulation as it demands theology not eliminate myth from discourse, but rather find new and interesting ways to incorporate myth into the field of academic theology. This key insight, which becomes a prevalent aspect of the Theopoetics framework, invigorates Wilder to continue articulating Theopoetics as a viable means to engage the numinous. That amazement would spill over into a dialogue about Levertov's poem

“The Prayer”<sup>10</sup> found in her collection entitled *O Taste and See*, which was a staple of conversation among those at the conference that year.

This poem presents the use of an old myth and image to articulate a longing for new ones. In this poem, the speaker is grounded in the ancient myths of the Greek gods, “In Delphi I prayed / to Apollo” (227). Levertov is reinforcing, alongside Thomas Merton in his poem “From the Second Chapter of a Verse History of the World,” the theopoetic reexamination of ancient myths and images, articulating that they are insufficient and, therefore, must be supplanted by something new. In this recognition, the poet must create a new image to articulate inspiration and renew one’s sense of the numinous. In Levertov’s poem, the old gods are at best apathetic and the old ways of articulating the Divine no longer spark the imagination, it is a dead myth. The speaker’s body responds to the “brackish / spring” that was once drunk from and rejects the waters from the temple. As the speaker states, “and soon after / vomited my moussaka / and then my guts writhed” (227). The body longs for something, but what that is to the speaker is unknown. The poem resolves with an attempt to search for something new, a new or different god that hears the speaker and renews the speaker’s imagination. Levertov writes:

I questioned my faith, or  
within it wondered  
if the god mocked me  
...  
I think sometimes not Apollo heard me  
but a different god. (228)

The resolution of the poem follows in the footsteps of Merton’s rejection of previously known myths as he was entering into writing poetry as a newly converted Catholic. There is a feeling of rejection from the gods as the speaker wonders if they mock her in her prayers and in her searching. But there is a thread in the poem, that begins to unravel the idea of the gods with the final line, indicating that there might be something greater out there that has yet to be named. Levertov does not have this new name or image to draw from at this point in her life. Instead, she returns back to the images of her childhood while attempting to craft something new.

The title of this collection, *O Taste and See*, is deeply embedded in her father’s Jewish-Anglican heritage as it is pays homage to Psalm 34 in the Hebrew Bible which states, “I sought

<sup>10</sup> All quotations of Denise Levertov’s poetry are taken from *The Collected Poems of Denise Levertov* published by New Directions, 2013.

the Lord, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears . . . The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them . . . *O taste and see* that the Lord is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him.” (Ps. 34:4; 7; 9 KJV; emphasis added). Levertov adopts this phrase for the title of her collection and repurposes it to engage with subject matter surrounding the reciprocity between the body and its spiritual journey. The Psalm from which Levertov quotes indicates that she may also be aware of its traditional use among Christian art as a means of explaining the Eucharistic nature of art as one that requires the whole body and spirit to be engaged. Within Christian theology, “Taste and see that the Lord is good” connotes a physical exploration that requires body, mind, and soul to engage with the Divine. The content of the Psalm is also curious as it describes that the Lord surrounds those who would know Him, protecting and blessing them as they inquire through experiential means to know if the Divine is “good.”

The Divine surrounding, protecting, and blessing might in some way be a connection point for those spiritual pilgrims in search of something more. For example, in the same year as the conference, 1967, Levertov, along with the poet Wendell Berry, went to Kentucky and visited Thomas Merton for the first time. In Merton’s correspondence with his publisher and poet, Mark van Doren, “Merton said he had read Levertov’s poem ‘The Artist’ and found ‘[i]t is very fine, very spiritual in a broad, Jungian sort of way’” (Greene 92). Merton would die the following year, but his writing would remain an influence on Levertov up into her later years as evidenced in her *New and Collected Essays*, where she states, “I see nothing inherently detrimental to my poetry in the fact that I participate in the Eucharist or that I read Julian of Norwich, Bonhoeffer, or Thomas Merton without skepticism” (Levertov *New* 244). Merton becomes a guide to Levertov in establishing new ways to engage with the numinous without catering to the demands of one’s audience. He presents for her a way to truly serve the poem wherever it goes, even if the poem bestows a need to discuss the numinous.

Denise Levertov’s influence on Theopoetics, recognized at the conference, is also explicitly communicated a few years later in Stanley Hopper’s seminal speech “The Literary Imagination and Doing Theology,” which is considered by most Theopoetics scholars to be the official beginning of the movement. In that speech, he cites Levertov’s poem “September 1961” as the poetic representation that, “our contemporary poets are keenly aware [of the need for new language], for it lies at the core of their craft” (Hopper *Way* 208). He begins to explicate a particular portion of the poem that he believes to be the essence of Theopoetics. The poet states:

We have the words in our pockets,  
obscure directions. The old ones  
have taken away the light of their presence,  
we see it moving away over a hill  
off to one side. (186-187)

