

Prolegomena to a Speculative Criticism of Literature

William Franke

Vanderbilt University

Theoretical reflection on the literary techniques fundamental to poetic representation—with precedence given specifically to the figurative modes of metaphor, symbol, and allegory—begins within literature itself. Such reflection is first enshrined in the unforgettable words of poets reflecting on the powers and wonders of poetic language. Such poetic self-consciousness continues to be articulated in the reflections of philosophers and theorists. The fundamental facts of signification and the fathomless enigmas of figuration are infinitely intriguing in themselves. They are plainly evident in almost everything human whatsoever. Yet, at the same time, they remain unsoundable in the depth of their mystery. They have continuously called for theoretical reflection. Such reflection is bound to turn self-reflexively in fascination toward the literary means of its own expression.

This sort of theoretical activity was occasionally pursued in former ages under the aegis of a philosophical or speculative “philology.” My work aims to revive philology in a speculative key that I have theorized and applied in my books and essays.¹ The specifically figurative modes of literary expression, including metaphor, allegory, and symbol, are given special attention throughout my works as the enabling means of a kind of synthetic, supra-analytic “revelation”—in a phenomenological

¹ Examples of my work in this vein include *Dante's Paradiso and the Theological Origins of Modern Thought: Toward a Speculative Philosophy of Self-Reflection* (New York: Routledge, 2021); *Poetry and Apocalypse: Theological Disclosures of Poetic Language* (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2008); *A Theology of Literature: The Bible as Revelation in the Tradition of the Humanities* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2017).

sense that, however, communicates ultimately with theological revelation. It is the task of speculative criticism to interpret this phenomenal type of disclosure. Most importantly, the speculative vocation of literature aims beyond the reach of figuration altogether to encompass a negativity that remains fundamental to any form of representation. Prima facie, in its usual acceptance, representation is *not* itself the real but only a *representation* of a reality that is absent or inactual. This inherent negativity is significant in a heightened degree and register when representation understands itself as a mode of revelation. Poetic figures then need also to be understood dialectically in relation to what escapes and points beyond figuration. In this sense, revelation is, as the word itself intimates, a “re-veiling,” a fitting out or dressing up in figures of something that is not in itself figurative.

My work begins to feel out the idea of a speculative criticism of literature and its relation to other speculative enterprises, notably in philosophy and theology.² While drawing on these kindred disciplines, speculative criticism of literature and culture emerges as, in crucial respects, the discourse most suited to synthesize a comprehensive vision of knowledge in its wholeness. This becomes evident once we admit the conjectural and creative nature of knowledge that strives to go beyond narrowly circumscribed fields of objectivity and information in the effort to sound a higher order of meaning and coherence.

Our current media revolution raises the question of whether language can retain its position as the key to knowledge or must cede it in a contemporary culture no longer based on the *logos* but dominated by images and other media with apparently greater power of immediate presence. Still, the mediation of the word perdures as crucial to human beings’ self-understanding, and the poetic word proves to be its privileged, indeed indispensable vehicle. The origins of this human predicament can be probed particularly in conversation with Vico, as well as from a variety of other anthropological perspectives. The topic of language as figural opens up from within Vico’s philosophical theory of the metaphorical origins of language. His work offers guiding inspiration for my idea of speculative philology as an analysis of the figurative origins of language.

² This prolegomenon is offered as an introduction in anticipation of my forthcoming *Speculative Philology* in two volumes (*Poetics of Revelation* and *Infinite Figures* respectively) gathering together numerous diverse studies.

