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“The Fiction of an Absolute”: Theopoetically Refiguring a Sacred Hauntology

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The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you
know to be a fiction, there being nothing else.

Wallace Stevens¹

The sacred does not exist; nor is it simply nonexistent. . . . More negative than the
negative that is the opposite of the positive, the sacred haunts
the boundaries, margins, and interstices of structure, form, and figure.

Mark C. Taylor²

Let's talk about God for a moment. Well, on second thought . . . maybe not. After all, to speak a theological dialect might simply be either too jejune or too shameful for intelligent individuals, those whose tongues are often tied by materialism and empiricism. Indeed, for enlightened secularists who live only in a world of material experience, the idea of God could be considered too much a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—far too superstitious, far too fallacious, and far too fatuous. Most likely, new atheists and new materialists would conclude that the topic of the divine should be addressed nevermore! One never achieves anything of merit by trafficking in empty religious cyphers, or by squandering good semantics on a non-existent deity, or by proclaiming a reality to sacred fairy tales that evoke a divine land far, far away. As Richard Dawkins so respectfully states it, one should never accede to “the time-consuming, wealth-consuming, hostility-provoking rituals [and] the anti-factual, counter-productive fantasies of religion.”³ Ironically, however, (or maybe not) that quote comes from his New York Times best seller dedicated entirely to talking about God!

Alternatively, one might also abstain from theological discourse on the antithetical grounds that “God” names an infinite reality so far beyond finite being

¹ Wallace Stevens, “Adagia,” in *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 189.

² Mark C. Taylor, “Think Naught,” in *Negation and Theology*, ed. Robert P. Scharlemann (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), 36.

³ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 194.

that any investment of linguistic capital necessarily results in bankrupt meaning. Granted, perhaps there is something rather pedestrian about raising the traditional mystical atheism espoused in apophatic theology; nonetheless, one cannot totally circumvent the long history of negative theology by which the transcendence of God, in its *hyperousiological* extravagance, finds affirmation in the negations whereby human language reveals its impotence. The only successful—and appropriate—vocabulary for speaking of God is one centered on the “not.” God is infinite (*not* finite); God is atemporal (*not* time-bound); God is immutable (*not* changeable). Were God to be confined within the claustrophobic categories of human conceptuality and communication, then God would not be much of a deity. Consequently, for the mystic, one can only negate, articulate what God is not, speak about God only through the humility of saying nothing about God. Ironically, however, (or maybe not), libraries are full of hundreds of theological texts written by mystics who claim that they cannot talk about God!

Have we made a false start, then, with the desire to talk about God for a moment? Perhaps. But perhaps not. We might conceivably conceive of God in such a manner that we could speak of God by *not* speaking of God. Or, stated otherwise, one could claim to speak of God by speaking of the *not*, which would not be a not-speaking, but a speaking that professed a theology of God as a theology of the *not*. Such an a/theology of God as the *not*-God, of God as the *not*, would not indicate so much a divine denial or nihilism but a divine denegation, the negating of the negative, which is not exactly a synonym for the positive. Such an a/theology finds expression in the early work of Mark Taylor, who claims that the notion of the *not* is “first and foremost religious and theological.” He insists that God and the world remain forever bound within a Gordian knot of the *not*, in which God is *not* the world and the world is *not* God.⁴ Yet, this reciprocity of negation should not be misinterpreted as merely another commentary on the polarity between being and non-being but should be understood as a “thinking naught,” a thinking of naught as otherwise than either being or non-being, as “*neither* being *nor* non-being.”⁵ Thinking of God, therefore, does not demand a *sacrificium intellectus*, a credulity predicated upon not thinking, but, instead, solicits a thinking of the *not*, a form of a non-negative negative theology. For Taylor, the a/theophany of this non-nihilistic nihilism of divine presence/absence discloses the incarnation of God as “God.” That is, the only incarnation of God that theological language can address is the inscription of God in(as) Word, with Word functioning as the endless play of identity and difference, of presence and absence, thereby generating the “divine milieu” in which one affirms the death of God by announcing the resurrection of “God” as “a sign that points to *nothing* beyond itself.”⁶

Taylor eventually does concede that, although he thought he had ceased talking about God, he discovered that such was not the case. He continually finds

⁴ Mark C. Taylor, *Nots* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 2.

⁵ Taylor, “Think Naught,” 36.

⁶ Mark C. Taylor, *About Religion: Economies of Faith in Virtual Cultures* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 26; Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 118.

himself having to talk about what cannot be talked about. He testifies that the denegation of God manifests a certain form of the sacred that comes to expression in a “piety of thinking” that accedes to the “doctrine” that “the sacred is that which allows God to be God by enabling God to be other than everything that is not God.”⁷ In other words, he may no longer believe in God, but he continues to believe in the sacred; yet, although the sacred is not God, it always “brings [a] dissatisfaction that knows no rest,” keeping him talking incessantly about God by not *not* talking but by talking about the *not*.⁸ He concludes that the name of “God” might well be “the name, in other words (always in other words), for that which language can never name or cannot avoid naming the unnameable,” that is to say, “the name for that ‘in’ language that does not belong to language.”⁹

Not surprisingly, perhaps, one can find an analogous perspective on the im/possibility of theological language in one who, unlike Taylor, confesses a continued belief in the “reality” of God. Paul Ricoeur, who certainly does not engage in an a/theology, appears to track Taylor’s linguistic denegation of God within a specifically confessional Christian context. Focusing primarily on the biblical texts that establish various Jewish and Christian theological traditions, Ricoeur notes that any talk about God must be polyphonic and plurivocal. In scripture, one finds no homogeneity of discourse or no mono-generic form of expression. On the contrary, the multiple genres of literature that characterize the biblical texts offer multiple ways of naming God, preempting any theological monolingualism by prescribing a heteromorphic polynominal talking about God.¹⁰ As a result, although God belongs to “the pretheological expressions of faith . . . [as] the one who is proclaimed, invoked, questioned, supplicated, and thanked,” the name of God “circulates among all [the] the modes of discourse” in scripture while simultaneously escaping each one of them singly and all of them collectively.¹¹

The name of God revokes any attempt at semantic conformity and premature closure of meaning precisely by indexing the functional iterability inherent in its polysemy.¹² The realization that no one genre successfully exhausts the name of God results in Ricoeur’s rejection of a “transcendental signified” and his affirmation that the relative differences among the divine names telegraph a deferral of absolute meaning and demand the endless play of hermeneutics.¹³ Accordingly, one can never disenfranchise the “not” or negation when talking about God. Any one way of talking about God is *not* the only way of talking about God, and God is *not* best named in any one genre of discourse. Furthermore, for Ricoeur, the discursive plurality of naming God evidences why one can never avoid speaking about God. One cannot *not* talk about God because talk about God precedes the negative

⁷ Taylor, *About Religion*, 21-32.

⁸ Mark C. Taylor, *Tears* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 231.

⁹ Taylor, *About Religion*, 30; Taylor, *Notes*, 11.

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 224.

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 96.

¹² Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 228.

¹³ Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, 153.

decision. That is to say, whenever one decides to talk about God—or not—that decision occurs within a context already replete with multiple expressions of naming God.¹⁴ No one talks about God *in vacuo* but inevitably *in situ*; therefore, all discourse about God relates to prior discourse about God, discourse contaminated by preexistent texts evocative of presuppositions and preunderstandings that provide linguistic milieux for interpreting God.

Indeed, one might well identify the key concept in Ricoeur's hermeneutics of theological naming to be the idea of discourse itself. All talk about God—even all non-talk about God or talking not about God or not talking about God—is discursive, depends on language as event, as used, as diachronic, and as semantic instead of semiotic. The name of God might well be a sign; however, naming God is invariably a sentence. With this focal attention on discourse, Ricoeur testifies to several quite significant characteristics of theological language, among them, the centrality of referentiality, the exigence of poetics, and the creative potential of the imagination.

