GOD-IN-THE-WORLD:  
HUSSERL, HEIDEGGER, LEVINAS AND THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ROOTS OF A HERMENEUTICAL THEOPOETICS

by

R. D. Walsh, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Launched amid the “theological turn” in French Phenomenology, the genealogical trajectory of a hermeneutical theopoetics that approaches the textuality of the text within the framework of a marginalized, circumscribed *pathos—*a non-rational, poetic voicethat disrupts, overrides and surpasses the deductive, positivist designs of any dominating *logos—*can be found in nascent form in Edmund Husserl’s failed bid for a transcendental phenomenology. Husserl’s assault on the citadel of apodicticity was taken up and transformed into the existential analytic of Dasein and the later ‘poetic’ philosophy of Martin Heidegger, where the poetic nature of language is first advanced as an originary hermeneutical opening. Heidegger’s existential phenomenology was somewhat grudgingly carried forward and surpassed in the originary phenomenological ethics of Emmanuel Levinas. It is with Levinas that the poetic alterity of the “otherwise-than-being” reaches inexorably toward expressing the inexpressible event of God-in-the-world in the language of an originary *proto*-theopoetics. More recently, an explicit framing of “theopoetics” is deployed in the decontructionist hermeneutics of John Caputo’s radical phenomenological theology. Although Caputo takes phenomenological theology to new and daring levels in the “softer, gentler” radicality of a “weak” approach to the textuality of the text, the theopoetics he launches as an “alternative to metaphysics” gets caught up in its own deconstructive abandon that constrains his analysis from digging down into the deepest, and somewhat ‘messy’, bodily roots of the poetic.

Caputo’s version of theopoetics is sifted through Derrida’s deconstructionist program with the aim of disrupting classical theology and running a “protect and defend” interference for the supposed vulnerability of a “weak” ‘God’ in the world. As a result, Caputo’s rendering of theopoetics does not fully incorporate its most radical potential for actualizing a personal, affective, and spiritual *therapeia* in the service of spiritual transformation, a *metanoia* which alone would allow ‘God’ an opening into the personal world of the theopoetic aspirant. In Caputo’s modeling, theopoetics remains a sophisticated hermeneutical gesture of linguistic analysis and revelation, and, to that extent, is innovative and helpful. But Caputo’s theopoetics does not go far enough. It remains at the level of an abstract intuitive methodology or epistemic way of dealing with the text at arm’s length for an academic audience, devoid of explicit commitment to the spiritual growth and development of the theopoetic aspirant.

Going back to the originary contribution of Levinas, *God-in-the-World* will reveal a theopoetics fully decoupled from any positive, pragmatic, or academic-utilitarian analytic. A theopoetics generated from the analysis of responsibility in Levinas’s ethical phenomenology will be shown to indicate an affective, pre-discursive, interpenetrating attitude and posture toward (a kind of bodily incorporation of) the text that reinstates the moment of mystical ‘excess’ that is excised by Caputo’s deconstructionist, relativistic theopoetics.

*God-in-the-World* unveils a theopoetics that reaches beyond the said of language to the ‘infinition’ of a saying-otherwise in the face-to-face, interpersonal relation—an infinition where God may come into the world—as a form of contemplative, mystical, personally transformational prayer. The justification for this move will be grounded in a theopoetical re-reading of Levinas. Caputo’s rendering of theopoetics relies predominantly on Derrida’s anti-Hegelian, anti-absolutist, deconstructionist approach. Under the influence of Derrida’s slippery notion of “unconditionality,” Caputo falls into an abject theo-relativism of deferral as a solution for the so-called Supreme Being ‘problem’. But the Derridean “Unconditioned” that Caputo champions is wholly impersonal and not at all prayer-motivating. *God-in-the-world* will show that an originary theopoetics is already a kind of intimate and personal mode of contemplative prayer in the manner of *lectio divina*—a mystical, poetical and bodily approach to a prayerful ‘reading’ which alone can set free the ‘presence’ of the indescribable within the described ‘absence’ of the text as the ‘presence’ of an absence.

*God-in-the-World* is a phenomenological, hermeneutical and philosophical-poetic study that takes as its jump-off point for the trek to find divinity in everydayness, Levinas's argument for the ontological priority of ethical responsibility interpreted as a pre-conscious responsiveness to the otherness of the Other which, ultimately, will claim to allow or ‘produce’ the epiphany of God-in-the-world. Levinas’s venturing toward the epiphany of God-in-the-world winds through the tangled origins of *socialité* and *responsibilité* within human consciousness and whatever ‘is’ ‘given’ prior to consciousness. The analysis of *responsibilité* as the origin and ground of a ‘heavenly’ theopoetics is worked out within the context of Levinas's critique of Husserl, Heidegger and the entire ‘onto-theological’ tradition of Western philosophy … all conditioned by the horror of the Holocaust. The net outcome of this exposition is the claim that Levinas—while he constructs the conditions by which a theopoetics might operate effectively on the fog-shrouded outskirts of language—was nevertheless unable to follow out the full spiritual, personal, therapeutic and transformational implications of his proto-theopoetic phenomenology. Thus, both Levinas and Caputo remain framed by a limiting intellectualist framework devoid of any clear and effective development of a transformational praxis that incorporates the fullness of what theopoetics has to offer, and for which *God-in-the-World* humbly offers itself as a possible antidote.