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Anatheism: A Theopoetic Challenge

Richard Kearney

Why is "making" considered a sacred activity for gods and mortals alike? Making something out of nothing. Making something in the image of something else. Creators making creatures while creatures in turn make their creators. Making out, making up, making and remaking worlds in one's image and likeness. In shapes and songs, paintings and poems, dreams, and crafts. From the beginning to the end of time. One great game of holy imagination played with hands, mouths, ears, and eyes. With bodies and souls. Art as divine–human interplay, again and again.

Theopoetics names how the divine (*theos*) manifests itself as making (*poiesis)*. The term dates back to the early centuries, meaning both the making human of the divine and the making divine of humanity. As the poet scholar, Ephrem of Syria, wrote: "He gave us divinity, we gave Him humanity." Or as Athanasius said in the fourth century: "God became human so that the human could become divine." Catherine Keller puts it succinctly: "The term theopoetics finds its ancestor in the ancient Greek *theopoiesis*. As poeisis means making or creation, so theopoiesis gets rendered as God-making or becoming divine."[1]

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[1] These quotes are from Catherine Keller, "Theopoetic Becomings: A Brief, Incongruent History," in *Intercarnations: Exercises in Theological Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017). Keller traces the origins of theopoetics from the participatory mysticism of Patristic authors and the cosmo-theology of Cusanus to a third millennium process cosmology inspired by Whitehead's notion of God as "Eros of the universe"—"Poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty and goodness" (*Adventures of Ideas* [New York: The Free Press, 1961]), p. 253. Developing a radical notion of "cosmic theopoiesis," Keller comments on Whitehead's statement that "as God creates the world, the world creates God" thus: "Theopoiesis takes on a new and risky double meaning: we are at once making ourselves God—and making God." For Keller, theopoetics is also cosmopoetics: world-creating as well as person-creating and thing-creating, in such a way that it is less a matter of theist believing or atheist disbelieving than an ana-theist "making and materializing of God … a doing God … doing the prophetic justice, the love thing." In her groundbreaking work, *Cloud of the Impossible* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), Keller amplifies further theopoetic insights by Cusanus and Whitehead concerning the "creatable-creating" character of God in dialogue with ideas of infolding–exfolding from Leibniz, Deleuze, and the contemporary physics of "planetary entanglement" (see especially pp. 209–210 and 306–316). See also our notion of a poetic-dynamic divinity in R. Kearney, *The God Who May Be* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002) and *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

Theopoetics carries an attendant claim that first creation calls for second creation—re-creation or creation again (*ana):* a double act where humanity and divinity collaborate in the coming of the Kingdom. This play of recreation goes by the name of "ana-theism."

Most wisdom traditions involve an original story of creation—or cosmogony—which serves as paradigm for their subsequent spiritual narratives. In what follows I will draw mainly on Abrahamic and Hellenic narratives to trace a short history of theopoetics before illustrating the notion of sacred play with reference to the work of Andrei Rublev. My overall suggestion is that certain expressions of artistic imagination offer ways of responding to the call of creation which precedes and exceeds the abstract systems of philosophy and theology. Theopoetic imagination gives flesh to word and word to flesh. It works both ways.

I Theopoiesis

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The use of the term *poiein*—to make, shape, or form—occurs often in the Bible in relation to divine creation. This theopoetic motif features from the start in Genesis (1.1, 1.7, 1.27) where we read, famously, that "In the beginning God created (*epoiesen)* heaven and earth" (1.1); or, again, "Let us make (*poiesomen)* man" (1.26). In Proverbs 8 (22-26), we witness the great primal scene of God's creation (*poiesis)* of Wisdom:

> The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was formed long ages ago, at the very beginning, when the world came to be [*poiesis*], when there were no watery depths, I was given birth, when there were no springs overflowing with water; before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given birth, before he made (*epoiesai)* the world or its fields or any of the dust of the earth … Then I was constantly at his side. I was filled with delight day after day rejoicing always in his presence. (Prov. 8.22-29)

In the Wisdom of Solomon, the formative power of *Sophia* is even more explicit:

God of my fathers and Lord of mercy,
who by your Word (*logos*) made (*poiesas)* all things,
and through your Wisdom (*sophia*) framed man. (9.1-2)

These early panegyrics of the divine play of *Sophia* echo the first chapter of Genesis where God creates humans in his own image and likeness. The original Hebrew term—*yzr*—plays on the mirroring between (1) the divine Creator (*yotzer*) who creates (*yazar),* and (2) the human power to form and shape (*yetzer*) according to the secret

alphabet of creation (*yetsirah*).[2] It is telling that the Lord did not make anything on the seventh day of genesis, leaving it free for humans to complete. The unfinished Sabbath is a gap calling for perpetual recreation—in imagination and action. And Adam and Eve, as the first creatures shaped from earth (*adamah*), deployed their power of "good imagination" (*yezer hatov*) to engender a human race capable of fashioning a Kingdom in the image of their God.

   This play of mutual recreation between human and divine is what we call theopoetics. It involves creatures co-creating with their Creator. In this view, God co-depends on us so that the promissory word of Genesis may be realized in embodied figures of time and space, image and flesh, art and action. Or as Thomas Mann aptly observes in *Joseph and His Brothers:* "God created for himself a mirror in his own image … as a means of learning about himself. Man is a result of God's curiosity about himself."[3] But greater than curiosity was desire. For in forming the human, God bore witness to a gap within divinity, a sabbatical crack or fracture from which the life-force of eros could emerge as desire for its other. God created because he desired a play mate, someone to consort with, as we know from Hosea and the Song of Songs. Or as the contemporary Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, put it: "*Dieu a*

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[2] See our chapter on the "Hebraic Imagination," in *The Wake of Imagination* (ed. Richard Kearney; London: Hutcheson, 1987). For recent pioneering work on theopoetics, in addition to Catherine Keller's work cited above, see Callid Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water: A Theopoetics Primer* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014); Roland Faber and Jeremy Frankenthal, *Theopoetic Folds* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013); John Caputo, "Theopoetics of the Kingdom of God," in *The Folly of God* (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2016); Amos Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Lima, OH: Academic Revival Press, 2001); Colby Dickinson, *Words Fail: Theology, Poetry and the Challenge of Representation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Noirin Ni Rian, *Theosony: Towards a Theology of Listening* (Dublin: Veritas, 2011), Patrick Hederman *The Haunted Inkwell: Art and the Future* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2001) and John Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). It is worth noting here that there are three main terms used to designate "creation" in the Hebrew Bible—*poiesis, ktizis*, and *bara*. It would require another work to fully explore these usages.