Ricoeur defines discourse as “someone says/writes something about something to someone.”¹⁵ Given this definition, he contends that one can never ignore the referential function of discourse, claiming that it fundamentally intends some connection between language and reality. In other words, discourse is not only expressive of some meaning but is always “*about* something.” That trait does not diminish when the discourse is theological; to be sure, any naming of God semantically entails a connection with some divine referent—even if that referent is non-existent. Yet how does one objectify God in such a way as to communicate some meaning about God, or how can one reject the reality of God in an atheistic naming of God? Ricoeur concedes that theological discourse cannot be referential in the same way as scientific or historical discourse. The latter rely on what he terms “first-order reference,” a “reference-effect” that cannot escape the critical criteria of empirical rules of evidence. In something of a nod to Kant's resistance to the “transcendental illusion,” Ricoeur insists that naming God cannot be another species of the genus “literal language,” which expresses first-order reference, but must be interpreted as an example of poetic language, “poetic” in the etymological sense of *poiesis*, language that “creates” new meaning. Poetic language describes “reality” by imaginatively re-describing through the power of figurative or imagistic language. It suspends first-order reference through a second-order reference of intending the world through non-literal and non-calculable “descriptions” of the *Lebenswelt* or possible modes of being-in-the-world.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 218. Jacques Derrida claims that linguistic prefiguring affects every human assertion, given that language has always already begun before we speak. Consequently, he says, it is necessary (*il faut*) to speak, since we cannot *not* avoid responding to the conversation begun prior to our speaking. Indeed, he goes so far as to state that theology calls this linguistic pre-existence “God.” See “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 99.

¹⁵ Charles E. Regan and David Stewart, eds., *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 112; Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 220.

¹⁶ Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 42.

Ricoeur contends that poetic (and, consequently, theological) language functions in tandem with the semantic dynamics at work in metaphor. As the metaphor depends on the tension between the semantic impertinence of the literal and the semantic innovation that ensues when the linguistic imagination envisions a new predicative pertinence of the figurative, so, too, theological poetics establishes a semantic pertinence that indexes a second-order truth function. For Ricoeur, naming God, therefore, cannot be reduced to emotivism or aestheticism, that is, cannot be explained exhaustively by either the expression of subjective feeling or the expression of a formalistic beauty. On the contrary, naming God as discursive intends the poetic truth of an imaginatively reinterpreted reference that functions as a heuristic fiction, re-describing “reality” by revealing (*aletheia*) new modes of possibility and non-empirical aspects of human experience.¹⁷ He associates this heuristic function of fiction with Wittgenstein’s notion of “seeing as,” which continues the reciprocity between the “is” and the “is not,” the speaking of God through some variant of an apophatic negation, this time the poetic negation of first-order reference.¹⁸ As a metaphor succeeds only when one “sees” its predication “as” not literal but “as” a new association of categories, naming God allows one to “see” God “as” not literally any empirical referent but “as” a poetic fiction providing a new schematic for the “truth” of human existence.

Ricoeur further demonstrates the heuristic capability of fiction by moving from metaphor to narrative and analyzing how fiction contributes a threefold mimetic process whereby temporal “reality” may be modeled according to the dynamic of prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration. All narratives develop within a context in which time and experience have previously been interpreted and ordered; that is, fictional narratives develop out of traditions of *prefigured* “reality,” in other words, of texts that have provided models *of* the world. Through the imaginative “genius” of the narrator, experience can be *configured* anew by the creative re-descriptions of poetic truth disclosed by the narrative plot. The plot is the re-configuration of temporal experience that now offers models *for* a new understanding of the world. Finally, through the act of reading and the appropriation of the world of the poetic text, the “literal” world can be *refigured* as individuals apply the new configurations to practical existence.¹⁹

Granted, Ricoeur, himself, does not apply the threefold mimesis explicitly to theological language. I contend, however, that such a move may be made, given that naming God is itself another instance of poetic language.²⁰ Accordingly, one could structure a theo-poetics around the threefold framework of *prefiguring* God, *refiguring* God, and *transfiguring* God. Indeed, one could do so by adhering to

¹⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 175.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 159.

²⁰ For an excellent investigation into the theological implications of Ricoeur’s hermeneutical philosophy, see Dan R. Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur: New Dimensions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

Taylor's and Ricoeur's varying non-negative negative theologies and insist that naming God exemplifies another type of fiction, a fictive figuring that re-describes God non-literally as a discursive fact or truth that has bearing on human existence. Although predictably provocative and certainly troubling to theological realists who idolize correspondent truth, understanding God as a fiction may not be so radical from a linguistic perspective. Interestingly enough, "fact" and "fiction" both derive from the same Indo-European root, which means "to shape" or "to make." Likewise, "figure" derives from a secondary root associated with "fiction." A fact and a fiction, therefore, are both formed or figured; both, in some manner, depend on a creative process that determines truth to be something done, a *facere veritatum*, as Augustine would say.²¹ The "fact" of God's (non)existence, as such, would depend on the prefiguring, refiguring, and transfiguring of a fictive discourse that names ("sees") God "as" impinging on endlessly translatable creative re-descriptions of human experience. Belief in God, consequently, would be a belief in a (true) fiction; and speaking of God would be a fictive naming of what/who God is and is not.

In order to prosecute this threefold strategy for talking about God as "the fiction of an absolute," I turn to the creative and discriminating radical theology of John D. Caputo. For decades, he has been a prophetic voice in contemporary philosophy of religion, proclaiming a deconstructive, radically hermeneutical, postsecular "Christian" theology that continues, *mutatis mutandis*, significant apophatic traditions, certain post-Enlightenment theories of interpretation, and the epistemological humility associated with a "Kierkegaardian" perspective on faith. Operating under the innovative influence of Jacques Derrida, Caputo has become a constructive theologian whose voice simply cannot be ignored. The development of his weak theology of the event offers an interesting example of how the sacred can be refigured through the open process of endless translation, a refiguring that concentrates on the name of "God" as a critique of the metaphysical cross-contamination of the Divine with Being. This process depends prominently on reinterpreting God as non-entitative, that is, as non-existent, without embracing the reductionism of dismissing talk about God as vacuous.

While concurring with Caputo's perspective at several points, I want to offer a critical supplement to his theo-poetics of the non-being (a questionable idiom) of God by proposing an ontology of fiction that might offer a minimalist acceptance of divine existence. The adapted Ricoeurian threefold mimetic structure forms the architecture of this essay, but does so only after a further adaptation. So as to indicate the polysemy of the symbol "God," I want to differentiate among a theological realism, a semantic ascesis, and a modest hybrid of the two. Consequently, I will investigate Caputo's theology of the name of God under the following rubrics: (pre)figuring *out* God, (re)figuring *on* "God," and (trans)figuring

²¹ John D. Caputo, "Looking the Impossible in the Eye: Kierkegaard, Derrida, and the Repetition of Religion," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2002*, eds. Niels Jørgen Cappelhorn, Hermann Deuser, and Jon Stewart (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 7; John D. Caputo, "In Search of a Sacred Anarchy: An Experiment in Danish Deconstruction," in *Calvin O. Schrag and the Task of Philosophy after Postmodernity*, eds. Martin Beck Matušík and William L. McBride (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 235.

in G~~X~~d. In this threefold conceit, God denotes an existent divine entity of some sort, having some type of agential reality; “God” symbolizes the name of God, the semantic cypher that operates within the broader context of theological discourse without any specific ontological claims; and G~~X~~d is a hybrid signifier that references God *sous rature* in order to talk about God iconically, in the sense that Jean-Luc Marion explains as talking about God “without Being” but not as Non-Being.²² Under this third section of transfiguring G~~X~~d, I intend to offer, merely as a thought experiment, something of a *supplément* to Caputo’s theology of the event as the insistence of God, something that will possibly allow a certain reserved repetition of the notion of divine “existence.”²³ By examining a particular analytic theory of the minimal ontological status of fictional characters, I hope to make the case for believing in God as a fictional absolute, although *pace* Stevens, it might not be the “final” belief!