A Speculative Approach to the Criticism of Literature and its Religious Significance

The agenda of my work specifically in speculative philology focuses on the idea of poetic or figurative language attaining to theological revelation. It emphasizes particularly the vantage point of literary form, with a view to developing theoretical insight into revelation in its inextricable relation to fundamental linguistic techniques of figuration. What are the hermeneutic and poeticological resources that religiously revelatory literature draws on or forges in order to capture and convey what poets from Dante to Blake have called the “divine vision”?³

With the revolution in literary criticism ushered in by postmodern theory, in which my own schooling as a literary scholar was steeped, some new ways of looking at claims to revelation in religious literature became possible and, eventually, even unavoidable. I have previously published numerous theological meditations on religiously revelatory poetry. In general, all of this writing keeps present to mind the theoretical stakes of the poetics of revelation operating in literary texts. The revelation in question is owing especially to the techniques of figurative representation, and my work in speculative philology thus concentrates specifically on the theoretical elucidation of figurative techniques such as metaphor, allegory, and symbol. These devices are adapted for use by philosophical and theological poets, as well as by secular writers, and constitute the indispensable linguistic means of their “vision.”

A fundamental conviction on which this work pivots is that understanding figurative language requires, or at least greatly benefits from, appropriating the terms offered by poetics of revelation and their theological underpinnings. Figurative language opens upon another world—or rather upon *our* world *as* other than the world we ordinarily know. The world becomes a revelation of an other world, in effect, an epiphany and even—for some—a theophany. This transfiguration does not presuppose a fixed theological and systematic knowledge of God. On the contrary, the mystery of figurative language, which enables us to peer into the unknown and unknowable sources of the real, is itself the source of what in certain respects and contexts emerges as the most authentic and original kind of theology, namely, poetic theology. This theology is revealed, in turn, as yet another form or aspect of figuration.

At the same time, and conversely, the work contends that the originally theological idea of revelation is essential to elucidating the nature of basic forms of

³ Further elucidation in *The Divine Vision of Dante's Paradise: The Metaphysics of Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

figurative language such as allegory, symbol, and metaphor as they have evolved in literary tradition. These concepts have also all been deeply analyzed and elaborated in theological discourse—and also, often somewhat derivatively, in phenomenological philosophy. Particularly phenomenology that takes seriously the so-called “theological turn” can prove fruitful for opening new vistas on poetic literature.⁴ But, in the end, it is especially *negative* theology that enables us to deal with the most deeply concealed phenomena of literary creation.⁵

Kevin Hart, in his critical discussions of modern literature in *Poetry and Revelation: For a Phenomenology of Religious Poetry*, stresses attentiveness to the self-unfolding of phenomena in “pre-thetic” experience as crucial to such literary revelation.⁶ Like Hart, I use “revelation” in a sense no longer strictly beholden to theological dogma and its stated “truths.” However, I also move out beyond the framework of the phenomenological reduction and analysis. I wish to examine the speculative premises of this move beyond “theses” more directly in poetry itself and in an unlimited theoretical perspective, one that is in process of elaboration through mutually critical dialogue among various paradigms. Hermeneutics proves to be the more encompassing methodological paradigm in my work: a *hermeneutic* phenomenology empowers us to interpret negative phenomena and even the negation of the phenomenal *in toto*. This limit marks the threshold where we cross over from phenomenology into negative theology.⁷

Phenomenology was originally conceived and proposed by Edmund Husserl as a rigorous science (“*streng*e Wissenschaft”). But the most important sources of literary criticism are to be found at a certain productive distance from science and through a critical reframing of scientific methods of investigation. Science is itself revealed by truly comprehensive reflection in the tradition of the humanities to be rooted in human understanding that can be approached in its ultimate grounds only

⁴ Dominique Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* (Combas: L’Éclat, 1991), now included with *La phénoménologie éclatée* (1998) in *La phénoménologie dans tous ses états* (Paris: Folio-essais, 2009). In English, see Janicaud, Chrétien, et al., *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000). For contextualization and commentary, see J. Aaron Simmons and Bruce Ellis Benson, *The New Phenomenology: A Philosophical Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁵ This emphasis comes out in Adam Y. Wells, *The Manifest and the Revealed: A Phenomenology of Kenosis* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018), forward by Kevin Hart.