[3] Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, p. 37. On the theme of divine–human mirroring see Hildegard of Bingen, who has God say that he "created mirrors in which he considers all the wonders of his originality which will never cease" (*Hildegard of Bingen's Book of Divine Works* [ed. Matthew Fox; Santa Fe, NM: Bern and co, 1987], p. 128) and Bonaventure who claimed that on the soul's journey to God "we must present to ourselves the whole material world as the first mirror through which we may pass over the supreme [Artisan]" (*The Soul's Journey to God* [vols 1, 9; New York: Paulist Press, 1978], p. 63). I am grateful to Richard Rohr for these two quotations and to Emmanuel Falque for his deep insights into the theme of divine–human mirroring in both Bonaventure and John Scotus Eriugena in *God, Flesh and the Other* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015). Eriugena's notion of "theophany"—God's theopoetic self-creating in and through his creatures—is expressed in the following formulae in Eriugena's ninth-century *De Divisione Naturae:* "God and the creature do not constitute two distinct realities but constitute a single and same reality because it is by a mutual concurrence that the creature subsists in God and that God is created … in the creature, manifesting Himself there" (p. 63); or again: "Because the divine Nature … becomes visible in everything that exists, it is not incongruous to say that it is created in everything that exists" (p. 64). In short, theophany is theopoetics to the degree that for God to create is to be created in and by His creatures. God thus sees himself "as in a mirror, carrying in Himself all existing beings." God-mirroring is God-making in and through creation (p. 65 f).

crée l'homme car on s'amuse mieux à deux." Creation is a love affair.[4] Theopoetics is theoerotics.

It is important to repeat that both Genesis and Proverbs declare that God is relation. Not a self-subsisting remote substance but a relationship between two—Yahweh and Sophia, Elohim and Adam—through the medium of a third (the breath of language). Indeed the fact that the Creator is also called by a plural name, Elohim, itself reveals that God is originally a community rather than some autonomous Supreme Being— "Let *us* make man." Divine creating is divine speaking from the start, as evidenced in the Hebraic word play on the first and last letters of the alphabet in Genesis 1.1.[5] The first word of Genesis is dialogue not monologue, and this is echoed in the opening of St

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[4] Emmanuel Levinas in Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). See also Aviva Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 1995). Just as a certain Jewish teaching claimed that the Torah (Law) existed before the Creation of the world, so too the spirit of loving Wisdom (Sophia) may be said to serve as an originary act of divine pro-creation (Prov. 8). This finds a Christian variation in Paul's claim in Ephesians (1:4) that Christians exist in a loving relation with Christ before the foundation of the world—and ever since in the work of ongoing creation, incarnation, and salvation (Rom. 8). The notion of a primal Cosmic Creative Christ is revisited in Colossians 1.15: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth." The Trinitarian relationship of Father–Son–Spirit as a primordial dance of mutual co-creation finds expression in the Patristic notion of perichoresis which first arose in third- and fourth-century Cappadocia, a theme we explore in the final part of this chapter. See Richard Rohr with Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2016): "This flow of love goes full circle. The 'Son' also creates the 'Father' precisely as Father." And Rohr does not hesitate to explore the gender fluidity of the persons of the dance, to include "mother" and "daughter," reminding us that the Pauline view of creation in Romans 8.22 ("From the beginning until now, the entire creation has been groaning in one great act of giving birth") is "very feminine"—in keeping with the feminine Sophia of the books of Wisdom. Which is why, Rohr notes, "men were historically so opposed to it" ("One Great Act of Giving Birth: The Cosmic Christ," November 2, 2016, Meditations@cac.org). In this connection he cites a number of great Christian mystics, including (1) Hildegard of Bingen—"Humanity is called to assist God … to co-create"; (2) Thomas Merton's notion of creation as a "general dance" (*New Seeds of Contemplation*); and Teilhard de Chardin: "'The world is still being created, and it is Christ who is reaching his fulfillment in it.'" When I heard that saying, I saw as though in ecstasy that through all nature I was immersed in God" ("Cosmic Life" in *Writings in Time of War)*.

[5] I am grateful to the biblical scholar Stephen Rugg for the following analysis: "The first line of the Hebrew text of Genesis (1.1) is *bᵊrēšîṯ bārāʾ ʾĕlōhîm ʾēṯ haššāmayim wᵊʾēṯ haʾāreṣ*
In the beginning he created God/gods the heavens and the earth."

There is a Hebrew "word" that doesn't translate. The "word" is constructed of two consonants the *aleph* (first letter of the Hebrew alphabet) and the *tav* (the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet); it is like seeing AZ or AΩ. That "word" has a grammatical purpose in this sentence as the "direct object marker." Hebrew doesn't have noun cases and word order is not absolute, so when a direct object needs to be specified this "word" is placed before the direct object(s). Rhetorically (and theologically) every "jot and tittle" would also be significant. Here we could suggest that the grammatical marker is a sign. "In the beginning God created aleph-tav," where aleph-tav is a merism for the alphabet and a synecdoche for language. The aleph-tav appears twice (because there are two noun objects). In the second instance it mediates (with the conjunction) "'the heavens' and 'the earth'. Language graphically 'holds/pulls together' the merism of heaven and earth. Interpreted thus we could suggest that *Eros*/language operates primordially as a bridge between two oppositions stuck in *thanatos*. So to hazard a more contemporary interpretive translation we might read: 'At the origins (of time), God created *langue,* and the heavens and the earth with *langue*'. [To expand the play of the aleph-tav in Hebrew—the word is sometimes a preposition, translated as 'with.'] *Langue* is then creatively employed as God's *parole* (because time and *langue* are in a sense simultaneous first-creations, *langue* participates with chronic force and can now be expressed as *parole*), where God speaks and 'there is'. What follows in the story is then a series of distinctions that cannot be maintained

John's Gospel which declares that "In the beginning was the word (*logos*) and the word was *with* God." The preposition "with" (*pros*) here actually means "toward" or "before," revealing a relation of face-to-face or person-to-person (*prosopon):* a dynamic liaison which mirrors the inaugural scene of Sophia (a feminine noun) playing before the face of the Lord (Prov. 8). These Jewish and Christian claims to the primacy of relation between persons are reinforced in the later Patristic figure of creation as a trinitarian dance (*perichoresis*).[6] We shall return to this point in our commentary of Rublev's icon of the perichoresis below.

separately; each separation is imbued with inherent boundary crossing—evidence of eros at work." I am very grateful to Stephen Rugg's presentation at my "Eros/Thanatos" seminar at the Philosophy dept, Boston College, Fall, 2016. See also Jonathan Yovel, "The Creation of Language and Language without Time: Metaphysics and Metapragmatics in Genesis 1," *Biblical Interpretation* 20 (2012), pp. 205–225; Naomi Janowitz, "Recreating Genesis: The Metapragmatics of Divine Speech," in *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics* (ed. J.A. Lucy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 393–405. See also Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Significance of the Cosmology in Genesis I in Relation to Ancient Near Eastern Parallels," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 10, no. 1 (1972), pp. 1–20, and Tzahi Weiss, "On the Matter of Language: The Creation of the World through Letters," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* (Fall, 2009). One might also cite here a number of contemporary hermeneutic readings of Genesis in terms of language and eros. Jacques Derrida declares: "In the beginning was hermeneutics" and associates Genesis with the ongoing play of "dechemination/ dissemination/ diaspora/ differance"; while Paul Ricoeur explores the primary role of nuptial metaphoricity and creation in another inaugural Wisdom book of Solomon, namely, the Song of Songs (see Ricoeur, "The Nuptial Metaphor," in *Thinking Biblically* [with André La Cocque; Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004]). See also the opening chapters of Aviva Zorberg's extraordinary hermeneutical–Rabbinical reading of Genesis as a language of eros in *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis*; and Emmanuel Falque's claim, in his hermeneutic reading of Genesis 1, that "In the beginning was sexual difference" (*The Wedding Feast of the Lamb: Eros, the Body and the Eucharist*, [New York: Fordham University Press, 2016], p. 140).