(Pre)Figuring Out God

John Caputo identifies two legislating lexicons that have supplied the traditional glossaries for naming God: (1) the conceptual network of Greek metaphysics and (2) the biblical categories of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. His concern over the “majority opinion” regarding how God has typically been figured out by classical theism directs him to focus his negative attention on the former of the two vocabularies. The Greek metaphysical perspective explicitly privileges *stasis* over *kinesis*, similarity over difference, and unity over plurality, a privileging that results from its Parmenidean pedigree. To be sure, Parmenides does serve as the patriarch of this perspective with his emphases upon Being as incapable of movement, void of alterity and mutability, and reduced to the simplicity of the One.²⁴ The commingling of the Divine and Being, a commingling that Parmenides confesses and that actually finds possible evidence in the revelation of the divine name to Moses in Exodus 3:14, initiates a commutative property of attributes. The characteristics of Being (*ontos*) characterize God (*theos*) and vice versa, resulting in a Greek ontotheology that assumes that “the very idea of the divine [means] the rule of the unchanging and immortal.” As a result, any theologian contaminated by Greek metaphysics will constantly ensure that a proper naming of God utilizes the categories of “the

²² Writing *sous rature*, under erasure, is a semiotic conceit that Marion borrows from Heidegger who writes the word “Being” *kreuzweise durchstreichung* (Be~~X~~ng). Marion applies it to the sign “God” (G~~X~~d) in order to avoid conceptual idolatry, that is, in order to signify that God cannot be manipulated by or confined within cognitive schemas. He claims that writing God in such a manner denotes that “the unthinkable enters into the field of our thought only by rendering itself unthinkable there by excess, that is, by criticizing our thought. To cross out G~~X~~d, in fact, indicates and recalls that G~~X~~d crosses out our thought because he saturates it.” See *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 46.

²³ For nuanced discussion of the supplement, see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 144-45.

²⁴ John D. Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 212.

necessary, immobile, and universal [instead of] the contingent, changing, and singular...”²⁵

Subsequently, metaphysical theology eventuates in an interesting list of divine names—Pure Act, Supreme Being, Being Itself, Self-Caused Cause—and an interesting list of divine characteristics—eternal, immutable, impassible, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent. Caputo finds these names and characteristics to be contentiously problematic. He categorically rejects metaphysical theology’s propensity to play the sycophant to an ontological categoriality and to name God’s transcendence with the language of *ousia*, “Being,” and *parousia*, “Presence,” even if that language bears the Neo-Platonic and negative theological sense of the hyper—as in *hyperousia* or *hyperparousia*—which would prefigure God as “beyond Being” or as some “saturating Divine Presence.” Obviously, therefore, he rejects even the apophatic traditions that purport to figure out God by analogizing God to Plato’s idea of the Good *epekeina tes ousias*. Even such *hyper* negative theology continues to prostrate itself before the idols of metaphysical thought in that it subordinates the “not” of the *via negativa* to the ontologically positive surplus of the Being of God as a transcendent entity. Caputo agrees with Jean-Luc Marion that such onto-centric language often tempts individuals toward committing “conceptual idolatry,” specifically the idolatry of power, prestige, and absolute knowledge.²⁶ Resultantly, Caputo desires to avoid the anonymous, egocentric idols of Greek metaphysics by de-Hellenizing theology and liberating it from its philosophical imprisonment in Athens.²⁷

Caputo’s renunciation of the prefigured God of classical theism compels him toward a radical theology, one somewhat similar to Taylor’s a/theology, which necessitates a functional atheism, an atheism that repeats a version of the “death of God.”²⁸ He unequivocally rejects the reality of any entitative deity, any interpretation of God as a discrete being, or as Being Itself, or as the Ground of Being, or as Beyond Being, or as Self-Subsisting Being, or even as a (Non)Being. He concedes that there remain those who may well believe that they have figured God out to be such a “being” and that, although he makes no such claim himself, those who do are not necessarily mired in superstition or supernatural fantasy. He does not consistently dismiss them that impudently. As a matter of fact, at one point he even celebrates the medieval attempt to transform Being into “someone,” *esse est deus*. He calls it a “beautiful idea” that informs an attractive basis for a life of virtue.

²⁵ John D. Caputo, “The Poetics of the Impossible and the Kingdom of God,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 475-76.

²⁶ Marion, *God Without Being*, 16-17.

²⁷ Caputo does in fact consider deconstruction to be generically a critique of idols, specifically a Jewish “idoloclasm.” He thinks that it philosophizes with a hammer similar to the one that Moses used on the golden calf. See “The Hyperbolization of Phenomenology: Two Possibilities for Religion in Recent Continental Philosophy,” in *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Kevin Hart (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 73.

²⁸ Caputo claims that his radical theology cannot be identified directly with Taylor’s a/theology; however, he does admit that deconstruction “is not simply that, but rather the hermeneutics of the desire for God.” Yet, this desire for God continues to engage a hermeneutics of the death of God (“The Hyperbolization of Phenomenology,” 74).

He even yields to the theologically realistic potential that “the God of classical metaphysics, if there is such a thing, would exist whether we desire it or not, whether we know it or not,” and one could add whether we believe it or not.²⁹ Nevertheless, the “beautiful idea” of God as a transcendent being simply fails as an argument, and Caputo simply does not believe it.³⁰ He logically rejects comprehending God as a divine ontological agent who acts as a cosmic super force, as an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent heavenly sovereign who performs miracles, privileges one group of people over another, and who wreaks vengeance on everyone who does not perform up to the divine standards.³¹

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Caputo has recently become somewhat more impudent in his desire to figure the metaphysical God *out*, that is, to “figure out” the ontotheological God not in the sense of comprehending this deity but in the sense of cancelling this divine cataloging, of doing *without* this God, of showing this prefigured interpretation of God the exit, and of disfiguring this metaphysical image—an act that he considers to be a form of iconoclasm that seeks to deface and destroy an idolatrous concept.³² He now claims that only “graceless, unliterary, and literalist” orthodox metaphysical apologists and obscurantist fundamentalists objectify God by collapsing primary and secondary causality and reducing God to the “ultimate laser show at Disneyworld.”³³ For them, talking about God is talking about “some super-being who out-knows, out-wills, out-does, out-powers, and out-exists every entity here below, a higher super-entity, a hyper-presence dwelling in a higher world.”³⁴ Caputo considers all of this, at best, nonsensical naiveté and, at worst, a self-aggrandizing perspective on divine sovereignty. He scorns both a “supernatural pseudo-physics,” which has God magically intervening in nature, and “a metaphysics of omnipotence,” which has God abrogating physics altogether.³⁵ Such a God of metaphysical speculation is dead, and Caputo merrily dances on his grave.

Of course, Caputo’s censure of ontotheology reveals his systemic suspicion of metaphysics *per se*. Correspondingly, his radical theology is a consistent extension of his radical hermeneutics. Both “radical” positions indict the deluded belief that reason can rise above the facticity of existence and imitate or participate in the Platonic Forms or that some cosmic logos or divine revelation can reach down and pull individuals up out of the flux of reality by the miraculous hook of absolute knowledge or absolute certainty. The security of first principles and the satisfaction

²⁹ John D. Caputo, “The Return of Anti-Religion: From Radical Atheism to Radical Theology” *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* 11 (Spring 2011): 118.

³⁰ John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 70-71.

³¹ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 39; John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 64-65.

³² Caputo, “The Hyperbolization of Phenomenology,” 73.

³³ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

³⁵ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 112. See also, Mark Johnston, *Saving God: Religion After Idolatry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 39.

of Cartesian clear and distinct ideas, both of which putatively establish the monarchy of reason, are all quite seductive. Caputo insists, however, that they are simulacra at best and dissimulacra at worst. Individuals are condemned to interpretation, restricted to limping along uncertain paths, constantly discovering aporia that remind us of our destinnerrance, our wandering in the desert of non-knowing in which we cannot be sure who we are or where we are going. Ontotheology promises redemption from just such Cartesian Anxiety by proposing a powerful omniscient God who manifests to special mortals the immortal guarantees of truth and meaning.³⁶ What Caputo calls “strong theology,” a nickname for classical theism, willingly succumbs to the seduction of those guarantees.³⁷ “Seduction” is not an irrelevant term here, given that Caputo borrows from Kierkegaard another image for this type of divine prefiguring, calling it “rouged theology.”³⁸ According to this epithet, classical theists prostitute themselves to the philosophical power and prestige offered by metaphysics in order to gain a God who exists as the pledge against uncertainty and meaninglessness. Caputo claims that the payment comes in false coin, for, indeed, such an absolute divine entity simply does not exist.