⁶ Kevin Hart, *Poetry and Revelation: For a Phenomenology of Religious Poetry* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

⁷ This transition becomes possible with the “new phenomenology” after the “theological turn” of authors such as Jean-Louis Chrétien and Jean-Ives Lacoste. See also Jean-Luc Marion, *D’ailleurs, la révélation* (Paris: Grasset, 2020).

poetically.⁸ Despite all our inalienably holistic consciousness and subliminal awareness, the different, not strictly scientific, status of knowledge in the humanities—and then of all knowledge as understood from the perspective of the humanities—is very often and very widely ignored in our academic institutions today.⁹ In these institutions, humanities are supposed to justify themselves as a further area of “research” competing for funding with social and natural sciences.

Speculative philology, as I conceive it, does not conform to this paradigm of scientific, or even of narrowly phenomenological, investigation. Authentic criticism grows, rather, from hermeneutic practices of interpreting signs, very often in originally religious texts, as well as from theoretical reflection on the material, human, and social radicals, the existential roots and generating sources, of literature and life. Such reflection constitutes “poetics” in a large sense embracing cultural poetics generally, as well as the creatively shaping endeavor of thought itself. This broadened conception of poetic reflection or thinking is what I mean by “speculative criticism.” In a largely post-Enlightenment era, we need to recover these ancient and mostly forgotten sources of speculative knowledge so as to understand the activity of criticism in the terms that are most appropriate to it.¹⁰

The resources in question are not necessarily, or not only, higher intellectual faculties but include also traditionally lower faculties of holistic intuition such as sensing or smelling things—animal senses. They can be traced to techniques of reading signs and inventing plausible corresponding narratives that were developed over untold millennia of human evolution, mostly long before what is usually recognized as civilization, by hunters and seafarers, by shamanistic healers and the like. Carlo Ginzburg differentiates sharply between intuition of a higher supersensible realm and such sensorial, animal forms of intuition or *fūto* (smell).¹¹ Today, I think, we are able to discern some ways in which the two types of intuition interpenetrate, at least at later stages in human evolution. We can therefore propose rather to understand revelation of a supersensible order as still incorporating an intuition grounded in material, worldly

⁸ I argue programmatically for this “poetic epistemology of humanities knowledge” in the introduction to *The Revelation of Imagination: From Homer and the Bible through Virgil and Augustine to Dante* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015).

⁹ Gadamer’s critique in *Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode)*, 1960) of the mechanical application of scientific method and his recognition of the epiphanic experience of truth in the humanities is a shining exception.

¹⁰ One recent and remarkable instance of this endeavor is Donald Phillip Verene, *The Philosophy of Literature: Four Studies* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018). For specifics, see my review: <http://readingreligion.org/books/philosophy-literature>.

¹¹ Carlo Ginzburg, “Spie: Radici di un paradigma indiziario,” in *Miti, emblemi, spie: Morfologia e storia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), 192-93.

sensation as the source of the metaphorical contents necessary to all analogical forms of intellection, signally those proceeding by means of allegory and symbol.

Poetic Figuration and the Unfigurable

All of our linguistic-rhetorical figures, if we pursue them to their limits, serve finally for bringing us face to face with the unfigurable. Reality is always deeper and more inexhaustible than the form or figure through which it is presented to us. Meaning, moreover, is inherently contextual and is constituted and garnered always only through relations, and thus via encounter with others and ultimately with the absolutely Other. Consequently, philological projects turned speculative are inhabited by a drive to break through their own boundaries in a number of directions. Speculatively philological projects tend to transgress the conventional disciplinary, periodizing, linguistic, and geographical limits of customary academic philology in a pseudo-scientific mold.

There are many cognitive theories of metaphor and linguistic approaches to the scientific elucidation of figurative language. However, the language of poetry and that of religious revelation tender some of the deepest experiences of language and its inextricable figurality. It is the domain of speculative philology to explore theoretically the marvels of figurative language. Called for is not an objective, scientific description of properties but rather entering into the experience of figurative language in poetry and religious revelation, including even experiences of ritual or magic.

