Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar

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Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar

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TH  A Theology of History (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963)
Introduction

Oleg Bychkov

Von Balthasar and the Place of Theological Aesthetics in Contemporary Thought

The present volume is a cross-section of theological aesthetics in its current state, as well as a tribute to Hans Urs von Balthasar’s contribution to this academic discipline. What constitutes theological aesthetics is difficult to define since “aesthetics” is itself a rather broad area, the exact contents of which are often bitterly contested. The issues and areas in modern aesthetics that are relevant to theological aesthetics, as will appear from the ensuing discussion, can be briefly described as follows. First of all, eighteenth-century theorists, building on some observations that date back as far as Plato and the Neoplatonic tradition, delimited aesthetics as a discipline that deals with those aspects of sense perception and natural emotional reactions (stemming from both natural and artificial objects) that have some cognitive and hence educational and moral functions, thus challenging the prerogative of conceptual reasoning in these areas. The subsequent tradition of German Idealist philosophy, extending to its twentieth-century successors represented by the phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions (e.g., Heidegger and Gadamer), particularly stressed the ability of aesthetic experience to reveal a certain kind of “truth” about reality. The Romantic tradition, in addition to that, stressed the moral potential of the arts and sensible perception of nature: thus in addition to being revelatory of reality, art and natural beauty can be transformative of one’s moral being. Both Romantic and Idealist aesthetics drew heavily on the ancient and, in particular, Platonic tradition.

Mainstream academic aesthetics, from the nineteenth century onwards, proceeded in the directions stemming from the idea that aesthetics deals with the “higher,” near-cognitive levels of sense perception and emotional reactions. Thus it examined what it is precisely about the nature of aesthetic and artistic form (either physical shape or, for example, the psychological pattern of a plot) that incites such perceptual and emotional reactions. (An offshoot of formalist aesthetics, starting with Gestalt psychologists, examined neuro-biological roots of aesthetic reaction to art and natural objects.) A byproduct of modern academic aesthetics of the “formalist” type is a view of aesthetics—which originated with Kant, but was by no means espoused by Kant to such an extent—as an “autonomous” field insulated from either metaphysics or ethics. Since aesthetic experience is signaled by a form of pleasure, analyzing the specific nature of aesthetic pleasure or delight is another important element of this direction in aesthetics. Standard modern academic aesthetics, following the model

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1 I am grateful to Frank Burch Brown for his ideas and suggestions regarding this part of the Introduction.
of aesthetic autonomy, characterizes this type of pleasure as “disinterested,” which goes well with the uninvolved (in their view) nature of aesthetic experience. Since one of the main areas of aesthetics has traditionally been literature and drama, an important area of modern aesthetics examines the way plot lines and dramatic action influence the audience. Already Aristotle in his Poetics—a perennial influence on this direction in aesthetics— noted that the effect of dramatic action, although some of it is initially “embedded” in the form-structure set up by the poet, must necessarily involve the spectator to complete the impression. The spectator is transformed by the experience, and his or her “knowledge” gained from the dramatic work has a participatory nature.

In sum, the three primary features of aesthetic experience that both emerge from modern aesthetic theories and are of key importance for contemporary theological aesthetics is that it can be revelatory, transformative, and participatory. Finally ‘aesthetic’ (as in ‘the aesthetic of downtown Paris,’ or ‘Aeschylus’ aesthetic’) is occasionally used in the sense of ‘style,’ ‘main stylistic or aesthetic principle,’ ‘main motif’ and so forth. For example, von Balthasar speaks of the ‘hymnic’ nature of pseudo-Dionysius’ ‘aesthetic.’

The situation with ‘theological aesthetics’ is no less complex, since, as will appear clearly from the present collection of essays, there is no agreed definition of the field, but instead a number of ways to approach and reflect on the instances of interaction between theology and aesthetic experience as described above. Von Balthasar, perhaps, presents the most systematic conceptualization of what constitutes theological aesthetics. Although his understanding of it is often contested, his way of delimiting the field, his personal preferences aside and with some modifications, still captures most of what is currently happening in this area. One direction in theological aesthetics is reflection on the cases when theology is done through the use of, or by an appeal to, the actual physical artistic media that are in themselves aesthetically attractive—for example, on the use of rhetoric in sermons, particular type of imagery, lighting and space in church buildings, or music during liturgical services. (One must note, however, that the area is not restricted to liturgical or specifically religious art.) The other direction, which is what von Balthasar himself calls ‘theological aesthetics,’ is when aesthetic insight, not necessarily from the fine arts but also from the natural world, plays an important role in building the very fabric of fundamental or systematic theology. In this case no actual physical art media need be involved, and instances of artistic or natural beauty are only used as examples, analogies and parallels to certain ways of doing theology. Theological aesthetics shows that in some way theology itself works like aesthetic experience, and its persuasiveness and power rests on the undeniable attractiveness of that which it proposes, just like in an experience of an aesthetic object. Such delimitation of the field of theological aesthetics can apply both in the cases when aesthetic experience is used strictly analogically (as in von Balthasar) and when religious experience is assumed (as in other contemporary thinkers) to have intrinsic aesthetic qualities (and vice versa). In either case one can use the example of aesthetic experience to demonstrate something about religious experience or a certain theological point. All essays that appear in this volume feature either one or both of these approaches.
The general import and place of theological aesthetics in contemporary thought, as well as the reasons for its conspicuous absence from the period immediately preceding the second part of the twentieth century, can be described as follows. Whether or not the authors themselves who write on the topic are fully aware of this, a surge in the interest in theological aesthetics can be understood as a response to the postmodern thrust to subvert the traditional conceptual framework of truth and value by attacking the claim to “truth” by rational discourse. On this view, the “truth” claims of rational discourse appear to have no more foundation than the convincingsness of well-constructed rhetoric, and the traditional ethical principles no more value than the aesthetic features of an artwork. Such a position allows thinkers like Nietzsche to assume the aesthetic point of view as the only possible one, indeed as the ultimate expression of the “will to power.” This led to a negative attitude to aesthetics in some theological circles, and some even declared that aesthetics was altogether bad for theology and religion. Theological aesthetics on the whole takes a different approach. By demonstrating an analogy, and in the case of some thinkers even an essential unity, between aesthetic and other types of experience, theological aesthetics attempts to show the reverse, namely, that the aesthetic is actually indicative of some sort of core “truth.” At its foundation, the source of all human experience is the same, and instead of reducing all traditional truths and ethics to aesthetics, one could just as well show how all aesthetics points at basic truths and ethical principles. Theological aesthetics can thus be seen as an attempt to arrive at, or to show how one arrives at, some fundamental principles by aesthetic means—by demonstrating the fundamental unity, or at the very least an analogy between aesthetic, cognitive, and ethical principles.

Another common trend opposed by theological aesthetics is the idea, developed in the nineteenth century, that aesthetics, even if it is not the only viable discipline, is at least an autonomous area independent of either ethics or metaphysics. The idea of the autonomy of aesthetics and its lack of integration with other areas, again, led to the absence of aesthetics from theology for a long period of time. Instead of echoing and continuing the early reaction in theological circles whereby aesthetics was banished from theology, theological aesthetics realizes that the position of aesthetic autonomy is damaging to both aesthetics and theology. Whereas disconnecting beauty from the true and the good means that aesthetics loses its roots as a philosophical discipline, banishing aesthetics from theology results in the loss of a vital area of human experience that has always been a way of connecting with the divine—and a most attractive and appealing way at that! By reintegrating the true, the good and the beautiful, theological aesthetics rediscovers the power of the aesthetic and attempts to reabsorb aesthetics based on the “engaged,” rather than autonomous, model for interpreting aesthetic experience.

Theological aesthetics also contributes to the discussion of theological method. The Protestant tradition has severed its ties with aesthetics for the reasons outlined above. According to von Balthasar, the situation with the Catholic tradition was different. Although it has formally preserved aesthetic concepts such as beauty, it has “eliminated aesthetics” in a different way: by eliminating all attempts to look for the form of revelation and replacing them instead with an attempt to make theology more “scientific” through the use of “historico-critical” methodology. Theological
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esthetics restores the balance in this area as well, through an alliance with contemporary hermeneutic theory, which, unlike the historico-critical “method,” sees the process of interpretation, in particular in theology, as creative, more akin to our aesthetic experience and interaction with artworks than to scientific research or “exact science.”

What is the role of von Balthasar’s project in the history of theological aesthetics? Von Balthasar, of course, did not invent the discipline, nor is he the only contemporary writer to address the topic. Nor is the study of theological aesthetics generally confined to Roman Catholic thought, but thrives outside of it, notably in the Reformed, but also the Lutheran and Anglican traditions. It is undeniable, however, that von Balthasar’s study has profoundly reinvigorated the discussion and left a lasting impression on scores of theologians and philosophers. Also, it would be difficult to find an equally extensive contemporary study of theological aesthetics in the Western tradition, and von Balthasar is certainly unique in his attempt to retrieve some foundational insights for his theological aesthetics from the Western tradition by engaging ancient and medieval texts at such length.

The foundation of von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics is his idea of the analogy between aesthetic experience (notably that of beauty) and revelation: made theologically possible through the predominant Catholic doctrine of the ‘analogy of being,’ that is, between created reality and God. The analogy is based on the observation—common in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetic theories—that aesthetic experience is always somehow revelatory: it reveals something about the hidden principles of reality. Being is not formless; it has the capacity to communicate its form, and humans, consequently, to perceive it. The most obvious and striking instance of such perception of form is precisely the aesthetic experience of beauty. Now if beauty is the revelation or radiance from the depth of being, then the revelation of the hidden God, including the Incarnation, will “itself form an analogy to that worldly beauty” (GL2, p. 11). Perceiving the form of beauty, then, becomes the first task of a theologian-aesthete.