(Re)Figuring on “God”

Caputo’s rejection of a strong ontotheological realism does not terminate in a categorical denial of the therapeutic potential inherent within theological language. His atheism toward the metaphysical God does not disallow his continued obsession with “God” as a suggestive concept giving expression to something sacred and transcendent, at least something transcendent in the sense of genuine alterity. He confesses that he has a weakness for theology, and that God has always been a preeminent protagonist in his thought. He may mimic Meister Eckhart and pray that God rid him of God; however, such a prayer only articulates his apophatic desire to remain open to the endless reinterpretation, re-inscription, and repetition of the semantics of “God.” Caputo’s classical atheism, therefore, remains God-obsessed—at least with reference to the name of “God” and how that name can be translated and substituted into various figures of the divine. In other words, Caputo’s theology never escapes the efficacy of “scare quotes,” for only by suspending “God” from those two restricting diacritical hooks may one articulate the unrestricted discursive possibilities of the name of “God.”³⁹ Consequently, Caputo contends that he does

³⁶ Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 16.

³⁷ See for example, Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 79.

³⁸ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 33. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 32.

³⁹ “My position is radically ‘grammatological,’ which means that the root source of the discrepancy between radical and confessional theology can be traced to the trace, something that shows up in the series of scare quotes that mark my version of theology, by which everything in radical theology is suspended (*points de suspension*). The discrepancy is due to my speaking of the ‘name’ of God, the name (of) ‘God,’ to my practice of saying ‘God’ not God, or the ‘event’ that is contained in the name of God, not God. This I do because of my conviction that no one has access to anything else.” John D.

not wish to remain within the claustrophobic structures of the *theological* but, instead, yearns to replace *logic* with *poetics* in order to escape the limitations of the literal for the liberating ambiguities of the symbolic and figurative. Only through developing a genuine *theo-poetics* can one do justice to the profound significance carried by the name of “God.”

Obviously, Caputo in his own deconstructive, postsecular manner synchronizes with Ricoeur’s thought concerning the centrality of poetics as the proper literary approach for theology. Although the two theorists differ at salient points, both recognize the necessity for introducing something of a second-order reference into theology that escapes the reductionism of scientific and historical correspondent truth and seeks to discover a truth that manifests a different order of reality. When talking about God, one cannot remain confined to the calculus of the empirical but must encounter the divine as another mode of being-in-the-world. To be sure, both thinkers explicitly note Heidegger’s nomenclature at this juncture and claim that religious language reveals aspects of human existence that transcend the mundane. Caputo calls this poetic reality a “hyperrealism” that traffics in the “passion, the intensity, the temporality and, yes, the mortality of the human condition.”⁴⁰ He maintains that the name of “God” is one of the most beautiful and potent signs for exploring and articulating these dimensions of the human existence.⁴¹

The name of “God” and the hyper-reality that it intends inoculate against the confining and coercive infections of absolutism and certainty, always leaving open the unexpected and the unprogrammable, serving, in other words, as a translation of Derridean undecidability.⁴² As a result, Caputo declares that a theo-poetics of the name of “God” must be understood not only as a hermeneutics of the name but also as a hermeneutics of the event that is sheltered in that name. He proclaims that the name of “God” contains the uncontainable event of promise and call that can never be reduced to an entity, to Being Itself, or to any exclusive transcendental signified. He insists that the name of “God” poetically denotes the hyper-realism of a sacred summons emanating from the event harbored in the divine name, a summons that animates individuals to instantiate the love of God. This idea of the “love of God” serves as a dominant motif in Caputo’s theology, to the extent that his legislating

Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of “Perhaps”* (Unpublished manuscript forthcoming from Indiana University Press, 2013): 5:24; see also 1:14. Used with permission of the author.

⁴⁰ Caputo, “The Return of Anti-Religion,” 38.

⁴¹ John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 134.

⁴² One should not confuse undecidability with indecisiveness, since the former does not mean the inability to make a decision but the necessity in having to make one. See John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 137. Undecidability means “that our lives are marked by a radical, structural inability to settle archi-questions, even as it insists on keeping them alive, which is what the name of God means for Derrida.” See John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 262.

theological question is “What do I love when I love my God?”⁴³ Although never satisfied with any specific answer—to be sure, a specific answer could most certainly *not* be the “God” he loves—Caputo identifies one constant throughout all the ostensible answers, that “God” names an event, an *e-venire*, the coming out of what can never be exhaustively named. As a result, Caputo’s theology of the event proposes “God” as a task or a deed, not as an entity or a metaphysical principle. One must figure on “God,” that is, rely on or count on or even have faith in “God,” as the divine event that shatters every human construction and that summons, demands, lures, and promises humanity to an unforeseen future. A proper theo-poetics, consequently, must be a responsive theology, an answer to the summons and the demands coming from the event harbored in the name of “God,” always motivated by the transcendent other, the unknowable, the subversive and disruptive impossible possibility always to come.

Prosecuting theo-poetics as a hermeneutics of the name of “God” or, more precisely, as a “hermeneutics of the event that is at issue in that [divine] name,” Caputo deconstructs the strong theology of metaphysical theism and replaces it with a “weak” theology of the event, a theo-poetics of the incoming of the Other (*l’invention de l’autre*) out of a future that cannot be anticipated, programmed, or determined by the present, as what he also names “the impossible,” which shatters every horizon of expectation. Caputo refigures “God” by bypassing the usual ontotheological categories of power and control and reimagining “God” as a “weak force,” a “God” who opens the divine self to the risks and uncertainties of existence by manifesting Godself as a call that may be ignored, as a promise that may be rejected, and as a lover that may be scorned. Of course, “God” is no divine “self”; however, Caputo considers this poetic personification to be an eloquent idiom for saving the name of “God” and of capturing the nameable and omninameable event that resides in all that happens “in the name of ‘God.’”⁴⁴ The event as the impossible “to come” evades every attempt at definition and identification. One never knows exactly what the event may bring, leaving a systemic risk and ambiguity inherent within the very structures of the absolute future promised by the event. The event may well be the invention of justice, or gift, or faith, or hospitality; but, then again, the event might result in threat, or destruction, or suffering.⁴⁵ Caputo insists that such a “coefficient of undecidability” necessarily characterizes every discourse about the event, leaving us with a passion for the impossible that is, hopefully, a passion for “God” as a messianic grace always “to come.”⁴⁶

The messianic dynamic at work in the event produces an asymptotic expectation of what is “to come,” the advent (*ad-venire*, coming-to) of what “eye

⁴³ John D. Caputo, “What Do I Love When I Love My God? Deconstruction and Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Questioning God*, eds. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 292; John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), xxii.

⁴⁴ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 13.

⁴⁵ Caputo, “The Return of Anti-Religion,” 44-45.

⁴⁶ John D. Caputo, “Hauntological Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Christian Faith: On Being Dead Equal Before God,” in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 102.

has not seen nor ear heard.”⁴⁷ The messianic skepticism of the event as a *je ne sais pas* haunts Caputo’s weak theo-poetics of the name of “God,” demanding that the name of “God” be constantly reinvented, refigured, and retranslated.⁴⁸ The name of “God” as a messianic cypher of the event connotes trouble and subversion, prying open all attempts at locking knowledge up in certainty or faith up in dogma. “God” does not only name order, the constructive, or the absolute; “God” also signifies disorder, deconstruction, and the relativizing of theological discourse.⁴⁹ The divine name is “the polynymic, polymorphic overflow [of] the uncontainable stream of names, which represents a condition of unstoppable translatability and inexpungible unknowability.”⁵⁰ The name of “God” as even the most beautiful name for the event remains itself a messianic specter, forever haunted by the apophaticism of the “to come,” forming the basis for the ineffability of “God” to be established, not on the hyperousiological excess of divine being, but on the polynominal polysemy of the divine names. The amorphous nature of the divine name, therefore, originates from the polymorphous nature of the messianic event harbored by the plurality of divine names.

