



University
of Glasgow

Walton, H. (2019) Theopoetics as challenge, change and creative making. *Literature and Theology*, 33(3), pp. 229-232. (doi:[10.1093/litthe/frz030](https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/frz030))

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/193179/>

Deposited on: 15 August 2019

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

Editorial

This special issue of *Literature and Theology* engages with a dynamic and challenging movement whose concerns lie at the heart of this journal's mission and purpose. In recent years theopoetics has opened up space for exploring the transformative spiritual, political and cultural significance of creative making. It brings art into intimate connection with theory and theology into a generative relation with imagination. It is a contemporary movement that is open, noisy and extremely diverse - but always passionate in its attention to ecology, embodiment and exclusion. As well as engaging with contemporary challenges, theopoetics reconnects to ancient spiritual traditions of theosis and incarnational theology. It attends, alongside these, to the relation between intense creaturely suffering and divine creativity.

It has been a special privilege to conceive and deliver an edition on this theme. Particularly as it is the final edition of *Literature and Theology* that I shall edit – Mark Knight having assumed editorship of the journal in April of this year. It is a pleasure to be able to hand over responsibility to him at a time when the interdisciplinary terrain we occupy is experiencing such exciting developments. Presenting this special issue also gives me the opportunity to consider the many changes in the way relations between literature, theology and theory have been expressed during the years in which *Literature and Theology* has formed my intellectual home.

My first encounter with the journal was as a doctoral student seeking to explore the relations between feminist poststructuralism and theology. Work in that area was being published by this journal - and nowhere else at that time. I quickly became aware of the international interdisciplinary conversations on literature and theology out of which the scholarship in this journal had emerged.¹ These conversations had gone far beyond identifying theological themes in literary works or reading sacred texts as literature. Contributors were engaged with exploring how the sacred speaks, and is speakable, within cultural forms.

Divergent voices explored this issue throughout the last years of the twentieth century and differing perspectives emerged. In this journal radical theology contested with radical orthodoxy and the perspectives of poststructuralism, feminism, queer theory and postcolonial theory shaped the critical tone of our debates. The careful, close reading of literary texts - for the theological ideas they express and the theological categories they contest - continued alongside these theoretical conversations. Within the past decade, in a changing political, theoretical and academic environment, much of the most significant work published in this journal has taken this form.

As the essays in this edition reveal, a deep engagement with literary and artistic work endures within theopoetics and extends to works not usually included in the 'literature and religion' canon. The principle that creative work itself offers significant epistemological resources for remaking theological thinking is affirmed. In the North American context ARC (Arts/ Religion/Culture) embraces theopoetics as a vehicle to engender ever closer active collaborations between creative practitioners and religious scholars and activists. The

intention behind this is not only the construction of new art and thinking but also the envisioning of new communal futures.

For theopoetics is a movement seeking much more than a collaboration between various individuals wishing to explore faith through the medium of creative work. As Mayra Rivera states in her article poetics has become a trope bearing political significance; 'poetics refers not only to styles of writing, but also to modes of knowing, being, and acting in the world.' The continuing need to address the political challenges of neoliberalism entails developing resisting communities beyond the bounded territories disciplines claim as their own. This involves breaching what Catherine Keller has described as the 'God boundary' which separates the discourses of faith from developments in scientific, philosophical, artistic and political thinking. A node she writes has now developed on the site of the divide between sacred and secular which has become a growth point for 'new forms of alliance, of ecopolitical assemblage.' Theopoetics is one of these growing forms.

This edition contains articles from some of world's leading theopoetic practitioners who offer focussed accounts of their own contributions. It also contains papers from scholars who are bringing fresh perspectives to developing creative conversations. As such it serves both to represent current work in the field and point to emerging themes that will be significant in future theopoetic assemblages. And while, to date, theopoetics has developed principally within the North American context new tones and accents are now sounding within it.

The first article by Richard Kearney indicates the potential of such developments. Kearney's important work as a hermeneutical philosopher is well known within theological and literary contexts. In recent years much of his focus has been upon reimagining the sacred through theopoetic work. In this particular contribution he draws upon his unique transatlantic perspective to bring Irish philosophy and Celtic poetics to the theopoetic conversation. Territorial boundaries are further extended in the second article by Mayra Rivera whose ground-breaking work on poetics draws upon Caribbean literature. Rivera follows in a trajectory established by writers such as Édouard Glissant, Maurice Blanchot and Paul Celan whose understanding of poetics transcends issues of literary form to explore how the silenced, the absent and the dead address us in their unspeakable loss.

John Caputo's article is a lyrical expression of themes which he has explored on the frontiers of theology, philosophy and poetics in a number of very significant books now regarded as key works in theopoetics. Caputo wishes to 'bring to words the lived experience of the call by which we are addressed in the narratives and songs, the figures and the forms of theology's founding texts' in order to revision theology in theopoetic form. Following Caputo's contribution, Shelly Rambo reminds us that theopoetics contains a significant strand which takes embodiment as its generative source. Rambo's previous work has been focussed on the need to acknowledge trauma in theological terms. Her essay here encourages us to recognise the importance of bodily knowledge as both a poetic resource and an essential faculty in our 'sensing of the sacred'.

In the article by Lacey Jones the issue of poetic form itself assumes theological significance through a close examination of the work of process poetics of poet Denise Levertov. O'neil

Van Horne pursues the potentiality of poetics to embody 'dark hope'. This becomes a resource for resisting environmental disaster through the theo poetic capacity to fabricate resistance from 'what has never been' by imagining the poetic possibilities inherent in possible futures. In her contribution, Beth Dodd extends the exploration of poetic hope and resistance by attending to performance poetry. She makes a strong connection between pneumatic theology and the 'breath' of oral poetic utterance; offering a 'model of participation in the Spirit as a partnership between breath and word in creative action.' Continuing the exploration of theo poetics through poetry Andrew Cuning draws on the work of poet Marie Howe which he places in a lineage of American writing focussed upon 'the ordinary'. Cuning argues that Howe radically inverts literary approaches to ordinary life in which transcendence is approached through a vertical relation between the commonplace symbol and its transcendental referent. Howe encourages us, rather, to proceed towards forms of theo poetic relation that are 'entirely horizontal' and in which the transcendent is enfolded in the immanent.

The theme of artistic creativity connects the final two articles in this edition. Callid Keefe-Perry reflects upon his location and communal obligations within ARC's vibrant collective of artists, theologians and activists. ARC draws upon the legacy of liberation theology, and the theo poetic work of Rubem Alves in particular. Keefe-Perry employs this to offer a challenging critique of traditional academic values and practices. In the final article I celebrate what has been achieved within theo poetics but question whether we have sufficiently interrogated understandings of creativity that undergird much theo poetic work. Creativity functions within theo poetics as a dominant cipher for what is vital, transformative and hopeful – in contrast to forms of theological thinking that appear abstracted, alienating and lifeless. However, creativity itself is deeply ambiguous. Exploring it more fully entails a loss of innocence but also a greater depth of awareness of the dark complexity that poetics mediates for us.

Heather Walton
Glasgow, August 2019.

¹ See *Literature and Theology*, 26: 3, 2012 for a full discussion of these founding conversations.