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How to Make the Heavens Speak: Peter Sloterdijk on *Theopoesis*

(Sloterdijk, Peter, *Making the Heavens Speak: Religion as Poetry*, Translated by Robert Hughes, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023, 288 p.)

Keywords: Peter Sloterdijk, heaven, *theopoesis*, religion, poetry

Peter Sloterdijk has a remarkable hermeneutic sense that gives him the ability to address philosophical problems with broad relevance. He gained fame with his book *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* [*Critique of Cynical Reason*] and has since solidified his place in contemporary thought through his diverse range of themes. Sloterdijk's works function as "spaces" in which the reader is invited to reflect upon philosophical themes such as time, the human condition, religion, politics, and so on. The focal point of the book being discussed here is centred on the topic of religion, which is explored in greater depth compared to other themes. Translated into English by Robert Hughes under the title *Making the Heavens Speak: Religion as Poetry*, Peter Sloterdijk's work has appeared as a German first edition under the title *Das Himmel zum Sprechen bringen: Über Theopoesis* (Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin, 2020). This book was originally intended as a short article on theopoesis dedicated to Jan Assmann for his birthday but has since expanded to encompass religion as ethical poetry.:

The expression *religio* can probably only be made comprehensible in its Christian appropriation if one recognizes in it the kind of ethical poetry that reaches for the whole of life (Sloterdijk 2023, 56).

In fact, Sloterdijk initially planned to write a celebration paper on Assmann. However, he failed to honour this invitation and eventually decided to dedicate his finished work to the scholar separately from the occasion of his anniversary. This is how Sloterdijk's book came into being as a way to express his gratitude for the influence Assmann had in shaping his thought.

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Structured into two parts, the book sets out to bring together a number of theological-philosophical-literary themes, on the basis of which the author presents, in a philosophical manner, the concept of *theo-poetics* or on religion as poetry, as Robert Hughes explanatorily translates the concept of *die Theopoesie*. Right from the title, *Making the Heavens Speak: Religion as Poetry* hints at this concept, as suggested by the analogy of “religion as poetry”. In fact, the title announces a discourse on the mundanisation of the transcendent through poetry. Thus, the problem of the “unspoken”, of the supernal other, of heaven, is rendered into words, into poetry, because it is only through speech that we are brought face to face with the irrational and thus able to bring “heaven” into the world, in a language we can understand. In other words, as Sloterdijk states in Dante’s footsteps, “only poetry could give access to the beyond” (2023, 57).

Throughout both parts of the book, the author examines religion in relation to philosophy and poetry. The twenty chapters that make up this volume, sometimes rather ambiguously titled, present in their content intertextualizations from an outstanding number of philosophers, theologians and writers, such as: Plato, Hegel, Fichte, Nietzsche, Bergson, Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Schleiermacher, Homer, Dante, Adolf von Harnack, Augustine of Hippo, Karl Barth and Denzinger. The first part of the book, titled *Deus ex machina, Deus ex cathedra*, consists of titles such as: *The gods in the theatre; Plato’s contestation; Of the true religion; Representing God, being God: an Egyptian solution; On the best of all possible heaven dwellers; Poetries of power; Dwelling in plausibilities; The theo-poetical difference; Revelation whence?; The death of the gods; “Religion is unbelief”: Karl Barth’s intervention; In the garden of infallibility: Denzinger’s world*. Afterwards, the second part of the book, titled *Under the high heavens*, contains eight chapters with the following titles: *Fictive belonging together; Twilight of the gods and sociophany; Glory: poems of praise; Poetry of patient endurance; Poetry of exaggeration: religious virtuosos and their excesses; Kerygma, propaganda, supply-side offense, or, when fiction is not to be trifled with; On the prose and poetry of the search; Freedom of Religion*.

The use of language to express the ineffable nature of the heavens shows humanity’s longing for the absolute and the heavens’ call for humanity to ascend. For this reason, *Making the Heavens Speak* is not a book about the “scientific” heavens, that is, about the heavens of astrologers, astronomers or astronauts (Sloterdijk 2023, XI), but about the heavens that retain their “mysterious” quality and at the same time offer themselves to be “known” through man’s ascension to them. In this respect, the author’s statement is edifying:

The discussion that follows in this book will concern primarily communicative, bright heavens inviting uplift, because, in accord with the task

of poetic enlightenment, the heavens constitute the common provenance of gods, verse, and the uplifting of spirits (2023, XII).