It is one of the most remarkable features of von Balthasar’s approach, however, that instead of recreating this process anew, he prefers to turn to the interpretation of traditional texts, starting with ancient and medieval, in order to retrieve this foundational insight of theological aesthetics. It is precisely interpreting the tradition that allows von Balthasar to overcome the “aesthetic autonomy” of contemporary academic aesthetics and recover the original unity of the beautiful, the true and the good. The ancient and medieval insight that dates back to the pre-Socratics is that the nature of the world is divine, that the world is based on certain eternal principles, and that humans can directly perceive these principles, or the divine, that radiate from the depth of reality. It is this radiation of these eternal principles, and our ability to perceive them directly, that the ancients and medievals associated with the type of experience that we now call aesthetic (the beautiful, the sublime, and so on). The ancient notions to kalon (the excellent and beautiful) and to prepon (the fitting) capture precisely the mediating and revelatory character of the aesthetic, which is not an autonomous area but is simply an aspect of all other forms of human experience: the true, the good, or the divine. From Plato to the Stoics to Augustine, aesthetic experience is not the goal in itself but what leads one to the goal. Moreover,
it does not lead one by logical discourse, but directly, immediately, by revealing the real worth of something through the experience of inner delight (i.e., aesthetic experience), especially in the phenomenon of *to prepon*, the most conspicuous variation of *to kalon*.

It is this insight derived from traditional texts that becomes the main instrument of von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics and is later applied to discerning the form of revelation in the text of the Scriptures. If Christian religion is the most convincing, it is so precisely because it is also the most aesthetic. Its foundational insights are not derived by logic, nor simply accepted by blind faith, but can be directly, or “aesthetically” seen, both in Creation (as in his fundamental theology) or in the Scriptures (as in his systematics). The revelation of God is not formless. For example, von Balthasar shows how some essential features of the personality of Jesus emerge from the texts of the Gospels. The convincing nature of Jesus’ personality and our fascination with it are based precisely on the qualities of its aesthetic form: it is so natural and organic that it simply could not be otherwise.

Despite his emphasis on contemplative “seeing the form,” von Balthasar himself realizes that ultimately contemplation must lead not only to a realization of truth but also to transformative action. In fact, the “theo-drama” presented in the Scriptures already provided a model for all action and drama taking place in created reality. Hence a seamless transition from his theological aesthetics to theo-dramatics. Since dramatic principles have been traditionally in the purview of aesthetics, this aspect of von Balthasar’s thought, insofar as it involves aesthetic principles, must also be included in the discussion of his aesthetics, or of theological aesthetics in general. Unlike contemplative aesthetics, with its natural emphasis on visual forms, theo-dramatics also serves as a much stronger uniting point with other, especially Protestant, trends in theological aesthetics.

Unlike the Catholic tradition, Protestant theology has had reservations about the value of aesthetic experience in religion, especially in the area of the visual arts—for reasons that are both historical (which it shares with the Catholic tradition) and doctrinal, that have largely to do with tendencies internal to particular types of Protestant theology, for example, the iconoclasm of the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions. Apart from a few rare exceptions, aesthetics, and in particular the concept of beauty, has been neglected by Protestants—at least until recently. Von Balthasar contends that the Protestant tradition views God in such a way that we cannot touch or grasp him: everything is taken on faith and there is nothing to “see” (*GL*1, p. 47). (Protestants have, of course, placed considerable emphasis on the importance of “hearing” God’s word.) Von Balthasar attributes the cautious Protestant attitude towards beauty, even in Barth, to its tendency to consider the nature of beauty as an event rather than as a constant intrinsic quality that possesses some sort of regularity (*GL*1, p. 67). This attitude is supported by the idea of gratuity of grace and the rejection of the analogy of being by some Protestants.2 Even Karl Barth,

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who paid considerable attention to the beauty of God in *Church Dogmatics* II/1, who paid considerable attention to the beauty of God in *Church Dogmatics* II/1,\(^3\) acknowledges that the Reformation and Protestant orthodoxy completely ignored the aesthetic element and considered the concept of beauty as secular and “extremely dangerous” because it brings our contemplation of God suspiciously close to that of the world (*CD* II/1, p. 651). Barth’s contributions notwithstanding, there has been a surge of interest in aesthetics among Protestants; several prominent Protestant theologians have written on the subject, and presently the topic is being actively explored in Protestant circles.

The Protestant approach shares some common features with the Catholic, and thus with von Balthasar, thereby providing ground for dialogue. Barth, as already noted, insists on the importance of the concept of beauty. Indeed, the idea of glory, for Barth, is neither reducible to nor exhausted by the concept of “power:” to describe how God convinces and enlightens us one needs the concept of beauty (*CD* II/1, p. 650). Moreover, beauty for him still preserves the element of appearance and its ability to be seen immediately, and thus to reveal something insofar as it is linked to form (*CD* II/1, p. 654). Paul Tillich sees art as revealing the divine in a certain awesome insight, a view also shared by Frank Burch Brown.

Although “Protestant theological aesthetics” is not at this point a clearly definable school of thought, one can speak of some distinctive trends that set it apart from the Catholic, particularly Balthasarian, approaches. Perhaps, its main distinctive feature is the view that neither the divine nor revelation of the divine has any permanent or stable form, which means that one cannot build a theological aesthetics on any attempt to “uncover the form.” If one were to turn to aesthetic experience, one would have to rely on emotive and affective aspects of it, for example, on delight rather than beauty. One example from the Reformed tradition is Barth’s insistence on the importance of divine beauty in the Bible (*CD* II/1, pp. 653–4); his concept of beauty is different from the classic “appearance” model adopted by von Balthasar. According to Barth, (*CD* II/1, p. 653) beauty is mainly linked to the concepts of the “pleasant, desirable and enjoyable” (cf. *CD* II/1, p. 654). For Barth there cannot be an extended conceptual discussion of the aesthetic element in God: there is “something here which must be perceived rather than discussed ...” since “this insight depends too much on the presence of the necessary feeling ...” (*CD* II/1, p. 656). It is precisely because attraction and joy—characteristic features of the beautiful—constitute an “inalienable form of his glory” (*CD* II/1, p. 655) that the idea of the beautiful is indispensable for Barth, and God’s glory is so persuasive and convincing. Since beauty is not so much a matter of discussion but of feeling, one can see how a Protestant theologian would rather focus on a concrete analysis of experience of the arts in religion, instead of promoting a Balthasarian-style “theological aesthetics,” which is mostly conceptually and textually based.

Tillich’s discussion confirms this view for the Lutheran tradition. For Tillich, the style of art that is most appropriate for religion is expressionism, since it possesses the best ability to “break through reality” and achieve a manifestation of the ultimate.

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The most important feature of such art is not that it communicates some beautiful, harmonious and regular form, which is susceptible to quasi-conceptual explanation, but that it is ecstatic in nature. In other words, Tillich also puts an emphasis on sensibility, emotion, and feeling rather than on the intellect.

Although Nicholas Wolterstorff, just as Barth, maintains the position that art is strictly subsidiary, not central, to the acquisition of truth, he further contributes to shaping aesthetics in the Reformed tradition. Disallowing any claim to autonomy for aesthetics or indeed the claim that “perceptual contemplation” is the main function of art, he stresses rather the engaged nature of art, which not only allows for but actively promotes its effective interaction with Christian life. He also points out the importance of responsibility in creating art, thus wedging the use of the arts to ethical and religious considerations, thereby making art transformative. Wolterstorff’s emphasis on action and transformation provides further opportunities for a dialogue with the dramatic direction in Balthasarian aesthetics, in particular with those Catholic theologians (such as Alejandro García-Rivera) who explore elements of theo-dramatics in application to the contexts of suffering in regions of Latin America. This element of action, engagement, and transformation in Protestant aesthetics also explains keen interest on the part of some Protestant theologians (such as John W. de Gruchy, Sigurd Bergmann, or Tim Gorringe) in promoting “aesthetic justice” for the aesthetically deprived, as well as their involvement in eco-aesthetics that perceives our natural environment as part of our “area of action.”

An organic combination of the most prominent features of Protestant aesthetics, including its similarities with the Catholic tradition, is exhibited in the work of Frank Burch Brown. As with Tillich, and in agreement with the Catholic thinkers, he speaks of the ability of the arts to reveal, and thus connect us to the numinous and divine. Like Wolterstorff, he speaks of the transformative, and not only the revelatory role of the arts. Furthermore, like Barth, he emphasizes the emotional response to the arts, taking ineffable joy in the process. Continuing the emotive-affective trend in aesthetics, and thus combining the Protestant insights with those of German Romanticism, he particularly stresses the fact that humans are embodied beings and it is only the arts that are uniquely capable of speaking to the body or the “heart,” as well as to the “mind,” so as to engage the whole of the human being. Brown points out another prominent trend of Protestant aesthetics congruent with its emphasis on grace alone: the ability of the arts to raise awareness of the sinfulness, vulnerability, and suffering, unworthy state of humanity—in addition to revealing the heights of human experience in self-transcendence.

This latter trend in aesthetics especially resonates with theologians (of all denominations) working in the contexts of deprivation, despair, pain and suffering, where (as in Nietzsche!) all logical or ethical reasons and explanations ultimately fail and all that still remains intact and salvific in its attractiveness is aesthetic experience. Curiously, this ability of the arts to communicate the paradoxical, “glorious-miserable” nature of reality—quintessentially summarized in the event of the Cross, which is both beautiful and ugly—provides yet another point of convergence with some Catholic theologians, such as Viladesau, who promote “contrast theology” by way of the arts.
In brief, Protestant trends in theological aesthetics both add to, and have points of convergence with von Balthasar and the Roman Catholic tradition. In particular, all schools emphasize the engaged, rather than autonomous or disinterested, nature of aesthetics. In addition to the traditional contemplative traits, which make it revelatory, aesthetic experience often takes on the participatory and transformative character of drama. Its expressive-emotive nature is particularly conducive to transforming the human soul ethically and religiously.