The point here is not to offer an exhaustive theory of figurative language from any defined type of methodological paradigm but rather to enter directly into an experience of language in its inherently figurative operation. This is what a *speculative* approach can do. It takes us beyond theory in the sense that Goethe's Faust lamented in calling it "grey theory" ("graue Theorie") and is based rather upon the motives for which Gadamer praises theory ("Lob der Theorie," *Reden und Aufsätze*, 1983). Heidegger's *On the Way to Language* (*Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 1959), along with his many speculative readings of poets, were an inspiration to Gadamer. This experiential approach makes speculative philology a method not of mastering information about a topic, purportedly in an exhaustive manner, but rather a mode of experience of such language and always with awareness of relations to something else—the beyond of language. Not closing the topic off, which renders it sterile, but opening it to its relations with others enables us to penetrate its unformulatable secrets, the *unfigurable* in every figure.

Poetic figuration is a dynamic process that lives and dies and yields to its own polar opposite: figuration leads beyond figures, though only figures again are capable of conveying the experience of this beyond. In a poem like John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," concrete sensation ceases and turns into a mode of imagination. The speaker is left in the dark ("here there is no light"), bereft of all actual images, but precisely this lack stimulates his own *conjecturing* of forms and figures, even to the point of making up a lush pastoral landscape scene realized with vividly sensuous imagination:

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine
Fast-fading violets covered up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

This may still be a far cry from negative theology and its entering into the *unfigurable*, but there is nevertheless a deep connection between imagining sensations *in their absence* and conjectural figuration of an absence that cannot become present at all. In each case, a representation passes over into its opposite. Keats, in all innocence, describes an aspect of the dark night of the soul reminiscent of John of the Cross. Falling in love with death charges the negative erotically, and as the object of desire, death is deeply felt even in its very nothingness: "Darkling I listen, and for many a time / I have been half in love with easeful Death . . ."

By such meditations in verse, Keats arrives at "negative capability," as he explains in his 1817 letter to his brothers George and Thomas. This capacity of resting in uncertainty is a poeticological analogue of certain mystical methods of approach to God in negative theology. The "Ode on a Grecian Urn" comes near to articulating some of these poetic equivalents of negative theology in aesthetic experience that channels a paradigmatic encounter with the nothing and the expression of inexpressibility:

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,

Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme

The shift from a verbal to a visual mode notwithstanding, it is clear that no aesthetic impressions can match in purity and power the impressions made by nothing at all:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on'
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit dities of no tone

This vanishing of the object for the intensification of intuiting a non-object opens the dimension of infinite possible figurations, of figuration as infinite, as without bounds. In speculative thinking, nothing remains as a discrete subject unto itself and for its own sake alone.¹² In itself, any object of thought is simply nothing. The life and interest of everything consists in how it relates to everything else. That is why poetic figures never exist simply for their own sake. The same goes for interpretive methodologies—they are by their very nature means to an end. Deconstruction, phenomenological reduction, and negative theology are very much a part of a more comprehensive speculative philology such as it can be practiced and performed today.

Philology as Speculative Thought and Criticism

My work traces criticism from ancient sources to its modern and contemporary manifestations.¹³ It privileges criticism understood as speculative reflection that works basically from literature, especially from literature taken seriously as religious revelation. My larger project (including the two forthcoming volumes on Speculative Philology) moves through a variety of historical permutations of speculative criticism from ancient allegorical hermeneutics, exemplarily among Neoplatonic philosophers, to modern linguistic epistemologies, eminently that of the French Symbolists, their

¹² A fundamental lesson about this sort of mutual relativity can be learned from Hegel's thinking on the speculative proposition as determined by the mutual engenderment of subject and predicate. See the Preface to *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

¹³ *The Revelation of Imagination: From Homer and the Bible through Virgil and Augustine to Dante* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015) and *Secular Scriptures: Modern Theological Poetics in the Wake of Dante* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press: 2016), taken together, outline this trajectory.