Therefore, why “religion as poetry”? Because both religion and poetry draw their origins from the communicative heavens. Moreover, the problem of transposing the heavens as communicative “images” is caused by man’s inability to perceive the heavens in their essence, as Sloterdijk states: “the heavens that can be made to speak are not a possible object of visual perception” (2023, XI).

Last but not least, *Making the Heavens Speak* suggests, in a metaphorical way, the “union” of the transcendent with the world, or the communication between “a beyond” and “a here”. In other words, the personified image of the heavens being made to speak can be rendered by what Sloterdijk expresses in another well-known work of his, *Rage and Time*, where the speech of the “higher” is brought through by means of singing: “To sing has meant from time immemorial to open one’s mouth so that the higher powers can make themselves heard” (Sloterdijk 2012, 2). More precisely, just as through singing the higher powers reach man’s ear, so does through speech heaven reaches man’s language.

Beyond this interpretative and expositional excursion on the “heavens that are made to speak” through poetry, the relationship between religion and poetry are eloquently articulated by the author in Chapter VI, Part I, *Poetries of power*. In order to maintain the reader’s interest, we will provide a few key ideas from this chapter. This relation is thus established by Sloterdijk as follows: “«religions» [...] are to be understood as the products of local powers of imagination” (2023, 44). To provide a fuller explanation of this matter, the author draws on some ideas of Bergson from *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, where the latter calls religions “works of a natural faculty of fabulation” (Sloterdijk 2023, 44). Indeed, Bergson refers to religion as a “myth-making function”, hence as an important faculty for the manufacturing of myths (1974, 98).

Moreover, with regard to religion understood as a faculty of fabrication, Sloterdijk states:

Wherever this faculty of thought flourishes, the tendency to produce religion appears as a natural colour in the spectrum of anthropology. Accordingly, cathedrals would be fables written in hard stone; priests would be actors absorbed in their roles; martyrs would be sorcerers’ apprentices who never return from their journeys into the hereafter; theologians would be dramaturges who deal with the grammar of fables (2023, 44).

Likewise, in the same chapter, *Poetries of power*, the philosopher addresses the innate dimension of religion in the human brain. In this regard, he refers

to the theories of speculative neurologists such as Pascal Boyer and Michael Shermer. According to Sloterdijk (2023, 44), they describe an innate pre-programming of the human brain, also called the religious brain, that produces beliefs regarding the presence of forces, of “supernatural agents” (Boyer 2001, 16). Therefore, this sensitivity to transcendence is merely a natural faculty of the human brain to think of the existence of highly intelligent structures. The first intelligent conviction is that “it is surely that there are powers and forces in the world which are potent both within us and beyond us” (Sloterdijk 2023, 45). For this reason, the action of these forces refers to the fact that everything that happens is initially understood as inclination and fact, because “everything is alive, everything is populated by a host of impulses, «all things are full of gods»” (Sloterdijk 2023, 45). Part of this chapter consequently refers both to religion understood as imaginative capacity, hence poetry, from which the title *Poetries of power* derives, and to religion understood as the innate predisposition of the human-religious brain to create beliefs in the presence of supernatural forces acting as powers from “beyond”.

Chapter VIII, titled *The theopoetical difference*, can be understood as an explanatory note to *Poetries of power. The theopoetical difference*. Here, Sloterdijk exposes, explains and examines two stages of religious poetry: initial, cosmological poetry and secondary, ethical poetry. However, before explaining the theopoetic difference, the author argues that religion must be understood through poetry because:

From very ancient times, across the most widely divergent cultures, there have been poems that addressed themselves to divine things or to the gods – later also to the one God, or to God in general, with neither definite nor indefinite article. The earliest narratives of totems, ancestors, cultural heroes, gods, and primordial powers were based on poetry (2013, 55).