Caputo conveys the endless translatability and substitutability of the divine name through the symbol of the ghost. As stated above, he considers the messianic to *haunt* the event, to function as a specter always possessing and dispossessing concrete structures and always bedeviling discretely definable interruptions in the open play of meanings. Caputo’s “devilish” or hauntological hermeneutics respects the flux of existence, the *différance* inherent in all discourse, and the messianic infinity of the absolute future perfect.⁵¹ As such, it interprets the divine names as spiritual manifestations of various spirits that no one can locate with reference to source or terminus. “God” will always refer to a particular “holy” or “sacred” spirit that never allows itself to be confined within definitions or idolatrous conceptual networks. Faith in these spirits that haunt the divine names must be a faith that embraces the uncertainty and risk of the non-knowing inherent within them. The hauntological hermeneutics of faith capitulates to the lack of transcendental categories, or Platonic Forms, or foundationalist clear and distinct ideas in order to engage the messianic in the more humble sense of “formal indications.” Borrowing this phrase from Heidegger, Caputo prescribes the messianic as the weak force that “point[s] to something, I do not know quite what, something that assumes flesh and blood in living individuals and living traditions.”⁵² Indeed, the names of “God” as the signs of the messianic event do affect the facticity of human existence. How “God” is figured and refigured has tangible and existentialist implications. Still,

⁴⁷ Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 173; Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 287; Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 52, 64.

⁴⁸ Caputo, “God Perhaps: The Diacritical Hermeneutics of God in the Work of Richard Kearney,” *Philosophy Today* (SPEP Supplement 2011): 56.

⁴⁹ John D. Caputo, “Hospitality and the Trouble with God,” in *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality*, eds. Richard Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 83; Caputo, “The Return of Anti-Religion,” 39.

⁵⁰ Caputo, “Hauntological Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Christian Faith,” 100.

⁵¹ Caputo, *On Religion*, 13-14.

⁵² Caputo, “Hauntological Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Christian Faith,” 105.

those names cannot be exorcized of the spirit of ambiguity that haunts them.⁵³ All they can do is acknowledge the formal indications that serve as a “kind of weak schematic and indeterminate pointing in the direction of certain concrete actualizations that can be realized only *in actu exercitu*.”⁵⁴ Interestingly enough, here again, Caputo’s “hauntotheopoetics” correlate with Ricoeur’s imaginative poetics of fiction in that both recognize a heuristic energy at work in theological discourse. For both, such discourse is haunted by a weak force that prefigures and reconfigures reality, offering imaginative models of and for reinterpreting “God” and the “world.”

The contiguity of thought between Caputo and Ricoeur continues with reference to their shared dependence on the textual traditions of Christianity as providing examples of theo poetic models for “God” and existence. Both privilege the projected “worlds” of the biblical texts as formal indications of possible reconfigurations of “God” and the human condition, especially the kingdom kerygma proclaimed by Jesus of Nazareth. Given his more “conservative” hermeneutical perspective on religious language, one might not be as surprised that Ricoeur directs his poetics toward the preaching of Jesus, especially the efficacy of parables.⁵⁵ Conversely, one might be quite surprised to find Caputo illustrating his theo poetics with the same “confessional” discourse. Nevertheless, he does. Indeed, he testifies that his radical theology remains parasitic on confessional theologies in that one must have some accepted doctrines to be radicalized.⁵⁶ Consequently, one should not be so amazed that Caputo’s theology of the event comes to concrete expression as a poetics of the Kingdom of God with Jesus of Nazareth as its “centerpiece.”⁵⁷

Although Caputo insists that no one name can exhaust the excess of the event, and no one name can possibly define what we love when we love our “God,” he does take a functional leap of faith and suggest an answer to his ruling question: What does he love when he loves his “God?” The answer, given the “coefficient of contingency” that marks the prefiguring of “God” in his tradition, is simple—he loves the God revealed in Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom of “God.”⁵⁸ Caputo celebrates the disruptive and transformative dynamics of the Kingdom of “God” as a “sacred anarchy,”⁵⁹ as a hyper-reality of *metanoetics*, of changed hearts and minds, of rebirth and renewal, of a certain madness inherent in loving enemies, in blessing persecutors, and in refusing to repay evil with evil.⁶⁰ Not surprisingly, he considers Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom of “God” to be an instance of deconstruction, a

⁵³ John D. Caputo, “In Praise of Ambiguity,” in *Ambiguity in the Western Mind*, eds. Patrick Messina, Marc Stie, and Craig J. N. de Paulo (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005), 15.

⁵⁴ Caputo, “Hauntological Hermeneutics and the Interpretation of Christian Faith,” 106.

⁵⁵ See for example Paul Ricoeur, “Listening to the Parables of Jesus,” in Reagan and Stewart, 239-45.

⁵⁶ Caputo, *Insistence*, 4:3-4.

⁵⁷ See John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 134.

⁵⁸ John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 253.

⁵⁹ Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 86; Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 13-17.

⁶⁰ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 123, 149.

prophetic indictment of the *status quo* for the redemptive and affirmative purpose of maintaining a genuine expectation of something new “to come,” of a new truth that can ensure justice, gift, forgiveness, hospitality and love,⁶¹ a new truth that can have actual socio-political implications for responding to widows and orphans, to the oppressed and disenfranchised, to those marginalized individuals who struggle with regressive tax laws, sexism, the violence of war, homosexual bigotry, or the traumas of abortion.⁶²

Caputo’s theology of the event as a poetics of the Kingdom of “God” correlates the centrality of Jesus’ deconstructive sacred anarchy of *metanoetics* with the Apostle Paul’s “word [*logos*] of the cross [*stauros*]” and its emphasis on a prophetic critique of established power structures derived from the sovereignty of Reason and Being.⁶³ In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul contrasts such structures with the weakness and foolishness of God and makes the audacious claim that God chooses the “nobodies” (*ta me onta*) in the world to mediate the good news of the redemption “to come.”⁶⁴ The word of the cross, consequently, refuses to confine “God” within the typical philosophical categories and human definitions of prestige and control. Instead, the word of the cross speaks kenotically of a theopassionism, of a suffering “God” revealed in the event of Jesus’ crucifixion. By embracing the Pauline perspective, Caputo develops his own postsecular *theologia crucis*, a staurological poetics of the event that symbolizes unconditional divine transcendence without playing the sycophant to ontotheological criteria of sovereignty, such as omnipotence, impassibility, and immutability. Yet, he never forgets to remind his readers that Jesus announces a kingdom that is still yet to come, always in the process of coming, something for which we pray—“Thy kingdom come”—and weep and wait. The kingdom comes as that which never fully arrives, as that which exceeds our intellectual grasp and our imaginative projections. In other words, it is a kingdom consistently haunted by the specter of the messianic and inevitably reliant upon faith as a non-knowing or a knowing-not.

Caputo translates his theo-poetics and poetics of the Kingdom into a poetics of the “perhaps,” by which he attempts to rename “God” yet again by continuing his refiguring of the divine according to a weak theology of the event.⁶⁵ “Perhaps,” according to Caputo, “cuts deeply into the name of God so much so that God is the very element of the *peut-être* itself, the ‘event’ of the promise which is no less a threat, of the maybe which is also a maybe not.”⁶⁶ The “perhaps” signals that “God” constantly provokes and subverts through the weak force of a call that can be disregarded as an unconditional summons to justice and grace, but without sovereignty.⁶⁷ It does not express a solipsistic subjectivism of religion into some pious passivity of mystical contemplation; instead, it conjures forth a direct

⁶¹ Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 63-80.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 90-116.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁶⁵ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 1:20.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:17.