6   *Perichoresis*, or the divine dance of Trinitarian relation, was there from the beginning (see Rohr, *The Divine Dance)*. In Christianity, Sophia—which Proverbs said was created in the beginning—was sometimes identified with Christ as the second person of the Trinity (viz, the famous Hagia Sophia basilica in Constantinople). Sophia was associated at times with the "Word" (*Logos*)—for example, in the Wisdom of Solomon (9.1-2) as we noted above, where *logos* and *Sophia* are used synonymously as equiprimordial powers of creation (of the world and humans): a theme echoed in certain later commentaries on the Prologue of John's Gospel. It should be noted, however, that in the Nicene Creed (381 AD), the Church Fathers spoke of the Father "engendering," rather than "making" the Son—"*genitus non factum (poiethenta).*" And the later controversy over the "*Filioque*" (seventh–ninth centuries), which hierarchically subordinates the third person of the Trinity (*pneuma*) to the Father "and" (*que*) the Son, further diluted the radical equity of face-to-face (*prosopon*) relations between the three divine persons. It is very revealing, nonetheless, that the term "*pros*" features in the opening sequence of John's Prologue—"The Word was with (*pros*) God—indicating that the Word-Logos-Christ-Son plays 'before/in front of/face to face with' the Father (*prosopon* means face). I am grateful to John Manoussakis for his readings of Sophia and *prosopon* in 'Toward a Fourth Reduction' in his *After God*" (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009). I am also indebted to Richard Rohr in *The Divine Dance* for his insistence that the human person see itself in continuity with divine creation, in perpetual personal face-to-face relation, and not as some isolated autonomous self. We are "chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world" (see Eph. 1.4). For more on our understanding of *prosopon/persona/person* see also the opening Chapter of Kearney, *The God Who May Be*. While perichoresis is primarily a Christian image of the Trinity it is important to note, as we shall note below, that Rublev's famous image portrays the Trinity in terms of the Jewish Bible scene of three strangers visiting Abraham and that many other passages in the Torah and Psalms depict God in terms of imaginative figures and metaphors—nursemaid, shepherd, eagle, lion, father, burning bush, still small voice, etc. See also Numbers 12.8 where Moses is reported as seeing the "image" (*doxa*) of the Lord. It is telling, I think, that one of the most powerful contemporary paintings of the three strangers visiting Abraham at Mamre—after Rublev—is that by the Jewish painter, Marc Chagall.

In Jewish Scripture the leitmotif of *theopoiesis* extends well beyond Genesis and the books of Wisdom to the Psalms and Prophets. Think, for example, of Isaiah 29.16 where the human creature is described as the clay of the potter, the handicraft of the craftsman, the art of the artist. Or, again, recall the Rabbinical and Kabbalistic commentaries on the making of Golems—human-like figures shaped from clay according to the Book of Creation (*Sefir Yetsirah*). One such version tells of how Abraham and his teacher, Seth, were invited by God to study the *Sefir Yetsirah* for three years "until they knew how to create a world."[7] But lest they succumb to the temptation of idolatry—like Enosh who worshipped his own clay image—humans were admonished not to replace God's creation but only to repeat it so as better to appreciate the power of divine making. It was good to experiment with the divine letters of creation as art, exploration, invention, but not to actually substitute God with an idol. If one yielded to the temptation of literal imitation, the Golem risked becoming a monster who turns on its creator. And so to prevent such idolatrous destruction, the makers of Golems were exhorted to remove the "shem" (a parchment spelling *emeth*, meaning "alive") from their creature's lips so as to respect the difference between human and divine creation. The point was for humans to participate in divine *yetsirah/poiesis* in the right manner—namely, abiding by the Way (*Torah*) of the Creator (*Yotzer*)—rather than set themselves up as mini-Gods in their own right.[8] According to Jewish wisdom, then, we are not divine makers but human makers—finite creatures called to collaborate with God in the completion of Creation.

In the later Christian tradition we find similar calls to cooperate in the coming of the Kingdom by joining the Trinitarian dance of perichoresis, thereby repeating the original act of genesis. Such a collaborative theopoetics between the divine Logos and human action seeks to follow Christ the God-Man in completing the "New Creation" (Gal. 6.15). We read in Ephesians 2.10 that "we are the handiwork (*poiema*) created by Jesus Christ for good works … that we should live in them." As such, Christianity may be understood as the historical–cultural task of carrying on and carrying out this "poem." Whence the notion of Christ as Lord of the Dance and Supreme Artist—echoed in the vibrant Christian culture of image-making both in the iconography

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7 Cited in Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination,* p. 55.
8 On the Talmudic and Kabbalistic readings of the Golem, see R. Kearney, chapter 1, section 3, *The Wake of Imagination.* See also Gershom Scholem's illuminating account of the Jewish literature of Golem-making in the *Mystical Symbols of Judaism*: "Just as the human mind remains infinitely inferior to the all-encompassing divine intelligence of God, so does the Golem's intelligence lag behind the human … Still, the Golem remains a representation of man's creative power. The universe, so the Kabbalists tell us, is built essentially on the prime elements of numbers and letters, because the letters of God's language reflected in human language are nothing but a concentration of His creative energy. Thus by assembling these elements in all their possible combinations … the Kabbalist who contemplates the mysteries of Creation radiates some of this elementary power into the Golem. The creation of the Golem is then in some way an affirmation of the productive and creative power of man. It repeats, on however small a scale, the work of creation" (cited in Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination,* p. 59). Scholem does not hesitate to note the implications of this for contemporary cybernetics and the new technology of virtual simulation and cloning. His critical conclusion is that we should explore the power of making (*poiesis*) to experiment with "creations of imagination and mind" (*tetsirah mahshartith)* but not to substitute ourselves for God (cited in *The Wake of Imagination,* p. 61).

of Eastern Orthodoxy and the religious art of the Italian humanist Renaissance and after.[9] We will return to a discussion of this iconographic culture in Part III and ask the related question of how divine *poiesis* relates to human *praxis*.

ii

It is worth noting briefly here that when, in the Greek philosophical tradition, Aristotle seeks a term for the divine mind, he chooses *nous poietikos*—the mind that "makes." And in his *Poetics (Peri Poietikes)*—though now talking of human not divine making—Aristotle describes poetic creation as a mirroring–emplotting (*mimesis-mythos)* of life: an art of recreation involving, in Paul Ricoeur's words, a radical "configuring" of our world. The term *poiesis* occurs in the very first line of Aristotle's classic text and regularly thereafter, referring to the transformation of everyday haphazard events (one thing after—*meta*—another) into a meaningful configured plot (one thing because of—*dia*—another). And it is by means of such creative re-making of our experience that we achieve healing catharsis: namely, a poetic distillation of our basic drives of "pity" (*eleos*) and "fear" (*phobos*) into compassion and serenity. Poetics, in short, involves a "creative redescription" of experience which replays our actions and sufferings in a storied way that issues in the pleasure and wisdom of art. Configured