Common Themes and Productive Tensions

The contents of the present volume reflect, to a certain extent, the field of theological aesthetics, both within the Balthasarian tradition and outside of it. The collection does not attempt to misrepresent the area by introducing too much polish and harmonization, and leaves it honestly messy. However, a perceptive ear will be able to hear some common voices, themes and motifs, which resonate across different traditions and from different contexts. Can we say, with von Balthasar, that they still “play from the same score,” although atonal and contemporary, which often appears discordant to a traditionally trained audience? Ultimately this will be left for the reader to judge. Nonetheless, a few brief observations about the essays that comprise this volume are in order.

The essays presented in this volume range from von Balthasar’s own efforts in aesthetics, to—professed or hidden—followers of von Balthasar, to his critics, to theologians working on aesthetics more or less independently of his thought. And yet this does not necessarily mean that they cannot be “harmonized” and accommodated within the general score of theological aesthetics. In fact, it is remarkable that in the end the picture of theological aesthetics—and, one could say, of aesthetics in general—that emerges from such a diverse collection of essays has some identifiable common features.

Most papers converge on and concur with the view that aesthetics is not an autonomous field, as it is often presented in contemporary academia, but an area that always interacts with, and serves other fields, such as ethics, cognitive theory, or theology. Wolterstorff’s essay builds a theoretical foundation for the dismantling of the “autonomy” of art and serves as a leitmotif for most of the other essays contained herein. When we deal with cases where theology or religion interacts with art or aesthetic experience we must move beyond the traditional narrative of “aesthetic autonomy” and the idea of “beauty for its own sake,” which is enjoyed in quiet contemplation. The obvious examples are liturgical and memorial uses of art, which are described in more detail in the essay by Alex García-Rivera who shows more concretely how aesthetic objects actually work “dramatically” in the sense of engaging people and doing something for them. “Aesthetic autonomy” does not account for such traditional engagements of art. Therefore Wolterstorff suggests moving beyond such a view of aesthetics to consider the practical, or dramatic, impact of art by examining particular social practices of art in their specific contexts.

Looking back at the tradition through Balthasarian-style retrievals of ancient and medieval texts shows that aesthetic experience historically has always been viewed
this way. For example, Plato in the *Republic* made a direct connection between the arts and the state of morals, and the Stoics based their cosmological arguments for the existence of the divine (later copied by Augustine) on aesthetic experiences of nature. In this volume the tradition of aesthetic retrievals is represented by Dan Tate’s essay which discusses Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Günther Pöltner’s work on beauty in Aquinas, and Mary Beth Ingham’s essay on aesthetic elements in Duns Scotus.

In Aristotle, the aesthetic experience of a dramatic action has revelatory qualities. It points to some inherent “truth” (or structure, pattern, law) of reality, which already moves one beyond the focus on the experience itself. According to Tate’s interpretation, Gadamer presents Aristotle’s *mythos* as a kind of substructure of reality reconstructed by the poet, and *mimesis* as the process of revealing (*Darstellung*) this substructure. One can add, from an analysis of Plato and the Stoics, that according to the ancient tradition the principles of *kalon* and *prepon* expressly indicate the manifest nature of this substructure or law. When this structure is revealed, either through contemplation or through a dramatic involvement of the spectator (the participatory aspect of art), it causes a response of joy (the emotive aspect) and becomes transformative, which makes art and aesthetic experience ethically, politically or religiously relevant, or, in Tate’s words, makes us “rethink art beyond aesthetics.”

Pöltner also sees an aesthetic understanding of the beautiful in the sense of aesthetic autonomy as a reduction. In his case, it is Aquinas’ thought that helps him retrieve a broader and fuller notion of the beautiful that has cognitive, ethical, and theological significance. (It is interesting how retrievals of Aquinas resonate through such diverse texts as, for example, Pöltner’s and Gorringe’s!) Ingham’s essay also presents aesthetic elements in Duns Scotus’ thought as functioning not autonomously but in the context of his soteriology. It is God’s response to an act of human love that acquires aesthetic qualities of pure delight: just as in ancient thought the human reaction of delight indicates the presence of truth or goodness in perceived reality.

In sum, ancient and medieval authors see the aesthetic—whether it is viewed as beauty, art, revelatory, participatory, transformative, emotive, etc.—as originating from the same source, that is, nature of reality, and pointing to the same source, or connecting us to and harmonizing us with this source. In this regard, ancient thought helps us understand various trends in modern aesthetics, including theological aesthetics, as complementary if not mutually illuminating and corrective.

After the recovery of the “engaged” model of aesthetics from ancient thought in twentieth-century philosophy (e.g., by Heidegger and Gadamer), the trend against aesthetic autonomy continues in present-day theological aesthetics. The essays by Francesca Aran Murphy and Ben Quash in this volume demonstrate this clearly for the case of von Balthasar himself. Murphy shows that even for von Balthasar aesthetics was not a goal *per se*, but a “gateway” to his theology, the central concept of which is love, not beauty, and the most important field of which is theo-dramatics. She stresses that it is the “idea of love” that “is behind all the key stages in von Balthasar’s theology.” Thus in his theology something comes through beauty, not as beauty. Something expressive, clear or appearing such as beauty immediately invites a response and answer, thus initiating a movement from aesthetic contemplation to a dramatics. The same movement is outlined by Quash (“contemplation ... necessarily issues into action”) who emphasizes a clear leaning towards dramatics and action.
Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar

in von Balthasar’s aesthetics (“aesthetics open out into dramatics”). He traces this feature of von Balthasar’s theology back to Ignatius, with his focus on practice. Drama best expresses the “character of the divine encounter with humanity;” thus it is the practical aspects of aesthetics and of truth, as well as their participatory nature, that are most important. Aesthetic contemplation ultimately leads to a dramatic revelation of truth as participatory.

Frank Burch Brown echoes the opinion that to view art and aesthetic experience as necessarily “autonomous” is misleading: if the aesthetic and the religious are often intrinsically intertwined, the criteria of “good art” should often coincide with, or at least take account of, the criteria of “good religion.” Again, aesthetics here expands into a broader area. Lee Barrett continues to press the same point for the Protestant tradition in general. Art and aesthetic experience ultimately fulfill a certain human need, thus preventing them from being viewed as purely autonomous.

Finally, the same view of aesthetics is confirmed by studies of specific issues. For example, Jim Fodor’s essay demonstrates how making certain theological points in biblical texts is inextricably linked to the literary and aesthetic form of the parable and the mode of its reception. Richard Viladesau speaks of the special sense of “beauty” in Christianity, which is not purely aesthetic, and shows how the arts are uniquely suited for developing a “contrast” theology of the Cross. An important argument against aesthetic autonomy is the inescapably contextual nature of aesthetic and artistic experience, which is involved with our social conditions and spaces in which we live: an idea conveyed in the essays by Sigurd Bergmann and Tim Gorringe, but also echoed by other authors such as Viladesau. Another central theme that both Bergmann and Gorringe explore is how the aesthetic, by virtue of being dependent on our cultural milieu, can also serve as an instrument of justice (which they call “aesthetic justice”), for example, if one considers our attitudes towards aesthetic criteria of other peoples, or the aesthetic quality of environments in which various groups of people live. Thus aesthetics, in the spirit of the Protestant tradition, becomes highly involved in human action, serving as an instrument of justice (and, ultimately, the work of God) through the use of the arts and an examination of aesthetic attitudes.

All contributions to the volume can also be seen in the context of von Balthasar’s work, a fact reflected in the name of the volume. Lee Barrett’s essay provides a conceptual framework for connecting other essays with reference to von Balthasar using a model of a constructive dialogue between von Balthasar and the Protestant tradition, thus immediately involving non-Balthasarian trends represented in this collection. Starting with a brief outline of fundamental features of von Balthasar’s own position, Barrett frames the discussion along the lines of potential “mutual appropriation” of useful elements by both sides to their respective benefit. This approach, first, opens a way to a more thorough examination of von Balthasar’s own aesthetics; second, calls for a constructive critique of both von Balthasar and other traditions; and, third, allows us to draw into conversation even those voices that do not stand in any direct relation with von Balthasar. The rest of the essays in this volume fall precisely into one or more of these three categories.

The essays by Murphy and Quash, which open the volume as a tribute to von Balthasar himself, both place his aesthetic thought within the grand scheme of his
theological project and challenge some assumptions about his theological aesthetics. Thus Murphy stresses the feature of theological aesthetics in von Balthasar that resonates across other traditions throughout this volume: aesthetics here is used for something else, in the case of von Balthasar serving as a “gateway to theology of love,” and is not cultivated for its own sake as an autonomous discipline, as it may appear. She also stresses a natural movement from aesthetics to dramatics in Balthasarian theology.

Quash further elaborates on the dramatic element of von Balthasar’s aesthetics, which can serve as an excellent departure point for a dialogue with other traditions. Western drama traditionally functioned as “illumination of existence;” a revelatory function of drama elaborated in detail in Tate’s discussion of Aristotle and the ancient tradition. Noting the revelatory nature of aesthetic experience is, of course, one of the common points across many traditions in theological aesthetics and many essays in this volume. The involvement of the spectator who is “caught up” in the dramatic action signals the participatory nature of dramatic truth: a key feature of aesthetic experience important for “theologies of action.” Another important point is that Jesus’ drama answered the “aesthetics of suffering” as expressed in the Mediterranean literary tradition. Accommodating suffering through dramatic action, in addition to contemplating the beautifully harmonious aesthetic form, draws into conversation many more traditions, as is exemplified, for example, by the essays of García-Rivera, Víladesau, and to some extent Bergmann and Gorringe. Finally, the idea that the Passion and the trinitarian drama can serve as the ‘aesthetic standard’ for all drama allows one to formulate and use the general principle that, vice versa, analyzing art and attitudes towards art can be a paradigm for doing theology, as is exemplified, for example, in Bergmann’s essay.