For Hopper, Levertov's words reveal that it is the calling or commission for the poet to bear the presence of the Logos, or the Word of the Divine, through a renewed literary imagination to people who do not have any sense of the imaginative, the numinous, embodiment, or understanding of the Sacred image. This insight is a key aspect of the Theopoetics framework today. Hopper's view of Levertov presents her, and poets like her, as prophetic voices to a culture that believes the transcendent to be dead. Hopper states, "It is not simply that 'the Old great ones have left us alone on the road' [as Levertov claims in the poem]: it is that the Western matrix of images is changing. One notes . . . the relatively superficial level of our ambivalent response to metaphor" (Hopper *Way* 210). Hopper moves to Levertov's collection of poems, *Relearning the Alphabet*, claiming the title and the book's proclamation is theo-poetic. Hopper believes, "Levertov, as poet, speaks of the necessity we are under of 're-learning the alphabet' . . . the poet . . . today . . . [has] to unlearn the traditional alphabet of thinking . . . seeing and speaking. It is a radical uprooting, possible to the poet because [s]he is attentive to the music of the gods" (Hopper *Way* 226).

### **A Recursive Reading of Denise Levertov**

In 1966, a year before the monumental conference held by the Church Society for College Work, eventual Theopoetics scholars were unwittingly articulating how one might read a poet like Levertov recursively at Drew University, interpreting poets' work as a Theo-poetic process. At the Third Consultation at Drew, Swiss theologian Heinrich Ott proposed that, "later utterances . . . gain a special weight for the interpretation of the total life work. The earlier utterances don't contradict, but rather must be interpreted in the light of these later trends" (et. al. Hopper *Interpretation* 30). Ott cites the Catholic idea of "*fides implicita*," which insists that while interaction with the numinous is not explicit in certain works of creation—painting, writing, philosophizing, etc.—it is rather "an implicit knowledge revealing itself [in a] step-by-step hermeneutical knowledge" (et. al. Hopper *Interpretation* 17). This is one of the key tenants of Theopoetics as theology, that one's understanding of the Divine and the Divine itself is "in



“daily life,” creation, and “the dream,” or vision, which produce a connected internal and external world. The speaker goes on to say that they:

believe the earth  
exists and  
in each minim mote  
of its dust the holy  
glow of [the Divine’s] candle. (674)

The images of divinity or religious sentiment are grounded in the earth. The numinous must be embodied and felt. Amos Wilder identifies that:

Any plea for a valid [T]heopoetic today must defend itself on two fronts. It must assert the rights of the imagination against abstraction, rationalism, and stereotype. But the enemy is also on the other side: the cold of the imagination for itself alone; vision, fantasy, ecstasy for their own sake’s, creativity, spontaneity on their own, without roots, without tradition, without discipline. (Wilder *Theopoetic* 57)

According to Wilder, the poet must be the champion for an imaginative understanding of the world and rejects the idea that everything needs to be formulated scientifically or systematically to be considered worthy. However, a sound Theopoetics must also reject a freeform art that demands inspiration for the sake of itself. It is here, that Levertov shines as a beacon for Theopoetics, as this is the idea she had been searching for and articulating from the beginning of her career. This framework contains an appreciation for the numinous inspiration but also demands that one engage with people, oppressed or in power, with the intent of crafting new images, and viewing the poem and its contents as Divinely endowed, revealing the Sacred to the reader and to the poet.

Though Levertov herself never officially announced or accepted the mantle of Theopoetics in the way that Alves, Hopper, and Wilder did, or came from a perspective that demanded explicitly religious poetry that needed a revival like Merton, she becomes an emblematic figure that reveals the possibilities of what Theopoetics can be as outlined in her “aesthetic beliefs” in the essay “A Poet’s View” in 1984. In that essay, Levertov synthesizes the Theopoetic modes (The Corporeal, The Prophetic, The Mystical) into three creedal statements.

She claims that she believes “in inspiration, to which intelligent craft serves as midwife; that the primary impulse of the artist is to make autonomous things from the materials of a particular art . . . the obligation of the artist to adhere . . . to the inspired experience” (Levertov *New* 240). Levertov revises the metaphor that was stated earlier from poet as “priest” to “midwife” here (this may be due to the negative connotation the former term possibly carried), but begins her



statement in *A Poet's View* with “obligation” and “inspiration” as the chief goal of the artist. Though the metaphor is less explicitly religious, it still reflects the ideas propounded by Wilder in his text *Theopoetic*, going so far as to represent those ideas in the act of revising the metaphor as “midwife” which presents an obligation to help the poem enter into a healthy life.