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[9] Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, chapter 3, pp. 133–138. Since, for Christians, God is made man in the person of Christ, images are permitted and even encouraged, for there is now said to be a legitimate analogy or *similitudo* between the finite and the infinite, overriding Deuteronomy's prohibition ("Thou shall have no graven images"). Image becomes the mediator or chiasm between word (*logos*) and flesh (*sarx).* On the notion of Christ as artist-dancer-player see our hermeneutic analysis of the mystical tradition of *deus ludens* in Kearney, *La Poétique du Possible* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984), pp. 269–272. The notion of divine play has played an important role in popular religious culture in Christian culture also, involving different forms of public liturgies, pageants, processions, and Passion plays on Holy Feasts and rituals—Mardi Gras, Corpus Christi, Good Friday, All Saints (Halloween), All Souls, Christmas, the Epiphany, etc. A common feature of many Latin Catholic cultures in particular to this day. We also find it in the notion of Christ as "Holy Fool" and "Lord of the Dance," where in certain sacred moments in the liturgical calendar—for example, Shrove Tuesday and the Feast of Saint John (June 21, the summer equinox), the faithful are invited to don masks and costumes in a time of Carnival where the normal rules of time, space, gender, class, and behavior are traversed and reversed, in a divine comedy of fantasy experimentation and play where the conventional logic of non-contradiction no longer applies. This gives popular currency to Samuel Coleridge's definition of poetic imagination as "the yolking together of opposite and discordant qualities." On this notion of Carnival as sacred time and space, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). See here also Simon Critchley's fascinating reflections on Oscar Wilde's account of Christ as supreme artist in *Faith of the Faithless* (New York: Verso, 2013). One finds similar accounts in the work of William Blake, for example: "Jesus and His Apostles and Disciples were all Artists …. A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect; the man or woman who is not one of these is not a Christian. The Old and New Testaments are the Great Code of Art. Art is the Tree of Life … The Eternal Body of Man is the Imagination; that is God Himself, the Divine body (Hebrew) Jesus; we are His Members. It manifests itself in His Works of Art … Prayer is the study of Art. Praise is the practice of art" ("Engraving on the Laocoon"). It is important to recall in this context, that theopoeisis is not confined to works of high art but is also to be found in the most basic forms of everyday sacred making—of food into feast, of sound into chant, of wool into sacred weaving and couture, of wood and stone into sacred architecture and furniture (from simple Shaker cabinets to holy chapels and cathedrals). In these forms of common sacred practice, making God is a making good and making beautiful of everyday existence. Religious culture as popular culture. The Sacred in the profane.

by the poetic work we, the audience, refigure our own lived existence.[10] We refine our passions (*pathemata)* and are invited to become, in Aristotle's terms, more serene and compassionate citizens of the polis.

iii

Before concluding our preliminary note on theopoetics, let me recite what I consider to be a telling example from modern religious literature. Gerard Manley Hopkins was a Jesuit poet who combined a Scotist–Aristotelian aesthetics of singularity (*haeceitas)* with a Biblical–Ignatian belief in the inherent divinity of "all things." He describes the moment of literary epiphany as a recreation of creation; or as he puts it—an art of "aftering and seconding," a motion of "over and overing" which replays secular experience as sacred.[11] Hopkins speaks of a retrieval of past time that, like Proust, repeats forward, proffering new life to memory, giving a future to the past. This poetic revisiting involves a detour of distance and disenchantment after which we may return to our first experience in a new light, in a second naïveté, over and over. Freud calls this temporal retrieval *nachträglichkeit;* and although he is speaking of "trauma," the same après-coup structure is operative in poetic "wonder": both terms come from a "wound" of shock or surprise which explodes our normal sense of time and space. In Hopkins's work, this wounding expressed itself in a series of dark sonnets which prefaced his poetic epiphanies:

> "I wake and feel the fell of dark not day … "
> "Oh the mind, mind has mountains,
> sheer, frightful, no-man fathomed.
> Hold them cheap may those who ne'er hung there … "

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[10] See Paul Ricoeur on Artistotle's account of poetics as catharsis and narrative emplotment in *Time and Narrative* (vol. 1; Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), chapter 2. Aristotle's philosophy was to exert a considerable influence on Western Christian intellectual culture, especially during the great medieval Scholastic period following Thomas Aquinas in the thirteen and fourteen centuries; but his potential impact on a Christian aesthetics of *poiesis* was often overshadowed by the Platonic critique of imagination as a mimetic and mendacious act subordinate to reason. For Plato the power of making (*techne demiourgike* in his dialogue, *Protagoras)* belongs properly to a quasi-divine maker or demiurge half way between the eternal Forms (which are not made but exist outside time and spaces) and human mortals who are condemned to replicate mere copies and imitations, removing themselves further from the original truth of the Transcendental Ideas, which remain timeless, immaterial, and immutable. See our account of the Platonic and Aristotelian theories of imagination in "The Hellenic Imagination," *Wake of Imagination,* and our analysis of narrative catharsis in "Narrating Pain: The Power of Catharsis," *Paragraph* 30, no. 1 (2007), pp. 51–66; "Writing Trauma," *Giornale de Metafisica* 2 (2013), pp. 7–28 and "Narrative Matters," in our *On Stories* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

[11] See our discussion of Hopkins's anatheist poetics in Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 11–12; in "God after God: An Anatheist Attempt to Reimagine God," in *Reimagining the Sacred* (ed. Kearney and Jens Zimmerman; New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 6–18. See also our recent essays, "Secular Epiphanies: The Anatheistic Hermeneutics of Gerard Manley Hopkins" in "Secular Theologies and Theologies of the Secular," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology,* 54: 4 (Winter 2015), guest editor, Whitney Bauman, Blackwell, Oxford, 2015; and "Épiphanies: Hopkins, Scotus, Joyce," in *Métaphysique et christianisme* (ed. Philippe Capelle-Dumont; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2015).

Traversing such dark nights of the soul, the poet returns to a celebration of ordinary things as micro-theophanies:

"Flesh fade, and mortal trash
Fall to the residuary worm; world's wildfire, leave but ash:
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond" (*That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire).*

A Catholic author, Hopkins performs a sacramental reimagining of everyday experience. But this notion of holy repetition is not confined to any particular religion. It extends to any poetic movement of returning to "God *after* God." God *again* after the loss of God. As in the replay of a child's game, "gone, back again." "*Fort/Da.*" We learn young that what disappears as literal comes back again as figural—that is, as sign and symbol, as a second presence in and through absence. And by symbol here we do not mean *untrue* or *unreal.* The return of the lost one—in the case of religion, the lost God—may well be the most "real presence," theopoetically speaking. It may in fact be a more powerful and moving presence precisely because of the detour through separation and letting go. This involves a new notion of time—kairological rather than chronological—a time which traverses and reverses time, as in the Eucharistic formula: "We do this in memory of Him until he comes again." *Theopoiesis* is about coming back again (*ana*)—creating again time after time. In a word: *ana-poiesis.* Theopoetics is anapoetics.