One must mention in passing that in addition to essays that discuss von Balthasar directly, there is a number of authors who use von Balthasar’s thought to frame their own ideas (for example, the idea of aesthetic analogy in Víladesau) or who have been influenced by him in their work (García-Rivera’s interest in dramatics, Pöltner’s retrieval of revelatory aspects of aesthetics from Aquinas).

Another group of essays is united around the idea of retrieving theological aesthetics from earlier traditions—ancient and medieval to more recent—which is the keystone of von Balthasar’s own work on theological aesthetics. Such essays thus can be seen—with or without explicit acknowledgment—as mirroring his efforts. Often such retrievals are creative, contain explicit or implicit criticism of von Balthasar’s achievements in this area—another uniting point—and supplement his own work. Thus Tate uses Gadamer’s discussion of Aristotle’s theory of drama to bring out new elements that complement von Balthasar’s analysis: interpreting Aristotle’s mythos as “structure” (Gebilde) and his mimesis as “revealing” (Darstellung). His analysis of Aristotle also helps to dismantle the model of “aesthetic autonomy” harmful to theological aesthetics. Pöltner follows in the tradition of von Balthasar in retrieving a broader notion of aesthetics from Aquinas. His analysis (which is backed up by his fundamental monograph on Aquinas’ aesthetics), again, expands von Balthasar’s discussion of Aquinas and works out in detail just how beauty in Thomas’ thought can be presented in modern quasi-Heideggerian terms: as the very moment of appearance of being, or as its revelation.
Ingham presents another example of creative retrieval of theological aesthetics from the thought of John Duns Scotus. Echoing indirectly Murphy’s observations on von Balthasar’s agapic emphasis in theological aesthetics, Ingham notes that Scotus’ soteriology is centered “within an aesthetic view founded on divine love ... and delight” and goes on to explore how God’s aesthetic response to the human act of love shapes Scotus’ theology. Thus she fills in some gaps in von Balthasar, to whom the texts of this medieval author were not readily accessible, and at the same time expands theological aesthetics beyond fundamental theology into soteriology.

Bernadette Waterman Ward goes beyond simple retrieval or implicit critique and provides significant correctives to von Balthasar’s interpretation of Hopkins. She builds some of her critique on revealing further fine features of Scotistic thought in Hopkins (thus linking up with Ingham’s work) and pointing out a variety of Scotistic elements of which von Balthasar was not (could not be) aware. An analysis of the notion of “formality” in Scotistic thought allows her to provide another important corrective to von Balthasar, who, according to her, tends to read Hopkins only in terms of the presupposition of sacramentalism and faith, while his texts can be read outside of those from a secular perspective.

A similar corrective to von Balthasar’s retrieval of Hopkins is performed by Fergus Kerr. Kerr, first of all, starts with a short outline of von Balthasar’s aesthetics, which, together with similar short outlines in some other essays, such as Barrett’s, complements the two opening essays on von Balthasar by Murphy and Quash. Kerr specifically addresses von Balthasar’s retrieval efforts aimed at the secular textual tradition. Just as Ward, Kerr provides some corrective critique of the way von Balthasar positioned and evaluated Hopkins, in particular his idea of Hopkins’ alienation and the role of the “English inheritance” in his contribution to the Catholic tradition.

In addition to the contexts of reanalyzing the tradition, correctives to von Balthasar’s approach can be introduced, directly or indirectly, by critiquing, utilizing, or adding on to the key notions and directions of his theological aesthetics. A great number of essays in this collection dedicated to this task are harmonized by providing echoes, counterpoints, and new melodic lines to the magnum opus of theological aesthetics.

The critique can start with the most basic feature of aesthetic experience that allows von Balthasar, as well as the whole tradition of European-Mediterranean thought before him, to use it in theology: its revelatory character. Barrett’s essay, again, takes the lead in pointing out that von Balthasar’s emphasis on contemplation more than on volition, speaking positively, can contribute much to the restoration of the “theology of glory” eliminated by the Protestant emphasis on the “theology of the Cross” which is focused rather on the scandal and paradox. At the same time, he might have overemphasized the role of awe, wonder, delight, and enchantment in Christian theology at the expense of attention to human neediness, dependence, need of forgiveness, etc., which are typical of the Protestant tradition. This observation opens up an opportunity for further dialogue with the Protestant tradition, as well as a way to a theological aesthetics that would accommodate the non-glorious, the ugly, and other aspects that are so typical of the recent developments in art and secular aesthetics. Theological aesthetics, according to Barrett, will benefit from
the Protestant emphasis on the role of the will and action, leading to a focus on the prophetic function of art that incites to action (as, for example, in Wolterstorff, but also in the trends that focus on theo-dramatics, and in contemporary “eco-theologies”).

An example of a constructive appropriation of von Balthasar’s emphasis on the revelatory aspect of aesthetic experience, which is combined with an emphasis on the active function of art in a community of faith, is García-Rivera’s interpretation of theological aesthetics as dealing with the “revelatory and unitive” capacity of art. Although he starts with the much-criticized concept of beauty, he steers away from aesthetic contemplation as the only way of perceiving this beauty. Interaction with the arts is engaged, active and participatory, sometimes even physical: more like in a drama. It is connected to people’s lives, personal narratives, social contexts, and has a transformative role: points that are brought up in a number of other essays in this collection.

One of the major areas of contention in debates about von Balthasar’s version of theological aesthetics is the idea of aesthetic analogy: another unifying point for a number of essays. Barrett notes that von Balthasar’s concept of aesthetic analogy results in his attention to the particular, to material forms, in perceiving reality as sacramental: all of which is impossible if God is understood as purely transcendent and reality as bearing no trace of God. Such an attitude to reality, of course, opens up either to the use of art in religion (such as illustrated, for example, in Viladesau’s essay), or even to ecological and environmental approaches to theology (such as in Bergmann and Gorringe) where physical reality itself (such as nature or buildings) is viewed as a way to God. At the same time, Barrett also points out that the dominance of “analogy” leads to the view of creatures only as useful for the purpose of providing an analogy, and having no value in themselves. As a result, aesthetic experience as such is, in fact, devalued and sacrificed to the religious: an issue indirectly addressed by Burch Brown’s essay.

George Pattison’s essay provides a further critique of von Balthasar’s aesthetic analogy—which is answered, or at least echoed, in several other essays. He focuses his critique on two main points. Speaking of the idea of analogy in general, he questions, first of all, how the Balthasarian concept of beauty, or beautiful and harmonious form—which, according to Pattison, constitutes the central point of his approach based on aesthetic analogy—can accommodate art that is not beautiful. Some modern art, Pattison notes, simply does not fit under the paradigm “form” or “beauty:” yet it “opens up worlds of breath-taking power.”

The second problem is outlined as follows. Even granted the validity of the analogy of beauty (“earthly beauty—divine glory”), there is no reason to assume that there will also be an analogy between the disciplines of aesthetics and theological aesthetics. Indeed, as pointed out earlier, aesthetics is in itself a vaguely defined discipline: could using it as an analogy to a theological approach actually obscure the picture, rather than clarify it? In addition to the general vagueness of the secular discipline of aesthetics, it has another serious flaw: indeed, Western Eurocentric aesthetics and aesthetic terminology isn’t even capable of mediating between cross-cultural differences (such as European and Asian notions of “beauty”). How can one expect aesthetics, then, to mediate between the human and the divine? In other
words, von Balthasar’s analogy does not account for the contextual nature of our encounters, on the one hand, with natural or artistic beauty, and, on the other hand, with God.

The first concern is at least partly answered in Viladesau’s essay. Indeed, von Balthasar simply speaks of the presence of form in nature and of its revelatory function. The exact nature of the form there is not necessarily defined, and although he does at times lean towards the Kantian-style “harmonious interplay” model, understanding form and beauty in von Balthasar as simply something harmonious—meaning “symmetrical” and excluding distortions and ugliness—is one-sided. After all, the “form” of Christ’s personality and life that appears from the Gospels does include the Cross! At the same time, no art, even most non-representational and wildly postmodern, is devoid of form and harmonization in the sense that it must be first perceived by our faculties in order to register a response: which, according to neuroscience (the fact already perceived by Augustine), means matching it to a certain Gestalt and fitting it (= harmonizing) with the perceptive neuron networks.

Viladesau’s essay, thus, is built around von Balthasar’s concept of aesthetic analogy and can be seen as an attempt to confirm von Balthasar’s intuition that aesthetic objects present a good analogy to the divine. He approaches the subject, though, from exactly the same perspective as Pattison: how can aesthetic analogy accommodate ugliness in art, and correspondingly the existence of suffering, evil, and ugliness in the world? In agreement with the general feeling that aesthetics in theology is not something autonomous that deals with “disinterested” attitudes, Viladesau points out that in theological aesthetics we speak of the special sense of “beauty:” beauty that is visible only in the light of faith. As the Christian faith includes the Passion and the Cross, the Christian sense of “beauty” must accommodate the “ugliness” of the Cross—which, according to him, transfers precisely into the ugly in art. Moreover, art is actually the best medium for expressing the paradox of the Cross, or “contrast theology.” The presence of both beauty and ugliness in the Cross does not lend itself to theoretical explanation—so an aesthetic analogy is actually the only thing that works! Viladesau illustrates his point with concrete artworks representing the Cross, in fact, already moving beyond von Balthasar’s theoretical effort towards concrete art criticism.