⁶⁷ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 90.

involvement in reality through the hyperreality of a hauntology of the messianic event, the event as the impossible “to come” that shatters every stable horizon of expectations.⁶⁸ I do not know what the event may be; I do not know if it is “God” or something else; I do not know if I am welcoming the messiah or a monster; consequently, my prayer must remain a confession of non-knowing—*Je ne sais pas. Il faut croire*.⁶⁹ Once again, therefore, Caputo has named “God” as undecidability itself, as the “paradigmatic name of . . . instability, of all the unstable transitions and unsteady passages that transpire between words and things, between words and other words, between words and deeds.”⁷⁰ In other words, actually in Taylor’s words, Caputo’s “God” of/as the “perhaps” is the nonexistent messianic call that functions as the disruptive sacred haunting “the boundaries, margins, and interstices of structure, form, and figure.”

Although Caputo’s hauntology of the name of “God” as the messianic event of promise disallows any divine existence and any other-worldly transcendence, it does not disallow the possibility that one can genuinely (re)figure on “God” as a potent motivation for existential acts of justice, love, forgiveness, and grace. Over a decade ago, he suggested that divine transcendence should be replaced with a notion of insistence, that is, that “God” does not dwell at an ontological distance from the reality of space and time but inhabits the very structures of life as a hauntological non-present presence intimately inspiring individuals to instantiate the poetics of the Kingdom of “God.”⁷¹ Most recently, he has taken the idea of insistence and applied it not only as an alternative to transcendence but also as an alternative to existence. That is to say, Caputo now refigures “God” as not existing but insisting, standing in the flux of existence in order to call people insistently to respond ethically to the incoming of the event.⁷² “God” insistently troubles the human condition with the dissatisfaction and disruption of the unexpected, the humility of undecidability, and the interrogation of every absolute answer dogmatized by human arrogance. But “God” does this only as a weak force, a force that cannot coerce, a summons that can be ignored, and a divine invitation that can be declined.⁷³ As a result, “God” does not exist as an omnipotent omniscient deity micromanaging reality but insists as a “perhaps” or a “might be” or “may be” that realizes existence only when individuals respond to the messianic call of the Kingdom to come—a kingdom that, like “God,” never exists.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:10.

⁶⁹ I borrow this phrase from Jacques Derrida in *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1, 129.

⁷⁰ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 2:17-18.

⁷¹ Caputo, “In Search of a Sacred Anarchy,” 238.

⁷² Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 2: 5-6.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 6:26.

⁷⁴ One could compare Caputo here with Richard Kearney’s theopoetics of the God Who May Be. See Kearney’s *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 79.

(Trans)Figuring in GXd

On August 6, 1975, *The New York Times* published on the front page an obituary of a famous Belgian detective. The obit characterized him as “internationally famous” and of an indeterminate age. His name—Hercule Poirot. His death announcement was a “first” for the “newspaper of record”; never before had *The Times* published an obituary of a fictional character. Yet, the paper considered his passing to be a significant component of all the news fit to print on that summer day. Interestingly, about a decade earlier on April 8, 1966, *Time* magazine published on its cover a question intimating a different possible obituary: “Is God Dead?” One could consider that to have been something of a perceptive question to be asked on Good Friday. The accompanying article contextualized that inquiry into the potential cessation of divine being by cataloguing it as “a summons to reflect on the meaning of existence.” Yet, perhaps both of these journalistic events stimulate broader interrogations into what existence might mean, since they connect that concept with an allegedly non-existent literary creation and with a transcendent deity traditionally considered to be beyond existence. Is there a possible way to connect the death of Poirot as the non-existence of a non-existent fiction with the radical theological question about the death of God as the non-existence of a hyper-existent divinity?

In the third section of this essay, I wish to pursue the above-mentioned connection, specifically as it relates to Caputo’s refiguring of “God” as a legislating name for the hauntological theopoetics of event as a weak messianic call. I explicitly want to consider that the idea of fiction, an idea that might serve as a common bond between Poirot and God, could possibly offer a tentative glossing of Caputoan radical theology and reintroduce into it a more timid acceptance of divine existence as a supplement to divine insistence. To do so, I advance an unpretentious thought experiment whereby one might consider Caputo’s “God” of the perhaps to have a type of existence, an existence that would offer a third alternative to the theological realism of God and the semantic hyper-realism of “God.” I do not intend this third to be an Hegelian dialecticized synthesis—although its application to Caputo will connect with his own renovation of a certain Hegelianism—but to be more temperately a suggested formal indication, or imaginative variation, by which GXd might be said to have, not only a hauntological dimension, but an ontological one as well. By writing GXd *sous rature*, I mean to symbolize this third manner through which GXd, transfigured now away from the disjunction between a metaphysical concept or a semiotic one, may be figured in to the refiguring of the sacred in such a manner as to admit a little existence back into Caputo’s theopoetics. I do so by adopting a recent reinterpretation of the ontological implications of fiction theorized by various philosophers working in the analytic tradition. In order to maintain focus, I concentrate primarily on the artifactual theory of fictional characters put forth quite creatively by Amie Thomasson. Professor Thomasson never applies her theory to theology; however, I wish to do just that as a way of arguing that one could poetize

Caputo's "God" as a fictional character, what he might term a "healthy fiction,"⁷⁵ who exhibits certain existential qualities, enough so that one could remain an orthodox Caputoan (*s'il y en a!*) and still believe in the existence of G~~X~~d.

Thomasson contends that the analytic tradition has historically depreciated the possibility that "mind-created or mind-dependent objects" could exist.⁷⁶ There can be no magically-connected creative force between thinking, or imagining, that, thereby, produces a genuine reality in the material universe. One result of this prejudice is that fiction and existence have been decidedly separated as associated terms. As Jody Azzouni remarks, an object exists "if and only if it's mind- and language-independent"; consequently, nothing in fiction could be said to exist precisely because fiction, as the creative achievement of imagination, fails to adhere to that criterion.⁷⁷ Thomasson claims that, in this empirically myopic view of ontology, fiction only plays the negative exemplary role of non-referring discourse; that is, fictional names illustrate that language can be used without any referentiality, without any intention to connect with material existence, resulting in every fictive statement being systemically false.⁷⁸

Yet, Thomasson contends that preempting fictional language from any genuine truth functional stimulus ensues in an anemic ontology that fails to appreciate the cultural realism that appears to characterize abstract artifacts, artifacts not limited to fiction but inclusive of laws, flags, music, and works of art. She considers the problem to be one of a naïve acceptance of disjunctive polarities, binaries such as physical/mental or real/ideal, which disenfranchise certain species of entities that discourse claims to reference but that do not fit neatly into either disjunctive category.⁷⁹ Cultural objects, such as those listed previously, have a dual nature to them in that they depend "rigidly" on a physical basis—flags exist as material objects made of some substance—but also "generically" on certain attitudes and intentions of individuals who imbue those objects with normative symbolic dynamics—flags also exist because individuals consider them as more than mere material objects.⁸⁰ She protests that one should not adopt an ontology that fails to account for all aspects of human experience, recognizing, of course, that not all experiences are critically valid but also recognizing that experiences of cultural

⁷⁵ John D. Caputo, "Atheism, A/theology, and the Postmodern Condition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 271.

⁷⁶ Amie L. Thomasson, "Ingarden and the Ontology of Cultural Objects," in *Existence, Culture, and Persons: The Ontology of Roman Ingarden*, ed. Arkadiusz Chrudzinski (Frankfort: Ontos, 2005), 130.

⁷⁷ Jody Azzouni, "Partial Ontic Fictionalism," in *Fictions and Models: New Essays*, ed. John Woods (Munich: Philosophia, 2010), 304.

⁷⁸ Amie L. Thomasson, "Fictional Entities," in *A Companion to Metaphysics* 2nd ed. eds. Jaegwon Kim, Ernest Sosa, and Gary S. Rosenkrantz (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 15. Her critique would also include a position such as Giovanni Tuzet's, who insists that fiction should never be confused with deception, since the former is known always to be false ("How Fictions are Credible," in Woods, *Fictions and Models*, 390.)