II Anatheism

"Ana" is a prefix defined in the Shorter Oxford English dictionary as: "Up in space or time; back again, anew." So understood, the term supports the deeper and broader sense of "after" contained in the expression "God after God." *Ana* opens a semantic field involving notions of retrieving, revisiting, reiterating, and repeating. But, as already mentioned, repeating *forwards* not *backwards.* It is not about regressing nostalgically to some prelapsarian past. It is a question, rather, of coming back "afterwards" in order to move forward again. *Reculer pour mieux sauter!*

So it is in this sense that we use the term ana-theism as a "returning to God after God": a critical hermeneutic retrieval of sacred things that have passed but still bear a radical remainder, an unrealized potentiality or promise to be more fully realized in the future. In this way, ana-theism may be understood as "after-faith," which is more than an "after-thought" or "after-effect." After-faith is eschatological—something ultimate in the end that was already there from the beginning. And that is why the "after" of *ana* is also a "before." A before that has been transposed, so to speak, into a second after. As Sophia says when she plays before the face of the Lord: "Before he made the world I was there … constantly at his side … filled with delight, rejoicing always in his presence" (Prov. 8.26-29). And this Hebraic sense of ana-chrony is echoed in Jesus's claim: "Before Abraham was I am."

But let us be clear from the outset: anatheism is not a dialectical third term which supersedes theism and atheism in a sort of Hegelian synthesis or final resolution. True, anatheism contains a moment of atheism within itself as it does a moment of theism. Or to be more precise: anatheism pre-contains both—for it operates from a space and time *before* the dichotomy of atheism and theism as well as *after*. The double "a" of anatheism holds out the promise, but not the necessity, of a second affirmation once the "death of God" has done its work. But it differs radically from Hegel's "negation of the negation" which sees the return as an ineluctable synthesis or sublation (*Aufhebung*). In contrast to such a theodicy, the "ana" of theopoetics is always a wager—a risk that can go either way. It is a matter of discernment and decision on our part. A replay of wisdom, again and again. The event does not take place behind our backs, irrespective of our agency, like Hegel's dialectic of Absolute Spirit. There is no "Ruse of Reason." Anatheism is not some predetermined dialectic leading to a Final Totality. It is not about Upper Case Divinity. *Au contraire!* Anatheism has nothing to do with Alpha-Gods or Omni-Gods. It is about re-imaging—and re-living—the sacred in the "least of these." It is lower case from beginning to end.

Anatheism concentrates, therefore, on unrealized or suspended possibilities which are most powerfully reanimated if one also experiences a moment of a-theism; the "a-" here being a gesture of abstention, privation, withdrawal, emptying.[12] A moment which is less a matter of epistemological theory than a pre-reflective lived experience of ordinary lostness and solitude—a mood of *Angst* or abandon, an existential "dark night of the soul" which everyone experiences at some moment in their lives. Even Christ on the Cross or weeping for Lazarus. This privative "a" of atheism is indispensable to anatheism. But in "a-n-a" we have two A's. And the second "a" is the "not" of the "not." The yes after the no which repeats the first yes of creation. The double A-A of anatheism. A reopening to something new. A dance of twelve steps and more. After all.

So, I repeat, the *ana-* is not a guarantee of ineluctable rational progress. The end of religion brings us back to the beginning of religion—to a fore-time preceding the division between theism and atheism. And in this respect, we might think of John Keats's famous definition of poetic faith a "willing suspension of disbelief," a returning again to Adam's experience on the first day of creation when everything was fresh and up for grabs, when anything could happen, for better or for worse. Keats calls this originary moment of not-knowing "negative capability"—"the ability to experience mystery, uncertainty and doubt, without the irritable reaching after fact and reason." And it has echoes, I think, of Kierkegaard's famous "leap of faith" in *Fear and Trembling*. A sacred repetition—not to be understood as a regression to some original position but as an originary *disposition* of openness to the radical incoming Other.[13] Abraham has to lose his son as given in order to receive him back as gift; he has to abandon Isaac as possession in order to welcome him back as promise. Isaac is not Abraham's (as extension, acquisition, property, projection); he is another's, another, a gift of the Other (the return gift of what Kierkegaard calls the "Absolute").

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[12] See our analysis of Paul Ricoeur's "Religion, Atheism, Faith" (*The Conflict of Interpretations)* in Kearney, *Anatheism*, pp. 71–81.
[13] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Penguin, 1985).

In short, anatheistic faith is a retrieval of something after you have lost it. It involves the repeating of the former as latter, of the earlier as later—a replay which surpasses the model of linear time as one moment succeeding another in favor of a time out of time: an epiphanic moment (*Augenblick* or *Jetzzeit)* where eternity crosses the instant.[14] "Ana" is a prefix that seeks to capture this enigma of past-as-future, before-as-after.[15]

To say this is not, however, to deny that *ana* also involves historical time. Far from it. Infinite time is in-finite, as Levinas reminds us; it traverses finite temporality and cannot exist without it. As such, ana-theism in its current manifestation does indeed coincide with a concrete historical situation that comes after the death of God, culturally, socially, and intellectually. It is marked by the announcements of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, by the atheist exposés of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the modern critique of Ideology, and so on. It is something that very much expresses a typical modern anxiety in the face of what Max Weber terms the "disenchantment" of the world, the desacralizing of society, the general malaise of the abandonment of God and loss of faith. In this sense anatheism is indeed a historical–cultural phenomenon which engages with our contemporary secular humanist culture. But not in any teleological manner, i.e., in the sense that we were ignorant and have now seen the light—that all faith was delusion and we are finally free at last! For anatheism, losing the illusion of God (as sovereign superintendent of the universe) offers the possibility of re-opening oneself to the original promise of the sacred Stranger, the absolute Other who comes as gift, call, summons, as invitation to hospitality and justice in every moment. In sum, as someone or something that was lost and forgotten by Western metaphysics—and needs to be recalled again.[16] And here, I think, we can move from the *historical* formulation of the anatheist question—what comes after the disappearance of God?—to the more *existential* one: How do we experience this today in our concrete lived existence?

This is why anatheism calls not for new theories as such but for new "examples" and "testimonies" of the anatheist moment in art and action. It is why anatheism needs theopoetics: scriptural, literary, visual portraits of lived abandonment and disillusionment followed by a turning (what Socrates called *periagoge*, what Augustine called *conversio*). The negative moment of letting go is, let me repeat, indispensable to a proper appreciation of anatheism. Without it we have cheap grace—God as comforting illusion, quick fix, opium of the people. I often think here of Dostoyevsky's sense of faith through radical alienation ("true faith comes forth from the crucible of doubt") or the "dark night of the soul" powerfully depicted in the mystical poetry of John of the Cross or Gerard Manley Hopkins, mentioned above; or of Christ's radical sense

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[14] For philosophical interpretations of this epiphanic moment see Kierkegaard's treatment of the "Instant" (*Augenblick)* and "Repetition" (*Wiederholung)* and Heidegger's ontological readings of these terms in *Being and Time* as well as the later deconstructive readings by Derrida and Caputo. See also Walter Benjamin's related reading of the Messianic time of *Jetzzeit*, and Giorgio Agamben's reading of the eschatological "time that remains."