The second of Pattison’s concerns—namely, the inability of secular aesthetics to overcome contextual differences, and thus its general failure as a basis for any further analogies—is addressed by Bergmann’s contribution. Indeed, one of the most serious accusations often leveled against von Balthasar is that his universal “form,” or, more particularly, “Christ-form,” is too constant, rigid, Euro- and logocentric to account for the infinite variety of cultural differences both in aesthetics and in theology (even among various Christian theologies). Indeed, empirical data seems to suggest that even if one must speak of a “form” of revelation, or of any “aesthetic form,” this must be an ever-changing and contextual form that is not a constant. Whether von Balthasar’s theology can actually accommodate such a concept of form (for example, by viewing “the form” as existing only as a multitude of local and contextual forms) is perhaps a matter of further inquiry. The present question is different: does the fact that the form is contextual mean that we cannot use an analogy between aesthetic trends and attitudes, even taken cross-culturally (that is, something like “contextual
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aesthetics”), and theology? Bergmann, although he is probably the least Balthasarian of the group, clearly thinks we can. He argues his case by analyzing the theological question “how self is related to the strange” about the relation between humans and God using the model of attitudes to various contextual aesthetic practices of the “strange” peoples. The key in using such analogies is, perhaps, to avoid a narrow academic understanding of what is aesthetics and what is ‘aesthetic form.’

Some essays, however, go farther than simply to use, or to assert the validity of aesthetic analogy. For example, Jim Fodor’s essay, which examines the role of the aesthetic element in Scriptural texts, points out that the connection between aesthetics and theology is more intimate than just an analogy. In fact, theology often works through and in the form of aesthetic patterns, which are tightly integrated with its own fabric: the view shared by many contemporary theologians, such as David Tracy. Brown’s essay also takes the idea of aesthetic analogy a step further. He builds on his view that there is a more intimate connection between aesthetics and religion than just an analogy. In fact, he claims, there is an occasional convergence of goals between good art qua good art and religion. There is some intrinsic kinship between art and religion: they often strive after the same thing, and art can directly enhance certain things in religion.

In addition to counterpoints and harmonizations, some essays provide separate melodic lines that add to von Balthasar’s view of theological aesthetics without involving his work directly. Barrett’s essay, in addition to introducing the possibility of a dialogue between von Balthasar and traditions that are very different from his, also hints at one important direction in theological aesthetics that can significantly increase its credibility. As many other authors in this collection, such as Brown and Pattison, he questions an all-too-structured and unified view of aesthetics often espoused by von Balthasar and points out that both ‘aesthetics’ and other themes in theological aesthetics have different meanings and must be taken in various Christian contexts. The importance of context is specifically the subject of Bergmann’s essay and, in part, of Gorringe’s.

In the end, whatever the angle of a particular approach to theological aesthetics, all essays in the present collection address the three primary features of aesthetic experience—revelatory, transformative, and participatory—that are so central to von Balthasar’s own work. This harmonious chord that resonates through our at times discordant and strained movement through the field of theological aesthetics inspires some hope that the engagement between aesthetics and theology can at least potentially become a unified field of inquiry.

Looking Ahead: Future Avenues for Research

It is appropriate at this point to raise a question: where should the efforts of theologian-aestheticians be applied next? The present collection suggests several avenues for future research. One immediate direction is deepening our understanding of what von Balthasar himself really intended by his project of theological aesthetics. For example, one could follow Quash’s lead, where he queries whether von Balthasar actually has done enough, and whether his aesthetics could have been inflected
somewhat differently had he considered a more modern literary form, such as the novel, in addition to drama. Pattison suggests another intriguing “deconstructive” direction in Balthasarian studies: while on the surface von Balthasar uses the Western aesthetic tradition to “save theology,” could it be that he was, in fact, trying to save the Western (and specifically German) artistic-literary heritage by way of drawing in theology? Along with this goes further exploration of the legitimacy of von Balthasar’s retrieval effort: is it hermeneutically defensible and textually sustainable to retrieve “theological aesthetics” from pre-modern (and sometimes pre-Christian!) texts? A forthcoming monograph by the author of this essay attempts to move precisely in this direction.

A more general topic inspired by von Balthasar’s efforts is to explore in more detail the exact nature of the relationship between, on the one hand art and aesthetics, and on the other hand religion and theology. Thus Pattison simply thinks that von Balthasar’s untimely effort of building his grand edifice of “theological aesthetics” on a shaky foundation of insufficient data on the true nature of aesthetic experience, in fact, obscured present-time theological engagement with art. His main contention is that the present-day discipline of aesthetics simply has not sufficiently worked out its major conceptual issues and has not collected enough cross-cultural data to attempt such an ambitious project as the one thought out by von Balthasar. Thus, based on Pattison’s critique, it might be advisable for future theologian-aestheticians to “build up resources” in several areas of inquiry before attempting any further generalizations: first, by examining what exactly is the nature of aesthetic experience that allows its engagement with religion; second, by finding ways of accommodating “non-beautiful” art; third, by studying the plurality of aesthetic responses and engagements between art and religion in various contexts.

Brown’s essay opens up one of the possible directions for the first area. It is well known that the use of even very low-grade art in religion often does the job quite well. Does the quality of art, then, matter? This perennial question echoes the more general one about the value of education as such in religion and spirituality: if even the most ignorant and uneducated can attain beatitude, why be highly educated? Is there anything about the higher degrees of elaboration of one’s intellectual or artistic powers, in other words, that is helpful towards religion? García-Rivera proposes a different way of proceeding, by examining precisely the opposite; that is, how any art, even of a low quality, works in religion, through a type of engagement that is far from “disinterested” or “contemplative:” through direct physical contact, connecting with people’s lives and personal narratives.

Foreshadowing the exploration of the second area, Barrett suggests that, perhaps, “harmonious form” simply does not account for all aspects of life, where there is sometimes discord, scandal, and much disruption, conflict, anxiety, and suffering. All this calls for an art and aesthetic that can express these realities better: perhaps, for paradoxical or “ugly” art. Echoing this thought, Viladesau suggests, as another avenue, to examine how “contrast theology”—in particular the theology of the Cross—is done through the arts.

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Finally, a number of authors (including Wolterstorff, Viladesau, Brown, et al.) join Pattison in his call to explore more cultural contexts in which aesthetic or aesthetic-theological notions are used. Essays by Bergmann and Gorringe, perhaps, are most helpful in outlining future directions for examining contexts, including whole physical and aesthetic environments where peoples’ encounters with the divine take place. Contextual theological aesthetics as an instrument of empowerment and justice is certainly another productive direction explored by both of these authors.

In the end, of course, one can object that the collection raises more questions that it solves and only “scratches the surface” of the field. But isn’t this how von Balthasar himself prefaces his own work, which extends for many volumes? It would be a sad bunch of authors indeed, had they claimed that our aesthetic experience of divine beauty can be embraced in one book!
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PART I
The Legacy of von Balthasar
Section A
The Trilogy
Joseph Ratzinger notes that, although “Hans Urs von Balthasar built his magnum opus of theological aesthetics” on the “insight” that “Being overcome by the beauty of Christ is a more real, more profound knowledge than mere rational deduction,” nonetheless, “his fundamental approach, which is actually the essential theme of the whole work, has not been widely accepted. Of course, this is not only and not principally a problem for theology; rather, it is also a problem for pastoral ministry, which must arrange for people to encounter the beauty of faith.”

The fact that von Balthasar’s “fundamental approach” has yet to bear fruit is partly the responsibility of von Balthasarians themselves, since we have all too often separated his aesthetics from his theology as a whole. Over the past few decades, ‘theological aesthetics’ has earned a place at the table of what Francis Martin once called “the religious studies business.” Quite literally ‘earned’: a friend remarked to me that his Dean told him he liked him teaching theological aesthetics because it covered two niche markets. The point of this paper is to indicate that von Balthasar had no interest at all in theological aesthetics for its own sake. He was neither concerned about the relation between artefacts and theology, nor determined to give capital ‘B’ Beauty a special place in theology. His trilogy begins with aesthetics because that enabled him to make it evident that love is the very heart of both God and the world. Hans Urs von Balthasar was hardly a philistine. Although his grasp of the distinction between England and Scotland may not be all that it might have been, von Balthasar is a brilliant interpreter of the great nineteenth-century British authors like Gerard Manley Hopkins and George MacDonald. His love of Mozart is well known. French literary criticism would be the poorer without his study of Georges Bernanos, with its sidelights on Paul Claudel and Charles Péguy. His readings of Homer, the Greek tragedians and Virgil make the fifth volume of The Glory of the Lord especially rewarding, as his interpretations of modern theatre do for the first volume of the Theo-Drama. His reflections on Beauty have deepened and renewed a tradition of thought about aesthetics which runs from Plotinus through Aquinas and Bonaventure to Hegel. But, as this paper argues, this wealth of insight can be misleading if it is taken as a contribution to ‘theological aesthetics.’ For von Balthasar, aesthetic experience is a gateway to an agapic theology.

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1. An Historical Context for von Balthasar’s Work

There is a recipe for lemon cake which prescribes pronging the newly baked cake with a small fork, to make holes to pour the lemon juice and honey into. This tastes much nicer than lemon cake with lemon icing. Von Balthasar expects aesthetics to perforate theology, and not simply to ice it. What he is looking for is an overall perforation, so that the angle of beauty is present in however one approaches truth, goodness, and all else. He mentions three aspects of beauty dug up by modern Hellenophile aestheticians: appearance, or *epiphania*, production, or *poiesis*, and *charis*, or grace. Something is produced, it takes on a sensuous appearance to us, and its smile is the manifestation not merely of a charming Kore, but of divine grace. This aesthetic perforation cuts through von Balthasar’s trilogy, the theo-drama and theo-logic as much as *The Glory of the Lord*. It creates a structural analogy through which to grasp the quixotic content of the Christian creeds. Catholics from Augustine to Aquinas to the moderns have employed analogy as a way of speaking cogently about the Trinity. Von Balthasar is no different: his analogue is aesthetic.