Therefore, the tendency for humans to address gods or God through poetry has existed since time immemorial, regardless of whether humans have addressed confessionally the one, singularized God, hence the definitely articulated God, or the common, polytheistic, indefinitely articulated divinity. The theopoetic difference, however, concerns the distinction between these poems through which people addressed God at different times. Thus, the theopoetic difference consists in the contrast between the initial, cosmological poetry and the secondary, ethical poetry. The latter was formulated, on the one hand, as an “ethicized” rewriting of the former and, on the other, as an ethical writing vying with pagan writings. The difference between these two types of poetry is therefore not a discursive difference, since both preserve the issue of religion, but an ideological difference.

Rewriting the original religious poetry as secondary-ethical poetry is exemplified by the author’s reference to the canonical text of Christianity,

namely the New Testament, of which he states that it is “the second version of a covenant which, in turn, refers to an earlier series of endowments already attested in writing: the covenant on Ararat, the covenant with Abraham, the covenant on Sinai” (2013, 56). Likewise, with regard to the ethical, hence secondary, religious poetry that appears to rival other writings: “Even the covenant of the people of Israel with their God was itself an ethicized second poetry of religion, in rivalrous contention with older «pagan» or «nature-religious» fables” (2013, 56).

Thus, Sloterdijk explains religion in relation to ethical poetry in the sense that within religion one must recognize an ethical poetry that touches all of life (2013, 56). By this statement the author refers to the fact that (religious) poetry is not created by rhyme or lyrical attitude, but by “the complete integration of the person within the rules and freedoms of existence under an ethico-poetic constitution” (2013, 56). Moreover, the philosopher states that, in their early days, the ethicized secondary poems were characterized by a totalizing tendency. On the basis of this characteristic, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* was received by the Protestant reformers, Luther and Calvin, as insufficiently totalitarian. Specifically, it promotes the problematic invention of Catholicism from the Middle Ages – the problem of purgatory and the three planes of Inferno-Purgatory-Paradise. Thus, as a product of this period, the *Divine Comedy* is insufficiently totalitarian. According to Calvin and Luther, Dante, by endorsing the Catholic view of an afterlife on three levels, “weakened the coercive pressure to repent” (Sloterdijk 2013, 57). However, Sloterdijk argues that the *Divine Comedy* is a theologically elaborated poetry of the secondary ethical type, one that shows “its lack of interest in cosmogonical questions of beginnings and origins and instead explicated in superhuman detail its complete absorption through the three states of ethically relevant last things: eternal hell, purifying hell, and paradise (2013, 57)”.

Therefore, the poetry of purgatory, the *Divine Comedy*, goes beyond the original realm of cosmology and moves into the realm of ethics. It could be argued that Dante’s poetry is not only an ethical-theological poetry, but also a teleological one, which promotes a performative discourse, necessary for the ultimate pursuits of man.

Beyond these differences, the problem of *theopoetics* is addressed at large by Sloterdijk in the second part of the book, especially in the chapters *Poetry of patient endurance*, *Poetry of exaggeration: religious virtuosos and their excesses* and *On the prose and poetry of the search*. How the heavens are made to speak in the author’s theopoetic approach in *Under the high heavens* remains a curiosity that can be alleviated by perusing this last part of the book.

Making the Heavens Speak appears as an element of innovation in the author’s own thought development. What is then so novel about Sloterdijk’s

book? The fact that poetry and religion are subjected to a process of *resemantization* through philosophy. Poetry is seen as a philosophical-theological discourse and is “pulled out” of its metaphorical clichés, thus becoming a religious discourse. For this reason, poetry is no longer the place where the poet pieces together the experiences that constitute his inner life, but the place where and through which heavens speak. In the same way, religion is wrenched from the grip of dogmatism and assumes the form of ethical-philosophical poetry. Therefore, in the philosopher’s conception, *making the heavens speak* is synonymous with communicating religion as poetry, for it is only through poetry, through language, that we are given access to the space “beyond”. *What exactly is poetry in religion, and how can religion be poetry from a philosophical point of view?* or *How can the heavens be made to speak?* are some of the questions that only Sloterdijk’s book can answer.

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