[15] For kairological and eschatological notions of ana-time, see our "Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology," in *The Ethics of Time* (ed. John Manoussakis; Continuum: New York, 2016).

[16] On the critique of onto-theology as a double forgetfulness of Being and God see the deconstructive readings of Heidegger, Derrida, and Caputo and our own hermeneutic treatment of this theme in Kearney, *La Poétique du Possible* and *The God Who May Be*.

of abandonment on the Cross. These are all concrete moments of emptying (*kenosis)* which open the possibility of a return to the inaugural moment of *anatheism*: the wager of yes to the Stranger. This primal wager is first and foremost an existential one—not a purely logical one *à la* Pascal (which is more a wager of knowledge than of flesh, epistemological rather than ontological). The anatheist wager—to turn hostility into hospitality—signals the inaugural moment of all great wisdom traditions. And with respect to Abrahamic theopoetics specifically, it invites us to recall certain "primal scenes" of hospitality in the Scriptures illustrated in many great works of religious art: for example, Abraham and Sarah as they encounter the strangers in Mamre; Mary faced with the stranger called Gabriel; the disciples meeting the risen stranger at Emmaus.[17] Which brings us to the final part of our reflection—anatheism as theopoetic art.

III Theopoetic art: Anatheist imagining

Let me conclude with an example of theopoetic art—Andrei Rublev's Trinity.

My suggestion is that works of art and imagination are more likely to express the superabundance of meaning, seeded by the ongoing process of theopoiesis, than the purely conceptual systems of speculative metaphysics or dogmatic theology. The polysemantic excess of theopoetics expresses the continuous creation of God which, in Teilhard de Chardin's words, "prolongs itself in history and culture." Paintings are more embodied than doctrines. Art is more incarnate than dogma. Orthopoiesis—like its twin orthopraxis—precedes orthodoxy. Indeed it is important to recall that theory is itself a faded form of *poiesis*, and only retains its pedagogical force by acknowledging its creative origin in the latter.[18] More simply put: images are more powerful than ideas because they are more sensible, more tangible, and more down to earth. They invite us to a "carnal hermeneutics" of sight, sound, taste, and touch. They move and mobilize our being. And here we should not forget that the Latin word for Sophia is *sapientia*, reminding us that primal wisdom originally comes from *sapere*, to savor and taste. The

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[17] On other theopoetic paintings of hospitality and strangers—in addition to Rublev's Trinity—see also our mention in *Anatheism* of Botticelli's Cestello Annunciation (1490), Rembrandt's famous etching series of Emmaus and Chagall's Abraham and Strangers. One might also mention our treatment elsewhere of Antonio da Massina's Annunciata and Sheila Gallagher's recent Pneuma Hostis, as well as such contemporary films as *Babette's Feast* (based on a story by Karen Blixen) and Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*. On the notion of art making (icon making and bell making) as a divine call to human co-creation—which excludes no-one—see Anthony Steinbock, "Transcendence as Creativity: Vocation in Andrei Tarkovsky," in *The Yearbook on History and Interpretation of Phenomenology* (ed. Jana Trajtelova; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016). Theopoetic art is exemplary of human–divine co-creation but it is not exclusionary (or elitist). Everyone is called to participate in the art of ongoing *poiesis* in many different mansions, great and small, sacred and secular, miraculous and banal. Every time anyone acts, speaks, or makes one is participating, for better or worse, in the creation or de-creation or re-creation of the Kingdom.

[18] On the derivation of intellectual concepts from imagination, see Kant's argument for the primacy of transcendental productive imagination in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Schelling's claim that philosophy and theology are derived forms of an "unconscious poetics of nature" or Nietzsche's argument that metaphysics is a form of masked mythology—"an army of mobile metaphors"— that has forgotten its own mytho-poetic origin (a point later developed by philosophers such as Heidegger, Derrida, and Ricoeur).

savvy of imagination precedes all speculative *savoir.* And it is important to recall that theopoetic imagination is not confined to high art but more commonly manifests itself in ordinary ritual cultural practices around icons, statues, paintings, and moving images.

When Rublev painted the Trinity in 1425 he did not try to represent Father, Son, and Spirit as abstract deities but rather as three human-like persons sharing a meal at a table. To be moved by the Trinity, Rublev realized, we need to be able to sense it, see it, and touch it. (Oriental Christians touch icons with their foreheads, lips, and hands). And to this end, he resolved to embody the mystery of divine relation in a created work
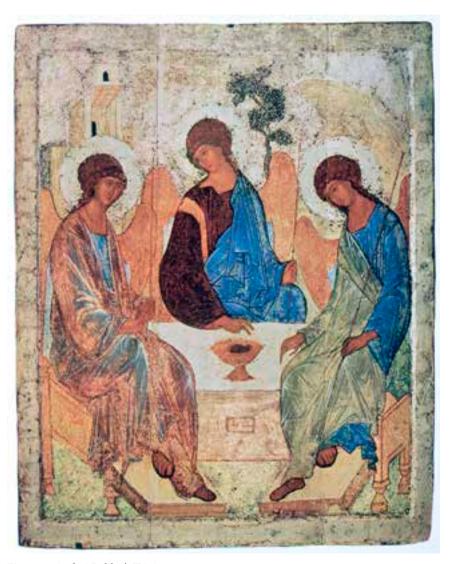

Figure 1 Andrei Rublev's Trinity.

of art, where paint, volume, form, and style configure something invisible as visible. He made an image which told a story, bearing out the teaching of the Church Father, John of Damascus, that we "need the Gospel in one hand and the painted expression of the same in the other, because the two have equal value and should receive equal veneration" (*Ep. II, 171).*

Rublev was a Russian Orthodox monk who, faithful to both the apophatic tradition of discretion and the kataphatic tradition of embodiment, did not try to paint God as some transcendent Form. Instead he painted the three strangers who visited Abraham and Sarah in Mamre (Gen. 3). The primal biblical scene exemplifies the Trinity as a drama of lived hospitality: the original title of the icon was "The Hospitality of Abraham" referring to how Abraham responded to the three strangers who appeared out of the desert not with hostile fear but by hosting a lavish meal. In the sharing of food from an open bowl—depicted at the center of Rublev's painting—the event marks a space, a chalice, a chora, a womb, where a future child is conceived: Isaac.

Rublev revisits the inaugural drama of Abrahamic hospitality to manifest the mystery of a Triune God. In the making and sharing of food, the divine becomes human and the human divine. Once they participate as guests in the feast, the "three" strangers, Genesis tells us, become "one." Three in one and one in three. Human as divine and divine as human. The impossible made possible.