A perforation is an angle on something, a way of framing a question. But in itself the structure is contentless: beauty is not the mixture which saturates the cake. Von Balthasar began his *Theo-Logic* by asking whether “love might not be the hidden ground underlying the transcendentals and their circumincessive relation.” In the 1940s, Karl Barth challenged von Balthasar to make Catholic theology speak about existence more existentially, that is, more Christocentrically. The last volumes of the *Theo-Logic*, written 30 years later affirm that “if the self-giving of the Father to the Son, and of both to the Spirit corresponds … to God’s intimate essence, this … can itself be … only love.” For von Balthasar, the ground of being is love. He turns aside from the debate between the (Catholic) defenders of the analogy of being and the (Barthian) proponents of an *analogia fidei* to speak of an analogy of love.

The opening pages of von Balthasar’s *Truth of the World*, published in 1947, enter the conversation between Neo-Scholasticism and the Nouvelle théologie, which was then in full spat. Von Balthasar’s introductory gambit, with remarks on the overlapping of nature and grace, and the impossibility of a real life separation between reason and faith, shows the hand of his teacher, Henri de Lubac. The book, which became the first volume of von Balthasar’s *Theo-Logic*, deprecates the totalizing ambitions of the human desire to know. The Neo-Thomism of the time was as much von Balthasar’s target as Hegel or German Idealism.

Such rationalistic versions of Thomism were disputed at the time by Etienne Gilson, who presented Thomas Aquinas as having created a Christian philosophy grounded in revealed knowledge of God. Gilson argued that Thomas’ metaphysics is realist because it is faith-based. In 1948, he published *L’être et l’essence* in which he contends that the separation of faith and reason in early modern Scholasticism lies behind Suarez’ rejection of the real distinction between essence and existence, which,
in turn, is interlocked with the shift away from realism in the conceptualisms of Leibniz, Kant and Hegel. The issue between Gilson and his opponents was whether, as the Neo-Scholastics had it, philosophy should be a separate rational foundation for theology, beginning from reason and moving on to faith, thus keeping philosophy and theology distinct, or, as Gilson argued, the place of philosophy is within theology, for starting from faith and moving thence to philosophy enables one to think more cogently, more persuasively and, above all, more realistically. His opinion was that, so far as reason keeps its distance from faith, it is bound away from reasonability and realism, and toward rationalism and conceptualism. Standing outside and against that argument was Barth, who deprecated the rationalist foundationalism of Neo-Scholastic Thomism, without proposing, as Gilson did, that faith makes us better and more realistic philosophers.

At the time, Gilson’s allies tended to be Augustinians, like de Lubac, rather than Thomists. More recently, with this ancient debate clearly in view, the ‘Bonaventurian’ Joseph Ratzinger weighed in against both the Neo-Thomist and the Barthian alternatives: “It is my view,” he wrote in Truth and Tolerance, “that the neoscholastic rationalism that was trying to reconstruct the praeambula fidei, the approach to faith, with pure rational certainty, by means of rational argument that was strictly independent of faith, has failed; and it cannot be otherwise for any such attempts to do that kind of thing. Karl Barth was right when he rejected philosophy as a basis for faith that was independent of faith itself; for in that case, our faith would in the end be based on changing philosophical theories. Yet Barth was mistaken in declaring faith on that account to be a sheer paradox, which can only ever exist contrary to reason and quite independent of it. By no means the least important practical function of faith is to offer healing for the reason as reason, not to overpower it or to remain outside it, but in fact to bring it to itself again.”

The Thomistic Gilson and the (on Ratzinger’s reading) Tertullianesque Barth have at least one thing in common, a focus on the unique existent. Barth’s Christocentrism comes down to an insistence that God’s action is particular, not general; Gilson’s existentialism comes down to an insistence upon the empirical existent whose reality precedes and supersedes all conceptual generalizations about capital ‘B’ Being.

In the one letter I have from him, von Balthasar stated that Gilson was his guide in interpreting Saint Thomas. He must have led him in much else, for the lineage of the conceptualist or ‘essentialist’ philosophers given in L’être et l’essence is expansively reproduced in the fifth volume of The Glory of the Lord. Truth of the World draws on beauty to open a case for the existential Thomist view of the priority of faith over reasoning, and for a de Lubacian omnipresence of grace.

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7 Balthasar, GL5, e.g., pp. 27–8.
Why Should Beginning from Beauty Help One See Theology is Founded in Faith?

The persistent negativity of early twentieth-century scholastic textbooks seems a probable source of von Balthasar’s comment that “Systems of thought that do nothing but polemically contrast their differences are dispiriting tokens of narrow-mindedness:” the alternative which he proposes to theological systems written against something is an aesthetic grounding in a “more encompassing totality.” Despite being avowedly ‘against’ every modern philosopher since Descartes, Neo-Scholasticism was itself weighted toward intellectualism or conceptualism by dint of the foundational value that it set on rationality. Neo-Scholasticism practically made rationality a criterion for reality, rather than an upshot of it. Von Balthasar counters this intellectualist or conceptualist bias by claiming that “Beauty is the aspect of truth that cannot be fit into any definition.”

Beauty gives truth its gravitational pull into reality because it doesn’t “fit” a logical schema. When we ask how things “signify” or mean, the analogy of the work of art is a barrier to an epistemology that translates individual existents into their general concepts, because an artistic gestalt is incommutably singular. As an incorrigibly unique and individual existent, it can’t be translated into a general concept, and then divorced from reality. Singular things produce images (or patterns of sense perception) that express something which von Balthasar calls “the whole.” What the image signifies is not another image or copy of itself, but something “unimaged:” if you ask “what makes an image signify,” you come down to its raw self-communication. Von Balthasar calls this “expression,” drawing on an aesthetic register to distinguish the image or “form of expression” from the power of expression. He is restating the “real distinction” between essence and existence in aesthetic terms. The “essence” would then be the intrinsic meaning of the art work, the “existence” its mysterious energy of expressiveness. The “whole” is being, and the “mysterious more” behind the expressive forms it creates is existence, giving “the urge to know” a “counterweight” which is “an indispensable component of the ethos of knowledge.” Knowledge is thus not merely the product of conforming our mind to a reality but a “gift:” “because of beauty,” von Balthasar says, “truth is always intrinsically a matter of grace. Something of this grace surrounds every truth insofar as it is an original disclosure of being. It is lacking to purely logical truth, which has been … siphoned off from being … And … because there is eternally more in the depths of being and truth than we have grasped, faith has to be an immanent property of all knowing.”

8 Balthasar, TL1, p. 187.
9 Ibid., p. 142.
10 Ibid., pp. 140–141.
11 Ibid., p. 140.
12 Ibid., p. 142.
13 Ibid., pp. 142, 191.
b. Evidence or Intuition?

Following the Augustinian de Lubac, von Balthasar aims to balance the claims of evidence, compilation and contemplation: the best way to “receive reality,” he says, is by a “reciprocal reflection” of “concept and intuition.”\textsuperscript{14} The paradigm for knowledge in \textit{Truth of the World} is language: but is von Balthasar thinking of “reading the world like a book,” or is he imagining knowledge as connecting up with the Author’s personal exuberance? One side of von Balthasar’s real distinction are the signs or expressive forms—the ‘essences.’ The other side—the “power of expression” or “mysterious more” or ‘Being’—is a sort of personal exuberance. Seen through an aesthetic model, and not just any ‘aesthetic model’ but the model of the relationship of Author to work, the existential Thomist stress on the real distinction comes home to roost in a Bonaventurian epistemology. For Bonaventure, the philosopher’s road map is a “global representation” of the divine, of which part is known, part believed, or in which reason cohabits with faith.\textsuperscript{15} For von Balthasar, personal exuberance englobes the evidence. Whereas words in a text can be conceived as following a static law from start to finish, a speaker’s force is dynamic and open-ended. Lexical meaning is closed and static, an “essence,” whereas speaker meaning is open—grasping it comes back to grasping what a particular person is communicating. So von Balthasar insists that “the prior condition about the existence of the rational” is confident trust.\textsuperscript{16} This emphasis on trust and being trustworthy is at odds with those of von Balthasar’s co-religionists who gave a purely intellectual rationale for rationality. That works where the object is logic, but where the object is a free person, “an element of faith and trust”\textsuperscript{17} is the condition of mutual communication. If the question, “what makes it expressive” has any mileage, that is owed to “‘faith in the genuineness of the ground’s expression.”\textsuperscript{18} The Bonaventurian holds that faith creates its own kind of knowledge, and such knowledge is less a piece-meal accumulation of bits of evidence and more an apperception or intuition.

2. Faith, Hope and Love

Thus, the opinion that those Neo-Scholastic versus de Lubacian debates are the jumping-off point for von Balthasar’s work has something going for it. But, to say that he makes beauty the gateway to systematic theology is incomplete. For the issue in those controversies was faith and reason. I was in a boutique in Edinburgh, and was brought to the unwilling confession that I was writing a book. So the shop-owner asked me what it is about. “The Trinity,” I muttered. “I know what that is,” she replied, “Faith, hope and charity.” Von Balthasar began composing his Trilogy

\textsuperscript{16} Balthasar, \textit{TD1}, p. 25.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 176.
\textsuperscript{18} Balthasar, \textit{TD2}, p. 25.
with *Truth of the World*, where the focus is *love*; next, he came out with *The Glory of the Lord*, where the issue is *faith*, to the extent that *aesthetics* concerns how theology sees within the light of faith; the *Theo-Drama* followed, with its slant toward eschatological *hope*; von Balthasar completed the circle with the remaining two volumes of the *Theo-Logic*, coming back to *love*. Having confronted “post-Christian Pneumatology” in *The Apocalypse of the German Soul*, von Balthasar wanted to outflank the secular millennialist eschatologies, with their dream of a “third age of the Spirit,” by imbuing the whole of theology with the quality traditionally given as the property of the Holy Spirit. So what makes the Trilogy hold together? For von Balthasar, according to Aidan Nichols, *perichoresis* is but another word for the “one divine nature,” and the ultimate focus of theology is the *shared divine essence* of love. Von Balthasar observes that “faith … means allowing love to have its way.” beauty is an analogous model for contemplating the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as love. In other words, von Balthasar shifts the terms of the debate from the alternatives of “faith first” versus “reason first” to include love. He goes beyond Gilson in not just giving priority to faith but in grounding that move in the prior one of interpreting existence as love.