Romantic predecessors, and their modernist and eventually even postmodern heirs. This history traverses the *dolce stil novo*'s recasting in medieval Tuscany of the gay science of courtly lyric among the Troubadours as a spiritual exercise aiming at moral-intellectual enlightenment and ecstatic joy. It engages with Renaissance and Romantic and especially Symbolist poetics of revelation. These references suggest, in briefest compass, the range of historical techniques that have been adapted to the interpretation of literature as a means of speculative thinking. Such speculative thinking, I maintain, furthermore, becomes itself an original source of spiritual revelation in literature and even in criticism.

The type of speculatively critical practice I pursue is often found in the work of poets and writers themselves, as well as in that of philosophers. Accordingly, such thinking's concern is with poetry *as* revelation more than just with poetry *and* revelation. This thinking attempts, moreover, to explore and develop a variety of poetics of revelation. A remarkable contamination between religious revelation and its interpretive relays in reading and thinking and criticism has become more and more difficult to discern, but no less determining, throughout the epochs surveyed in my projects down to our own postmodern predicament. These reflections provoke some hypotheses concerning the future of criticism viewed from the standpoint of its philological grounding.

A speculative criticism of literature has become ever more inescapable in today's environment of interdisciplinary and self-transforming humanities studies. But what such a criticism can mean and be are complex and controversial questions. What are its traditional sources and intellectual justification?¹⁴ These are issues that we all inevitably confront—yet not necessarily with much critically informed reflective awareness. I strive to render the field more coherent by tracing some genealogical lines of continuity for an approach that can be considered variously under the optics of speculative philology—or criticism or rhetoric. Any of these terms is apt to suggest how some of the different aspects of the literary in its speculative tendencies and capacities can border upon and invade other areas of inquiry and confer a general shape on knowledge as a whole. In this sense, criticism, or more traditionally “philology,” becomes something of an all-inclusive meta-discipline.¹⁵

¹⁴ Among myriad works in philosophy and literature, Massimo Verdicchio and Robert Burch, eds., *Between Philosophy and Poetry: Writing, Rhythm, History* (New York: Continuum, 2002) offers numerous insightful probes of this interface.

¹⁵ Jan Ziolkowski, in “Metaphilology,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 104/2 (2005): 239-272, reviews the recent history through which philology, generally considered the most conservative and old-fashioned of disciplines, became a new and radical enterprise.

There was a moment in the nineteenth century, during the age of Victor Hugo (1802-85), when it became widely believed and apparent that nations had been formed principally on the basis of narration of national origins in literary epics. This literary culture was transmitted through the educational system as furnishing the ground-study necessary for a coherent collective national identity. Philologists such as Ernest Renan (1823-1892) were able for a brief span of time to play a leading role in forging national self-consciousness and in orchestrating efforts for achieving what they perceived as humanity's historical mission and destiny. This is but one horizon of possibility for philology, and it has already become almost incomprehensibly remote from philology's position in contemporary society. Still, it is indicative of nearly unlimited possibilities of other, related shapes and faces that philology has assumed in the course of history and that may still harbor certain types of unexploited potential.

Founding figures among late nineteenth-century philologists such as Gaston Paris, Paul Meyer, and Pio Rajna, often formulated their goal as that of founding a new science of literature (“une nouvelle science de la littérature”) as some kind of universal encyclopedia of humanity. I stress, however, that the objectives of such a comprehensive philology cannot be scientific in the sense of an authoritative knowledge of a prescribed field of phenomena. Speculative criticism or philology is comprehensive in a wholly different sense—as being without inherent or prescribed limits. A recent representative essay of mine, “Poetry as Prophecy: From Anthropological Origins to Postmodern Apocalypses,” with its panoramic literary anthropology, probes the origins and limits of the concept of the human and therewith also of the divine.¹⁶ As a poetic type of knowing, my speculative philology is turned toward the infinite “beyond” that infinitizes the field concerned rather than being about objective knowledge of a definite set of delimited items within it. This becomes possible once poetry invades and contaminates theory with its own figurative and narrative modes of understanding. Then the dichotomy of literature and theory erodes and eventually breaks down. Science, in a supposedly rigorous sense, becomes difficult to verify and certify, but the unity and wholeness of knowing—and unknowing—turn out to be restored thereby and indeed fostered.