Rublev's icon features three persons circling around a table, each offering its place to the other in a gesture of endless hospitality. Their roles as father, son, and spirit are not depicted in terms of hierarchy or seniority but as equal partners in an open-ended dance. The dance is not self-regarding but opens onto a fourth person—an empty place at the base of the table where a stranger is invited, an outsider welcomed, a guest hosted: humanity in the person of each viewer of the painting itself. That is why a small rectangle still marks the lower part of the circle where a mirror once looked out—at us looking in. A mirror revealing to us that we are the reflection of divinity, made in its image and likeness—the fourth dancer invited to the dance.[19]

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[19] On the "fourth person of the Trinity"—invited to the perichoretic dance through the mirror-image—see Rohr, *The Divine Dance*: "Don't try to start with some notion of abstract Being and then conclude, we also found out [through Jesus] that such a being is loving. No, Trinitarian revelation *begins* with the loving—and this is the new definition of being. Most start with the One and then have trouble making it into the Flow between the Three. How about starting with the Three, and know that this is the shape of true Oneness? There is now a hidden communion, an Absolute Friendship at the heart of everything. The final direction of history is inevitably directed toward resurrection as Alpha becomes Omega (see Rev. 1.8; 21.6; 22.13), as both Bonaventure and Teilhard de Chardin would put it. Resurrection is no longer a one-time anomaly in the body of Jesus, but the pattern of the universe ….The Trinitarian flow is like the rise and fall of tides on a shore. All reality can be pictured as an Infinite Outflowing that generates an Eternal Infolding. This eternal flow is echoed in history by the self-emptying of the Incarnation and the Holy Spirit's seducing us back to God. As Meister Eckhart and other mystics say in other ways, the infolding always corresponds to the outflowing. I love the German word for Trinity, *Dreifaltigheit,* which literally means 'the three infoldings'. The foundational good news is that creation and humanity have structurally been in this flow from the very beginning (Eph. 1.4, 9-10; Rom. 8.21-25, 29). We are not outsiders or mere spectators but inherently part of the divine dance, while ever being drawn deeper into the Divine Two-Step. Jesus said, 'I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be' (John 14.3). Some mystics who were on deep journeys of prayer took

This dance motif is captured in the original Greek term for the Trinity—*perichoresis*—meaning to dance around. The three persons circle around (*peri*) a receptacle (*chora*) which may be read as a bowl of hospitality, a eucharistic chalice, a womb of natality (Sarah prefiguring Mary for the Christian monk, Rublev). This latter reading is significant for in early Christian churches, such as the Monastery of Khora in Constantinople, we find icons and frescoes depicting Mary bearing Jesus in her womb with the inscription *Chora tou Achoratou*: the Container of the Uncontainable.[20] The *chora* at the center of the dance may thus be seen as the core of finitude at the heart of infinity—the chalice-womb of bread and wine which hosts the human to come, the child to be born again and again. *Chora* thus marks a space of endless possibility for endless life, a site of eros and creation, of play and feasting. A feminine space where the three persons of the Trinity give birth to each other and to a fourth: each human who participates in the visual dance. As the medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart, puts it: "Do you want to know what goes on in the core of the Trinity? I will tell you. In the core of the Trinity the Father laughs and gives birth to the Son. The Son laughs back at the Father and gives birth to the Spirit. The whole Trinity laughs and gives birth to us."[21]

this message to its consistent conclusion: creation must then be seen as 'the fourth person of the Blessed Trinity'. Once more, the divine dance isn't a closed circle; we're all invited in ... This fits the 'dynamic' metaphysical principle that 'the inter-weaving of the three [always] produces a fourth' (Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Holy Trinity and the Law of Three* [Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2013], 89). This may sound like heresy—especially to a contracted heart that wants to go it alone. But this is the *fourth place* pictured and reserved as a mirror in Andrei Rublev's fifteenth-century icon of the Trinity." For further philosophical analysis of the "fourth dimension" of the divine–human relation, see John Manoussakis, "Toward a Fourth Reduction" and Kearney, "Epiphanies of the Everyday" in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp. 21–38.

[20] On the depictions of the divine mother and son as "*chora achoraton,*" see Kearney, "God or Khora?" in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 191. I am grateful to John Manaoussakis for this reference. See also the more common ritual formulations of Mary as Bearer and Mother of her Creator, for example, "Blessed are you, O Virgin Mary, who bore the Creator of all things: You became the Mother of your Maker" (Entrance Antiphon of the Catholic Feast of the Virgin Mary, October 8).

[21] Meister Eckhart, *Meditations with Meister Eckhart* (trans. and ed. Matthew Fox; Santa Fe, NM: Bear and Company, 1983), p. 129. In *The Divine Dance*, Richard Rohr explores the liberating gender implications of this perichoretic dance between the three persons: "God has done only one constant thing since the beginning of time: God has always, forever, and without hesitation loved 'the Son'—and yes, you can equally and fittingly use 'the Daughter'—understood in this sense as creation, the material universe, you, and me. The quality of the relationship toward the other is the point, not gender or even species. God cannot not love God's self in you (see 2 Timothy 2.13)! The 'you' that holds the indwelling Spirit, which many of us call the soul, is always considered eternal and intrinsically good because of its inherent connection to God." The fact—as we said in Note 3 above—that the word for originary divine Wisdom (*Sophia*) is feminine in Greek and that the word for the originary divine Spirit (*Ruach*) is feminine in Hebrew is also highly relevant here. (See Wis 8.1, Jerusalem Bible: "She deploys her strength from one end of the earth to the other, ordering all things for good"). Not to mention the fact that the "chora"/chalice/womb at the heart of the perichoresis—around which the three persons circulate—is inherently feminine. Rohr makes the additional point that the paradigm of the perichoresis marks a pluralist opening not only to the feminine but also to the interreligious: the impossibility of inclusive patriarchal closure and dogmatism. On the role of interreligious hospitality and narrative imagination see also Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch, eds., *Phenomenologies of the Stranger* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011) and Kearney and James Taylor, eds., *Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions* (New York: Continuum Press, 2012).