3. Theological Synaesthesia: Aesthetic-Dramatic-Logic

Since the model is analogous, it is stretchy. Since it is aesthetic, it creates a theological synaesthesia, in which notions of truth and goodness unfold out of beauty.

a. Beauty: Making It Imaginable Doesn’t Mean Making it ‘Visible’ Evidence

Von Balthasar had a shrewd grasp of where a theologian cognizant of Biblical criticism should look for *evidence* of the Christological claims which Christianity makes. He notes, for instance, the significance of the absolute quality of the “I have come” and “I am sent” sayings in the Synoptics—an idea which has recently been independently developed by Simon Gathercole to indicate that the preexistence is not a prerogative of the Johannine Christ. Von Balthasar clearly thought that the faithful historian can find persuasive and realistic evidence for high Christology throughout the New Testament. One could also point to the significance of the category of the *witnesses* in the *Theo-Drama* and *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*—an idea which, again, he left to a Christian New Testament scholar,

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19 Balthasar’s PhD, completed in 1928 as *History of the Eschatological Problem in German literature*, was published between 1937 and 1939 as *The Apocalypse of the German Soul*.
Richard Bauckham, to expound at length on an historical level. Just as Gilson argued that a Christian philosopher could stand his ground as a public philosopher, so von Balthasar evidently thought a Christian historian, likewise beginning from faith, could find effective evidence for the claims of faith. At the same time, just as Gilson thought that the philosophies which declare their autonomy from faith for the sake of retaining their union card ultimately fail as philosophies, so von Balthasar rejected the idea that Biblical “evidentialism” can find grounds for its cause if it does not think faithfully. Von Balthasar did not imagine that, because we have to be somewhere in order to see anything, all we see is where we are: what faith sees is, precisely, the form of Christ. On the other hand, he also regarded the idea of a position from nowhere as not having especially good Christian credentials, since the authors of the Gospels themselves “know that their only chance of being objective is by being profoundly involved in the event they are describing. They exercise objectivity by giving witness before the Church and the world, handing on the drama of Jesus’s life.”

Thus, beauty as such has a poor evidential function in von Balthasar’s Christology. Like Kierkegaard, he considers that “the fundamental character of [Christ’s] life was its hiddenness.” This is the self-effacing Christ of Pasolini, not a heroically impressive Christ, for, von Balthasar says, tackling evidentialist Biblical criticism, “God takes on the form of a slave, … to set up the indirectness which alone can lead to the growth of loving confidence in the sinner.” Even in his miracles, the historical acts of Jesus are the sign or form of expression, not the “signifier”—the power of expression; “but a pointer to the one who is concealed, who is deciphering himself … in the symbols.” The trail of words leads the Word to the Cross, where silence falls. That image or “not-word” of a corpse “bestows form,” points to an “incomprehensible power … to bestow form.” Something is being made evident here, in the crucifixion, and this comes about through the transparent beauty of God, not as the beauty of God. “When the word falls silent, the true message is proclaimed loudly: the message of the heart of God, broken open.” The cry of desolation is Jesus’ last word: this does not separate him from the divine being, or break up the single operation of the persons of the Trinity because the efficacy of the atonement is ascribed to “the love of God the Father, who allows God the Son to go into the absolute obedience of … self-abandonment … and as the love of God the Son, who identifies himself out of love with us sinners (Heb 2:13), and thereby fulfils the will of the Father in free obedience.”

26 Ibid., p. 335.
27 Ibid., p. 81.
28 Ibid., p. 86.
29 Ibid., p. 207.
b. How Beauty Conditions Goodness: Theo-Drama

One can note the structure of poiesis, epiphania and charis in relation to goodness; as von Balthasar puts it in the Theo-Drama, “the precious form points to the ground and origin behind … . What emerges as self-evident at privileged moments—particularly in erotic and agapeic love—is … the fact that … the very uniqueness of the individual being causes the indivisible uniqueness of Being to shine forth with peculiar clarity.”30 In the action or drama of salvation history, “… the Son offers no technical copy … or static icon of the Father—it is in the boundless obedience of the Son that the boundless self-giving love of the Father ‘appears.’”31 In theological ethics, the shinningly expressive word invites a response. Charis is both grace and gratitude. When expression is interpreted as word it begins to require an answer. This is how, when human freedom meets up with the good, the sheer or transparent frame of aesthetics thickens into evidence.

Von Balthasar seeks to balance the Thomist accumulation of evidence and the Bonaventurian intuition. In the Theo-Drama, he observes that “In Thomas … the Augustinian yearning to … behold God appears … as the movement of finite freedom toward its formal object, the Good.”32 Goodness signifies a God who “is so free that he is able to create beings who are themselves free.”33 Von Balthasar interprets the standard of evidentialist apologetics, Romans 1:19, as the fact that the “finite mind” is “faced” “with an ultimate decision” from the start, a summons “to see the immanence of divine freedom … in its own, finite free being.”34 Likewise, in relation to the Christological evidence, “historical fact is the point of reference,” but there are no “overwhelming proofs,” but rather, an “ethically demanded perception of form.”35 As illustrated by Mel Gibson’s The Passion, “after the event of Christ’s Cross, man is presented with a choice: hearing the cry of dereliction, he must ‘discern’ either hidden love … or the meaningless void.”36 The norm or standard applied to this decision is the Son’s obedient response to the Father’s request that he “give tangible proof of the divine love for the world.”37


In the Glory, von Balthasar complains that Suarez had reduced the material world to a “passive,” “quantitative” mass—well before Descartes denoted it as res extensa.38 The call to discover truth in “secondary qualities” is an aesthetic one. Already in The Truth of the World, von Balthasar disparaged the current fashion for “critical realism,” on the ground that its “three degrees of knowledge” begins after abstraction from

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30 Balthasar, TD2, p. 22.
31 Balthasar, GL7, p. 283.
32 Balthasar, TD2, p. 239.
33 Ibid., p. 118.
34 Ibid., p. 241.
37 Ibid., p. 85.
38 Balthasar, GL5, p. 29.
He claims that colours, smells and sounds, “the pink and white display of … spring blossoms, its fragrance,” achieve their truth when they are re-produced in a subject’s senses: “a tree needs the sensorium as the space in which to unfurl itself.” The vocation of the knowing subject in relation to matter is to provide the space in which things can “be themselves.” In a manoeuvre comparable to Maritain’s idea that poetic knowledge of the concrete comes about through “creative intuition,” von Balthasar suggests that sensory perception is a “creative ‘divination’ by which the subject … so to say guesses the intelligible from the sensible clue.” Such intelligible ideas are unified by analogy to “absolute being.”

When he links the aesthetic model to personal knowledge, von Balthasar shows why the requirement to be charitable about others does not boil down to not being entirely truthful. As per known, truth is not just registered, but constructed or created by a knower. So there is a note of poiesis in our understanding of other people. We speak of people “fulfilling their potential:” to explain how they blossom by being known, von Balthasar comments that some people wait to be loved—to be known in love—to become themselves. It would be as foolhardy to imagine that other people are our constructions as it would be to try to know them down to their nanobites. Knowledge of others requires respect for their distance, not prying into their corners. And, “even if a lover were to imagine that he truly knew his beloved’s essence, he would still daily renew his thanks to the beloved for the sheer wonder of his existence.” With the note of charis, grace or gratitude in place, we can say that when one achieves knowledge of another our “ideal image” reflects the fact that its truth per existing is mysterious or “veiled.” Rather than swallowing, digesting and spitting them out, we create a “sacred space” for them to “shelter” in. This requires that my knowing is not a “judgement,” but an act of love: in Bonaventurian form, von Balthasar claims that our ability to make an ideal image of another entails that God makes an “archetypal productive act of ‘knowing’” of each person, which contains “not only the judging gaze of justice, but also the loving gaze of mercy.” In things or objects, the truth of appearance happens automatically or spontaneously: but a free being has to decide to be themselves, or to upfront their genuine attitudes, opinions or feelings. Truth has the volitional dynamism which mediaeval theologians ascribed to the Holy Spirit, or love. We have it for the sake of communicating it: existing in dialogue, the meaning of truth is self-giving.

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39 That is, of course, the same complaint made by Etienne Gilson in *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, translated by Mark A. Wauck (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1939/1986).
40 Balthasar, TL1, pp. 63–6.
41 Ibid., pp. 72–4.
42 Balthasar, TL1, p. 114: ‘Many wait only for someone to love them in order to become who they always could have been from the beginning.’
43 Ibid., p. 107.
44 Ibid., p. 209.
45 Ibid., p. 78.
46 Ibid., p. 172.
The theme of the first volume of the *Theo-Logic* is that truth is grounded in love: it’s tempting to conjecture that, reflecting on this amorous epistemology, the author realized that the most perspicuous aspect of his argument was aesthetic, and so put that book aside to begin planning, in the 1950s, *The Glory of the Lord.*47 By the time he began rounding off the *Theo-Logic*, in the late 1970s, the transcendentals of beauty, goodness and truth had achieved a synaesthetic statement of God’s *self-expression*. Bonaventure’s philosophy was an “expressionism,” with Christ the Archetype at its “perspectival centre.”48 For the Christology of the second volume of *Theo-Logic*, Christ “‘represents the entire Trinitarian love in the form of expression.’”49 Being aesthetically expressive is the special modality of the Son, which is why he is eternally ‘primed’ for Incarnation.49 In this monotheistic Trinitarianism, God is expressive not just because he is an Artist, but because he is love.