⁷⁹ Amie L. Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 75.

⁸⁰ Thomasson, "Ingarden and the Ontology of Cultural Objects," 129; Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics*, 148-49.

objects and the existential implications of fiction do not necessarily fall under the invalid.

Thomasson agrees that one should adhere to a “minimal ontology” but not one so parsimonious that it cannot engage certain functionally-true cultural realities.⁸¹ In her version of a minimalist ontology, she contraposes an artifactual theory of fiction, a theory that interprets fictional characters to be abstract cultural artifacts that may be said to exist, not in the spatio-temporal sense of concrete reality, but in the sense of contingent intentional objects.⁸² This theory allows her to retreat from the non-referential dismissal of fictional truth and establish that one may “take some straightforward statements about fictional characters to be true and argue that [one] should claim that fictional objects exist.”⁸³ For her, therefore, fiction should not be understood as “non-existence” but as imaginative mental intentions that find expression in the objectivity of texts and readers.⁸⁴ Indeed, she accentuates a threefold dependence of fictional characters, stating that they are “tethered to the world around us by dependencies on books, readers, and authors.”⁸⁵ The triple contingency of fictional characters means that they come into existence linguistically through the creative acts of authors and remain in existence with a definable identity through the continued reality of texts and competent readers.⁸⁶ Whereas fictional characters may certainly continue to exist without the assistance of their authors, they cannot endure without the combination of textual embodiment—either written or oral—and the hermeneutical acumen of readers to interpret those texts in valid ways.⁸⁷ This reliance on literature and interpreters indicates that fictional characters can maintain an “objective” identity that distinguishes them as discrete and describable entities, or one might say, as Thomasson expresses it, “the textual foundation of the character serves as the means whereby a quasi-indexical reference to the character can be made” by a competent reader.⁸⁸

Not surprisingly, then, Thomasson claims that fictional characters as abstract artifacts adhere to certain “identity criteria for fictional objects both within and across literary works that not only are as clear and precise as those we have for ordinary objects but also correspond closely to our practices in treating fictional characters as the same or different.”⁸⁹ This demonstrates that “there is some real metaphysical identity of fictional characters apart from their individuation for

⁸¹ Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics*, 73, 116, 146.

⁸² Amie L. Thomasson, “Fiction, Existence and Indeterminacy,” in Woods, *Fictions and Models*, 109; Amie L. Thomasson, “Fictional Characters and Literary Practices” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43 (April 2003): 139-40; Thomasson, “Fictional Entities,” 12; Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics*, 36.

⁸³ Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics*, 107.

⁸⁴ See Roman Frigg, “Fiction in Science,” in Woods, *Fictions and Models*, 248 for this distinction in the comprehension of fiction.

⁸⁵ Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics*, xi.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 12, 24.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

consciousness.”⁹⁰ Accordingly, a fictional character both exists as a recognizable singularity given its historical and inter-textual continuity, such as Hercule Poirot remaining Hercule Poirot across a number of different novels, and also has the potential to cease existing were the requisite texts and readers to cease to exist.⁹¹ In other words, fictional characters as abstract artifacts are finite realities in the actual world, but not concrete empirical entities. They are neither material objects nor Platonic ideas, but they do exist and can potentially not exist.

Thomason’s artifactual theory of fictional characters suggests some tantalizing implications for Caputo’s hauntology of the sacred as a theo-poetics of the name of “God.” Indeed, he also has a less than sanguine attitude toward a rigid differentiation among reality, fiction, and truth. For example, he acknowledges that faith operates as “the historical shape that the love of God” assumes for those theists who believe in a theological realism. Moreover, he refuses to reduce that faith to an emotivist theory of discourse, choosing, instead, to attribute a “truth” function to the language of faith, specifically, “truth” analogous to the way a “novel can be deeply ‘true’ even though it is rightly classified as ‘fiction,’ not ‘fact.’”⁹² Furthermore, however, he also affirms that the fact/fiction dichotomy might not be as trenchant as it so often appears, because, quoting from Gaston Bachelard, Caputo accedes to the indeterminacy that “*un fait est fait*,” that is, as he translates it, “a fact is an artifact,” which indicates that facts, like fictions, are forged or constructed.⁹³ Obviously, then, for Caputo, faith may traffic in both facts and fictions and do so without necessarily having to make decisive distinctions between them. In other words, Caputo’s doctrine of faith might well allow for believers to follow Stevens’ poetic confession of a faith that believes in a fiction without deluding itself into assuming the fiction to be materially real. Such a “counterfeit” faith for Caputo allows for believing under the guidance of “suspending disbelief” without falling victim to deception.⁹⁴

My thought experiment concerning reintroducing the existence of GXd into Caputo’s weak theo-poetics of the divine name rests precisely on Caputo’s admission of the fluidity between fact and fiction and the genuine veracity of various attempts at poetic figuring and re-figuring the name of GXd. I would connect Caputo to Thomason at this very point and suggest that the name of “God” could well name the event at work in that name but may also, and simultaneously, name a GXd at work in the actual facticity of human existence. Of course, Caputo does not completely abolish the concept of “existence” from his theo-poetic vocabulary, since he reiterates constantly that the insistence of “God” ideally provokes ethical embodiment of the divine summons to forgiveness, justice, and hospitality.⁹⁵ He prescribes an existential moral incarnation of the name of “God” realized through various social manifestations of the poetics of the Kingdom. But, of course, he does not intend that incarnation to be “describing physical transformations of entities but

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 7-9.

⁹² Caputo, *On Religion*, 112.

⁹³ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 10:8-9.

⁹⁴ Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 173-74.

⁹⁵ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 1:20.

the *existential transformability of our lives*.”⁹⁶ I merely want to add an addendum to Caputo’s moral manifestation of divine “in(ex)sistence” by translating Thomasson’s artifactual theory of abstract entities into Caputo’s hauntotheology and reintroduce a form of *ontos*, of “being,” in the sense of a minimal divine ontology that seeks to avoid the pitfalls of metaphysical theism and posit a fictive reality to G~~X~~d. In other words, I seek to connect Thomasson’s minimalist ontology to Caputo’s “minimalist metaphysics” by introducing the idea of a fictive theism.⁹⁷ Such a fictive theism would accept that G~~X~~d is another expression of an ideal object, one that does not exist as a concrete spatio-temporal material entity but does exist as a (over-determined) determinate cultural object. Throughout the various modes of theological discourse, G~~X~~d can name distinctive fictional characters existing with recognizable divine properties that give the characters a continuity of identity. I shall call this theory a “transfictional theism.”

Positing a transfictional theism predicated upon Thomasson’s artifactual theory of abstract fictional entities is actually not too far-fetched given Caputo’s thought, since he, himself, actually refers to the name of “God” as an “ideal object.”⁹⁸ Quite properly, in fact, he makes that association in the context of arguing that Derridean deconstruction never seeks to reduce reality to a narrow materialism. That is precisely what Derrida entails with his suspicion that reality cannot be exhausted in presence. To be sure, that same suspicion lies behind Caputo’s embrace of hyper-realism, a realism always haunted by the specters of the messianic “to come.”⁹⁹ So, too, I argue, one can claim that the reality of G~~X~~d has an actuality, one not imprisoned in materialism or the empirical and one that also transcends the shortsightedness of a theological conceptualism. Consequently, a “transfictional” G~~X~~d may, perhaps, warrant a divine “reality” beyond the concrete, but never a divine “reality” beyond the “perhaps.”