The term *perichoresis* is translated into Latin as *circumincessio*. This word can be spelled with a "c," meaning *cessio-cedo* (ceding, releasing, letting go, offering one's place to the other); or it can be spelled with an "s" meaning *sessio-sedo* (sitting, assuming one's place, immanence). This movement of persons around the *chora* thus performs an act of inflowing–outflowing, ebbing–flowing, approaching–departing, *kenosis–hypostasis*: a two-step dance in which divinity invites humanity to join.[22] And this ingenious word play between *cedo* and *sedo*, of one step forward and one step back, finds a telling linguistic equivalent in the double entendre of the age-old greeting *adieu*. The double a-dieu with which the persons greet each other may be said to dramatize what we call the two A's of ana-theism. First, *A-dieu* as welcome (as in original Latinate usage, *ad-deum),* meaning an opening toward (*ad*) the other. And second, *A-dieu* as goodbye (as in later usage, *ab-deo*, meaning a releasing or letting go). Emmanuel Levinas explains this by saying that the original act of Creation is an act of love which leaves open a gap for the coming and going of the other—a gesture captured in the simple phrase "after you"/ *après-toi*. This is the "aftering" of Ana which is the first word of hospitality. As at a meal where one offers food to the guest who becomes a host to another guest in turn. Or as in dance where one retreats to let the other move in—ceding one's space so that the partner can succeed one in a circular movement, a mutual participation where, in Yeats's words, we can "no longer tell the dancer from the dance" (*Among School Children*). It is this perichoretic dance around (*chorein*) the still point of the turning world which opens onto the fourth person still be come, again and again, dying to itself and rising again, passing away and rebirthing in an ceaseless motion of rebeginning. Forever arriving and departing in the persona of strangers (*hospes*) who ask for bread and water, and receive it in turn. (Christ identifies himself as this *hospes* five times in Mt. 25, just as later he will reveal himself as a Lord of the Dance. Emmaus meets eschaton in the banquet of the Kingdom.)[23]

But let us return to the icon itself. If the devil is in the detail so is the divine. We have already noted that in Rublev's painting the three persons are not presented doctrinally as Pater, Filius, and Spiritus but as the three strangers who share food at the table of Abraham. They are seated in a circle and wear three different colored robes, gold, blue, and green. This visual differentiation into three colors represents the three aspects of the Holy One. As Richard Rohr explains in *The Divine Dance*: "Gold: 'the Father'—perfection, fullness, wholeness, the ultimate Source. Blue: 'the Incarnate Christ'—both sea and sky mirroring one another … Christ wears blue and holds up two fingers,

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[22] See my previous treatments of perichoresis in "God or Khora?" in Kearney, *Strangers Gods and Monsters* (in critical debate with Derrida and Caputo) and later in *Anatheism* and *Reimagining the Sacred*. See also the recent work on the Trinity and perichoresis in Emmanuel Falque, *St. Bonaventure and the Entrance of God into Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2017) and Tina Beattie "On the Matter of God: Conversations in the *Khora*," in *Mysticism in the French Tradition: Eruptions from France* (ed. Louise Nelstrop and Bradley Onishi; Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 59–80. While Tina Beattie offers a powerful feminist reading of the Trinity and Chora, she misreads my own hermeneutic interpretation of Chora in "God or Khora?" I hope that I have clarified my position in this present essay.

[23] See our treatment of the *deus ludens* and *homo ludens* in Kearney, *Poétique du Possible* and "Anatheism." For our previous work on hospitality and the stranger, see *Strangers, Gods and Monsters, Hosting the Stranger*, and *Phenomenologies of the Stranger.*

telling us he has put spirit and matter, divinity and humanity, together within himself. The blue of creation is brilliantly undergirded with the necessary red of suffering. Green: 'the Spirit'—the divine photosynthesis that grows everything from within by transforming light into itself (Hildegard of Bingen called this *viriditas,* or the greening of all things.) The icon shows the Holy One in the form of Three, eating and drinking, in infinite hospitality and utter enjoyment between themselves."[24]

Many spectators of Rublev's three Abrahamic strangers at Mamre may have thought not only of the three persons of the Trinity but also of the three visiting kings at Bethlehem, or the three guests at Emmaus where the divine, as risen stranger (*hospes*), returns to share bread with his two disciples. These great scenes of visitation and hospitality were often conflated in Orthodox icons, suggesting how Rublev's perichoresis may operate as a form of visual palimpsest pregnant with serial beforeings and afterings. Or to use more technical language, an "overdetermined signifier" inviting multiple semantic successions and repetitions. Each viewing of the Trinitarian image signals a new visitation, a new rereading of the original scene. Hence the importance, as noted, of the rectangular mirror-frame at the base of Rublev's circle, serving as portal welcoming each spectator to the table—asking not just for vision but participation, not just for seeing but for moving and being moved, touching and being touched, loving and being loved, hosting and guesting. "Eternal beatitude," as Anne Carson put it, "will be where to look and to eat are the same state."

If we take the portrait of God in Rublev's icon to heart, we have to admit that "In the beginning was the Relationship." Far from being a picture of internal self-regard—a self-loving-love, a self-thinking-thought, a self-causing-cause, *ens causi sui*—the perichoresis of three persons expresses the desire for a fourth. Returning to the theme of the mirror at the base of the icon, Rohr writes:

> The gaze between the Three shows the deep respect between them as they all share from a common bowl. Notice the Spirit's hand points toward the open and fourth place at the table. Is the Holy Spirit inviting, offering, and clearing space? … If so, for what, and for whom? At the front of the table there appears to be a little rectangular hole. Most people pass right over it, but some art historians believe the remaining glue on the original icon indicates that there was perhaps once a mirror glued to the front of the table. It's stunning when you think about it—there was room at this table for a fourth. The observer … and all creation.[25]

This radical openness to the other, the stranger, the guest, signals the deeply ecumenical nature of Rublev's icon, now displayed in Christian churches of almost every denomination; but this icon also extends, as suggested, the interreligious radius in its visual superimposition of the primal images of Judaism and Christianity—the three strangers of Abraham and the persons of the Trinity. This Jewish–Christian interplay in turn invites hermeneutic readings of the chora-chalice at the heart of perichoresis as both Sarah's womb and Mary's womb open, in each case, to an "impossible" child:

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[24] Rohr, *The Divine Dance,* p. 28.
[25] Ibid., pp. 28–31.

Sarah is barren, Mary is a virgin. Or more exactly, the chora incubates a divine possible (*dunamis*) beyond the impossible (*adunaton*) of the humanly possible. And it is interesting to recall here that the same terms used in the Septuagint to describe Sarah's exchange with the Strangers who visit Mamre (Gen. 18.14) are used to describe Mary's exchange with Gabriel in the Gospel of Luke (1.30). "Nothing is impossible to God." Hearing the respective annunciations of a future child, Sarah laughs and Mary says Amen. In both inaugural scenes, an impossible child is conceived. Isaac to Sarah, Jesus to Mary. Both miraculous natalities reside at the heart of the Trinitarian dance.

   Rublev's icon of the perichoresis, I am suggesting, offers a theopoetic artwork which reveals the trinitarian mystery of creation in a manner which goes deeper and wider than any treatise of theoretical theology—and is thereby more affective and effective in its testimony of divine *poiesis*. Indeed one might add that Rublev's picture of reciprocal inclusivity between persons is not just a hermeneutic bridge between Jewish and Christian hospitalities but also between these and other non-Abrahamic wisdom traditions celebrating triple divinities and trimurtis who are equally welcome at the table.[26] Rublev's icon is an open gateway to interreligious hospitality.

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[26] On the interreligious power of this work and other non-textual icons and rituals, see not only Richard Rohr but also Patrick Hederman, "Cinema and the Icon," in *Anchoring the Altar* (Dublin: Veritas, 2002); and the recent work of Marianne Moyaert, "Toward a Ritual Turn in Interreligious Theology," *Harvard Theological Review* 111, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1–23.