The obligation of the poet to the art, and the self would not make Levertov’s belief explicitly Theopoetic, but she then pushes into the territory of the framework with what follows:

I believe in the obligation to work from within . . . artists . . . have social responsibilities, at least of a negative kind, i.e., even if incapable of undertaking social actions related to the implications of their productions, they should refrain, at least, from betraying such implications. (Levertov *New* 240)

What Levertov indicates here is exactly what Theopoetics demands. It is not enough to make poetry or have a poetics that crafts religious images or posits ideas in a new way—rather one’s poetics must be grounded in the body and acknowledge the body’s connection to (and with) the numinous. In other words, one’s poetics must be incarnational containing *both* the flesh (or “human”) in tandem with the Divine. This idea of incarnation, in the Christian narrative, if following its chief example, causes a need for a death (God must die) and a resurrection (God relives anew). The obligation of the work may demand that one stands before the metaphorical crowd shouting for one’s crucifixion by the hand of their oppressor. For Levertov, it does not matter what the crowd is chanting, it is the poet who must present the voice of the oppressed and the truth that everything is sacred by means of the poem and its metaphors.

Levertov goes beyond this step in her third and final aspect of her creed, as she pushes further into a fully Theopoetic framework by allowing for a recursive reading based on a poet’s ability to effectively execute the first two parts of the creed. The writer states that:

. . . [C]reative gifts confer on those who possess them the obligation to nurture them in a degree proportionate to the strength and demands of the gift (which, paradoxically, cannot be determined unless the opportunity for its development is provided, which may mean sacrifices and imbalances in other areas of life). (Levertov *New* 240)

One’s ability to recognize the numinous as “inspiration” for the poet, will grow if one “nurture[s]” their awareness to the “demands of the gift.” If the poet does not recognize this, the consequences can result in the poet attempting to nurture other aspects of the life of writing—the need for an audience or “alternative” ways to become “inspired.” The poet may not recognize this in their lifetime and, therefore, will have an “imbalance” or a “sacrifice” in one area of their poetic career or another.

It may be that the poet falls prey to the ideas that Thomas Merton had to fight when crafting a poetics that adhered to the images that the religious order would accept to be taken seriously as a “religious” poet. Therefore, Merton had to have an “imbalance” of explicitly religious images that corresponded to the doctrinally familiar or accepted due to audience’s demands, which risks the poet leaning into possibly clichéd images that carry the weight of the poem. The other option would be that the poet would have to sacrifice being completely understood by the religious audience to follow the “demands of the gift” and write something theopoetically like his book *The Geography of Lograrie*.

It may also be that the poet might fall into the trappings of the ego and gives into a poetics of pain that embraces the bloodlust of an audience who believes inspiration to be crafted from trauma. The conclusion of which is tragic, as one might possibly “give up” their life in the pursuit of publishing the perfect poem or “sacrifice” their health to gain notoriety from the public. The lack of understanding might also present an “imbalance” of using poetry primarily as a tool and not fully embracing what poetry truly is—as one might lean on the poem as just a means to take an experience, a counter-culture rebellion, drugs, or inhibited emotions and blast them onto a page without any knowledge of craft or of the dangerous implications of poetry as chasing literary celebrity.

Levertov’s poetry and essays reveal that when one applies the Theopoetics framework, seeking an expression of embodiment that explores the numinous and allows the poem to be welcomed as it is, one will be able to articulate new ways of seeing and establish new images that reveal the sacredness of all things.

## **THEOPOETICS, POETRY, AND RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE**

### **Moving Forward with Religious Discourse in Poetry Using Theopoetics**

Theopoetics as a hermeneutical framework maintains a space for an engagement with the numinous and of the body without diminishing either for the sake of a rational explanation. It presents a generative creation and reading of poetry that accepts the embedded role of the numinous in the act of inspiration and connectivity through the Divine image and grounds the poem in bodily experience.

The expanse of the movement from academic theology into the realms of aesthetic experiences presents a need to explore Theopoetics scholarship within the medium of poetry. Religious poetry has for a long time been subservient to “ready-made” images to serve as sermon poems for religious gatherings that hope to attract younger audiences. “Secular” poetry has a similar problem in that poems that attempt to articulate or explore the numinous as a subject today are viewed with skepticism at poetry slams or readings because of the current political climate.

Thomas Merton and Denise Levertov present two theopoetic ways of operating in a skeptical or demanding poetic world. Thomas Merton’s theopoetic example presents a means for the “religious poet” to craft poems in a way that maintains some semblance of the religious image but subverts congealed religious notions to awaken something new in the hearts of those who long for the numinous. Through Merton’s example, Theopoetics becomes a corrective counter to codified religious expressions by presenting new ways to articulate old traditions or explorations of the numinous. Denise Levertov presents a theopoetic way to explore the numinous in settings like poetry slams or readings where audiences might adopt an attitude of skepticism (and rightly so) toward the topic of the numinous due to political movements that appropriate and misuse the religious image to oppress minorities and other religious traditions. Levertov’s theopoetic example becomes a corrective counter to movements that engage in oppressive social and political discourses as it reclaims the religious image, and crafts poetry that both explores the numinous and rejects oppression.

It is in this way, through the foundation and expansion of the Theopoetics movement into poetics, and the examples of Thomas Merton to religious people and Denise Levertov to “secular” poets, that the need for a Theopoetics of poetry is most evident. Theopoetics as a framework

presents a poetics that articulates the numinous in embodied experience without the need to qualify that experience to any particular religious community or deny or qualify the numinous to an academic community.

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