A fictive theo-poetics of G~~X~~d considers the divine to be a literary character whose existence depends both on the textual (oral or written) expressions that describe G~~X~~d’s determinate identity through various literary genres and on competent readers who encounter those texts and interpret them validly. Evidently, therefore, both traditions and communities are necessary for a fictional ontology of G~~X~~d to be effective. Across various texts and various hermeneutical perspectives, one can insist that there is a G~~X~~d that maintains certain enduring traits that give ontological integrity to the character. At this point, a transfictional theo-poetics of G~~X~~d correlates well with Caputo’s recent adoption of the Hegelian explanation of religion as prosecuting God through various *Vorstellungen*. Caputo considers a *Vorstellung* to be “the way truth takes place in a figurative or narrational, mythic or symbolic space.”¹⁰⁰ With reference to religion or theology, *Vorstellungen* are not merely the imaginative tropes with which one attempts to talk about “God,” but are,

⁹⁶ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 206-207.

⁹⁷ Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 93.

⁹⁸ Caputo, “The Return of Anti-Religion,” 47.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁰⁰ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 5:4.

de facto, other names for “God” as the cypher of the event.¹⁰¹ “God” is a *Vorstellung*. Unlike Hegel, however, Caputo does not believe that *Vorstellungen* are superceded by the Concept, thereby serving only a mediating role in the process of Absolute Spirit; instead, there are only *Vorstellungen*, without any transcendently signifying Concepts or “metaphysical elucidations.”¹⁰² A transfictional poetics of GXd certainly agrees with this conclusion with the caveat that GXd is a *Vorstellung* that does name an abstract entity with a discrete characterization allowing for a quasi-indexical ontological distinction.

Yet, there is another area where Caputo’s insistence of “God” and the fictional existence of GXd interact, specifically, with reference to the indeterminate nature of divine determinacy. Caputo insists that the name of “God” may be translated endlessly and is systemically open to an unending process of substitution. One can never claim to have discovered the definitive name for “God,” or, more precisely, the definitive name for the event named by “God.” He claims that just as there is no “messianic” reading of Hamlet, that is, a reading that achieves absolute truth and certainty as to Shakespeare’s meaning, so, too, there can never be a “messianic” naming of “God,” a one, final, correct interpretation of the divine.¹⁰³ Likewise, a transfictional theism rejects the idea that the character of GXd may be comprehensively determined without remainder. A hermeneutical indeterminacy forever haunts every reading of the requisite texts, added to which is the reality of the multiplicity of theological texts that purport to talk about the fictional character GXd. Even within the confines of a “singular” theistic tradition, one may find diversity among the divine characteristics. For example, as Ricoeur so convincingly illustrates, in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, GXd is diversely named in the various narratives of divine activity, given different characteristics by the sages and the prophets, and analogized by concepts ranging from husband to friend and from tyrant to empathetic fellow-sufferer. While one may correctly determine that these scriptures reference the “same” fictional character, they do so with a plurivocity that preempts any absolute certainty as to how to define the absolute GXd. There are what Thomasson calls “core properties” disclosed in these texts; however, those properties are never considered to be restricted.¹⁰⁴

Additionally, a transfictional theo poetic may stimulate one to recognize that the indeterminacy of divine naming does not function with *carte blanche*. Although the name of “God” may be endlessly translatable and disseminated across a polynominal field of semantic substitutions, as Caputo justifies so successfully in his hauntotheology, the name of GXd cannot be. Thomasson maintains that, although fictional characters remain open to intertextual character development, they, nonetheless, develop a historical integrity of identity that restrains interminable reinterpretations. The character of Hamlet may remain predominately the same in both Shakespeare and Stoppard; however, that does not entail that an author could not so re-write the character as to create a completely different ideal object retaining

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 5:21.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 5:8.

¹⁰³ Caputo, “The Return of Anti-Religion,” 61.

¹⁰⁴ Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics*, 59-60.

only the name of the former. In other words, not every “Hamlet” might be Hamlet. Correlatively, the fictional character of GXd as the Absolute never escapes the relativity of divergent theological textual traditions. The discrepancies in naming the character of GXd in different religious discourses may be so divergent that one has to conclude that the separate semantics of the sacred simply cannot be referencing the same abstract cultural object. In other words, the GXd of one religion may well not be the GXd of another.¹⁰⁵ No discourse ever escapes the exclusivity of its proprietary divine fictional absolute. As a result, a transfictional theo-poetics necessarily remains a polytheism, acknowledging that “God” may not name the same GXd in every theological culture.

Transfictional polytheism expresses the cultural-linguistic theory of religion espoused by George Lindbeck, who claims that religion should not be understood as a set of cognitive propositions nor as an experiential-expressive multiplicity of various linguistic references to the same sacred reality.¹⁰⁶ Instead, religions should be considered as culturally-relative and linguistically-situated, something akin to Wittgensteinian language games that might be comparable but can never be commensurable. Lindbeck insists that the cultural and linguistic differences that may obtain among various religions allow for the real possibility that they do not talk about or worship the same deity. Interestingly enough, although my transfictional theo-poetics is offered as a supplement to Caputo’s hauntology of the sacred, not as a criticism or an alternative, at this point the connection may be more tenuous. Given Caputo’s reticence toward exclusivity and his idea that the same event harbored in the name of “God” may be expressed in multiple vocabularies, one could infer that his weak theology of the event is more an experiential-expressive than a cultural-linguistic model of religion. Of course, this distinction may well be a consistent implication of trying to establish a fragment of divine “existence” in Caputo’s postsecular theology.

Evidently, throughout this essay, I have been talking about God/“God”/GXd, as well as talking about talking about God/“God”/GXd. How could I not, given that theological discourse precedes me somewhat jussively, demanding a response,

¹⁰⁵ Mark Johnston would agree based on his conclusion that “God” is not truly a proper name but a “compressed title” or a “descriptive name.” As such, there can be no “original dubbing of someone or something as ‘God.’” As a result, “God” does not necessarily reference the same “deity.” See *Saving God*, 5-8.

¹⁰⁶ Instead of comparing religion to empirical hypotheses or to emotive exclamations of prereflective experience, Lindbeck argues that “religions resemble languages together with their correlative forms of life and are thus similar to cultures (insofar as these are understood semiotically as reality and value systems—that is, as idioms for the constructing of reality and the living of life).” He labels this approach the Cultural-Linguistic and acknowledges that it draws inspiration from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s ordinary language philosophy, Clifford Geertz’s explanation of “thick description,” and Peter Berger’s sociological theory of religion as a “cosmizing” of legitimation structures of ultimate value. The Cultural-Linguistic theory considers religions to be “comprehensive interpretive schemes, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualized, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world . . .” In other words, for Lindbeck, one becomes religious by learning a “set of skills” and incarnating them within the facticity of one’s existence. See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religions and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 31-35.

requiring that I continue the conversation about the sacred, the absolute, or the divine. In other words, I can only think and speak within a milieu in which “God” has heretofore been prefigured, but prefigured in so many forms that I cannot escape a persistent feeling of uncertainty and indeterminacy, never altogether comfortable that my speaking of “God” escapes the apophatic idea that I cannot really speak of “God” or can only speak of “God” by not speaking unequivocally. Furthermore, I cannot dismiss the nagging supposition that my talking about “God” fundamentally refigures “God,” translates “God” into a different idiom that separates my discourse from other discourses, to the point that “God” never remains the same by virtue of my saying something about “God.” Inevitably, therefore, my refiguring poetics of “God” results in a transfiguring of “God” into something different, a semantic metamorphosis that reinterprets the divine correctly or incorrectly (*s'il y en a*).

Caputo is correct that we never escape a certain theological nominalism, one that reminds us that we both cannot speak of “God” and also cannot not speak of “God.” Furthermore, we can never know, with absolute certainty, if all our speech about “God” is speech about God or speech about anything, for that matter. Consequently, when I transfigure “God” as G~~X~~d, I can never know whether a transfictional nomenclature is adequate to the task of continuing the prefiguring, refiguring, transfiguring process or not. Does my theopoetics have any cash value? Is it non-referring? Or, is it merely a superfluous linguistic frivolity at best or a deceptive semantic manipulation at worst? Are we talking about anything when we talk about God/“God”/G~~X~~d? I find myself inevitably haunted by the specter of non-knowing to the extent that my only honest response to the above questions is: I am not sure; go figure!