¹⁶ Franke, “Poetry as Prophecy: From Anthropological Origins to Postmodern Apocalypses,” in *Prophetic Witness and the Reimagining of the World: Poetry, Theology and Philosophy in Dialogue*, eds. Mark S. Burrows, Hilary Davies, Josephine von Zitzewitz, vol. V of “The Power of the Word” (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 9-3. (Keynote address for The Power of the Word International Conference V, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford, September 2017).

The covert destiny and vocation of criticism at its most ambitious is to become a kind of comprehensive speculative thinking. In this regard, criticism is closely related especially to philosophy and theology. I understand these relations as overlapping rather than as oppositional. One can appropriately designate them as “perichoresis” or “circumincession” in a language borrowed from Trinitarian theology stressing the co-inherence of the persons of the Godhead. In some ways, speculative criticism proffering a poetics of revelation is more apt than either a systematically phenomenological philosophy or a revealed dogmatic theology to attain the goals that each of these venerable traditions has striven to achieve for so long. Of course, this presupposes seeing philosophy and theology, too, as inherently and ultimately speculative disciplines. As such, they are perfected and fulfilled by the sort of poetic thinking that my project outlines and propounds in and through what it calls “speculative criticism.”

This work tells the story of a largely occulted history of figurative language as directed by a telos of ever greater self-reflection that overcomes even itself in returning to the ground of reflection in the unfathomably real. Certain crucial junctures are highlighted in order to bring out the shape of an interpretation of human culture in terms of its figurations and their limits. Theology provides a key and theory a means to this type of interpretation that becomes oriented especially to poetry and remains itself poetic all throughout. My work carries out this meditation in a number of disciplinary contexts, constructing its meta-discipline of speculative philology as a way of relating these different approaches together. It embraces most ardently and intimately a historical span reaching from Dante to Symbolism—thereby extending considerably further than the canonical treatment of analogous developments from Baudelaire to Surrealism.¹⁷ My project annexes much also beyond its own poles, including both precursors and offshoots or spin-offs, which serve to frame and set up the whole tableau.

It is possible today to maintain that figures of rhetoric are replaced by electronic media as furnishing the fundamental code or language for art and expression. I wish to recognize the profound transformations that are underway, but also to suggest that figures are infinite and have a life beyond that assigned them by any finite logic, especially the digital logic toward which media studies are likely, if not obliged, to converge. However, this renewed life comes at a price. It entails a relinquishing of knowledge as a mode of domination and requires rather a kind of self-abandon or *kenosis*.

¹⁷ Marcel Raymond, *De Baudelaire au Surréalisme* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1963).

The central and unifying idea of my speculative philology is, first, that figures in language permit us to construct whole universes embracing even what we cannot objectively conceive and know. They are thus at the same time modes of releasing what they serve to construct and ways of relating themselves to the unknown that emerges from behind every act of knowing once it is unveiled in its figurality. My speculative philology shows how the undoing of the figure, its being broken open to something outside it and otherworldly, negates the logic of the figure and yet continues in another register the revelation of the beyond of the world. Speculative philology as a whole describes a parabola arching from the most basic and essential forms of figuration in language to the bursting open of the figure finally through reflection on its limits—without limits. In this sense, figures become “infinite.” Technical figurative procedures such as allegory, symbol, and metaphor are followed through various permutations to their infinitization in the undoing or deconstruction of the figure and of figurality as such. This surpassing of figurality provokes the ultimate revelation of our reality beyond and in excess of our determinate categories and even of the figures that enable us to envision it. We thereby feel our way blindly beyond all our objective knowing. We are moved into a visionary dimension that is no longer simply our own. Self-disappropriation by our participation in poetic figuration makes us vessels of a revelation of an otherness that has traditionally inspired figures of divinity.