4. The Aesthetic Inflection on the Trinity

A certain negative kind of theological customs officer feels that von Balthasar knows too much about God: they would like to restrict his lawless inclination to *imagine* the Trinity. One aspect of his theological style which offends both equivocalist theologians and analytic systematicians is von Balthasar’s smuggling pictures into the borders of the Uncreated, disguising the contraband behind the theory of ‘hyper-analogates’ in God to space and selflessness. Does one have to be Orthodox to find the Andrei Rublev touch in von Balthasar’s comment in the Pneumatology volume of the *Theo-Logic* that the Holy Spirit is breathed by Father and Son in “‘surprise’”? In this aesthetic model, the Spirit’s originating relation relates him to “freedom,” or “unpredictability;” as the communication of love between Father and Son, the Spirit is the “giving of a Gift;” the Holy Spirit is the “hypostatization” or personalization of the ‘gift’ character of the whole Trinity, the “sheer exuberance” of the “always more” which is God.50

The exuberance of artistic Incarnation is “completed through a subjective crossing of the boundary that transforms the act of ‘being laid hold of’ into an act of enthused ‘taking up.’”51 This human uptake of theosis reflects its created counterpart: the

47 The seven volumes of Balthasar’s *Herrlichkeit* were published between 1961 and 1969: it’s difficult to imagine that he didn’t at least *initiate* his research into this immense project before, say 1959, but simply wrote a volume a year from 1961 to 1969. And, given the way the *Herrlichkeit* feeds naturally into the *Theo-Drama*, it seems likely that von Balthasar cogitated the Trilogy to some extent in advance – again, requiring that he began it by the mid-1950s would suggest, therefore, that some of the research, planning, and even writing probably took place during the years at Basel.


49 Aidan Nichols, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

50 *Ibid*.

imago Trinitatis is “the love between human persons.” The danger which Thomists sometimes sense in the Bonaventurian idea of divine poiesis as ‘expression’ is that it can de-realize the products, making created reality a set of ‘special effects’ of the divine being, not having its own different reality. Von Balthasar tackles this by analysing creative being as love, and vice-versa, creative love as being. Is a person loved in his own different reality or in the love originating from his partner? Von Balthasar replies, “he is loved in the act of the one who loves him, who affirms him as he is in himself and, at the same time, as the one who is constituted this person through this act—precisely as this particular beloved person who exists in this way. The act with which God loves us and … draws near to us, affirming us and at the same time bringing us into being by his own action, is his Son.”

5. The Integration of Theology in Love

It is evidently not possible to show in the space of a short paper how the idea of love is behind all of the key stages in von Balthasar’s theology. Suppose that, for the sake of brevity, we may telescope the tasks of theology into showing that God exists, giving a cogent account of Trinity and Incarnation, and detailing the relations of Scripture, Sacraments and Church, it is not difficult to indicate that von Balthasar integrates all of these in the idea of love.

a. Argument for the Existence of God

He compresses Thomas’ five ways into a four-step argument, beginning from the child’s “experience of being sheltered,” which shows that my own ‘self’ is grounded in a “graciously open space;” this sense of the “real distinction” is confirmed by the intuition that Being is more than all of the selves which participate in it; but, the playful freedom of Being itself, the fact that Being is more than a creative ‘natura naturans’ automatically producing natural forms hints at an ontological differentiation within existence: and so, the “groundless ground” of Being is God. Just as Exodus’ “I am that I am” lies behind Thomas’ five ways, so the Johannine “God is love” is the creative revealed knowledge behind von Balthasar’s argument, which concludes: “If He creates the world without constraint and imparts to it … something of the manner of his freedom … and if this bestowing of freedom deserves no name but love: then from what other ground can God ‘be’ than ‘from love’?”

b. Analogy of Being

Catholics traditionally make Trinitarian theology ‘cogent’ by using analogies; post-Barthian Catholics are well advised to focus the analogy in Christ. And so von Balthasar states that,

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52 Ibid., p. 409.
53 Ibid., pp. 400–401.
55 Ibid., p. 636.
The central concern of a theological aesthetics must be the correspondence between obedience and love, between self-emptying into hiddenness and being raised up into manifestness …; for in this way theological aesthetics would be based … on the perfect proportion which Christ, through his obedience, has established … between heaven and earth and between the will of the Father in heaven and his own will on earth, a proportion which is … shown forth in the interpretative vindication by the Father, the Spirit, and the Church. The centre … of a doctrine concerning what is beautiful would then lie in this equilibrium, brought about through creative obedience, between God and the world and … between the … archetype (God) and the creaturely image and likeness (man); the theologically beautiful would itself include both the theological truth … and hence also the goodness (which lies in the justification of God in man and of man in God). Such an aesthetics would be explicitly christocentric.56

In ‘perceiving’ this analogate, correspondence or proportion, one catches sight of the divine nature: “in all this indirectness, the seeing is direct, because in everything that the Son is … there is seen directly the … love of the Father, for the Son and for the world. … In the one who makes space, … one can see what fills him: the love of the Father. And the act of making space can itself be seen as love for the Father.”57

c. Scripture, Sacraments, Church

This self-evidencing or “self-attestation” is recorded in the Scriptures. So why should reading the Scriptures, in faith and yet outside the Church which produced them lead rapidly to the analytic dismemberment of the Old Testament, Gospels and epistles into texts? Was it because taking the texts outside of tradition de-personalized them? Did the effort to read the text outside tradition inevitably lead to a focus on lexical meaning at the expense of personal, speaker meaning? Von Balthasar’s “Ariadne’s thread” out of the labyrinth of competing Scriptural words, his benchmark for what “unifies the different points of view,” is the exuberance of the Holy Spirit, the objective “momentum of God’s love to the Church.” The Church composes the Scriptures “as the spontaneous expression of its experience of the in-breaking of absolute love.”58 The last, Pneumatological volume of the Theo-Logic claims that “the Father’s love, [is] given to the world in his Son and ‘poured into our hearts’ through the gift of love in the Spirit.” This is how the Holy Spirit is “shown to be the given Interpreter of the divine Gift (which the Father gives us with the Son); and since the gift of the Son was itself already a revelation of love, the Spirit’s interpretation can only operate by leading us into love.”59

d. Trinity, Incarnation

Von Balthasar uses the aesthetic imagination to expand the analogy of being into an analogy of love, in which even the creaturely “real distinction” has its “hyper-
analogical” counterpart in God. Von Balthasar imagined the “potentiality of created ‘forms’” to Being as “passivity:” and this becomes the receptiveness of the divine persons to being “given” their “properties” by the other Persons: the otherness of the Persons of the Trinity comes about through the Father’s openness or passivity to receiving his character from the Son, the Son’s willingness to be Son, and the Spirit’s openness to being the “giving of the Gift.” The three hypostases are what they receive; what they are is the divine essence. It is thus “the ‘selflessness’ of the divine persons, as of pure relations in the love within the Godhead” which is “the basis of everything,” in von Balthasar’s ‘aesthetic’ theology.

60 Ibid., pp. 226–8.
Chapter 2

Hans Urs von Balthasar’s ‘Theatre of the World’: The Aesthetic of a Dramatics

Ben Quash

Introduction

Many essays in this collection are inspired by Hans Urs von Balthasar’s work, and the fact that he had not only a command of the historical wealth of Christian thought, but also a profound knowledge of (and sympathy for) philosophy, music, art, and literature from every age of Western civilization. He made it his task to trace all these in their relationship to the living form of Jesus Christ, who (in von Balthasar’s view) is the true subject of history, and who in-forms all created being.

Von Balthasar is therefore a theologian who combines both astonishing comprehensiveness with—as Francesca Murphy has shown in her chapter—passionate, devoted attention to the particular. To manage to be both is a rare thing in our age (von Balthasar’s Protestant friend and fellow Swiss, Karl Barth, being one of the few others who accomplishes it), which is perhaps why Aidan Nichols turns to make comparisons with figures from earlier epochs: von Balthasar, he says, combined ‘the mind of Thomas with the heart of Augustine, and all in the spirit of Ignatius’. In this chapter, I want to home in on the third of those identifications: the identification of von Balthasar with ‘the spirit of Ignatius’. My aim in doing this is to show how an Ignatian spirit impels the move from aesthetics to dramatics, which has such structuring importance for von Balthasar’s masterwork. In key respects, Ignatius’ conception of Christian mission is premised on a vision of the world as a theatre for action, onto which the Christian actor must step after careful, prayerful meditation on his or her role. Contemplation, in other words, necessarily issues into action. Aesthetics opens out into dramatics. In the light of this, I want to look at what the ‘aesthetic’ of von Balthasar’s dramatics primarily is, and, in concluding, to raise a question about the extent to which it is fit for purpose as it seeks to speak to other dramatic visions in the modern West.

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2 Speaking at the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain, September, 1997.
The Ignatian Legacy

It is easy to be overwhelmed by the sheer multiplicity of the sources of von Balthasar’s thought, but there are some thinkers who are more than mere sources for him: they exert a genuinely shaping influence. Ignatius was one of these. Indeed in some respects his influence seems to have been startlingly immediate, for even after von Balthasar’s painful departure from the Society of Jesus, his life’s work in company with the mystic Adrienne von Speyr3 was guided, as they tell us, by the intensely experienced presence and intervention of the saint. Ignatius’ vision of a kind of dynamic Christian Bildung (personal growth or schooling in the context of a ‘culture’ of the spirit which is both contemplative and active) affected not only the way that von Balthasar prayed, but it also influenced the way he evaluated other thinkers (especially those in the German philosophical tradition) and finally also drove his fascination with drama as a consummate way of expressing the intersubjective, ongoing character of the divine encounter with humanity (that being the true subject matter of theology). And that is one of the most significant gifts von Balthasar has made to theology in our time. Von Balthasar was never a man for whom theology and ‘spirituality’ (that is the Christian life of prayerful contemplation and activity in the community of the Church) could be separated. One can only do theology properly ‘on one’s knees’, he argued. To trace the indebtedness of von Balthasar’s theology to the cadences and themes of Ignatian spirituality is to show that this interpenetration of spirituality and thought can be real and fruitful.

In his Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius succeeded in creating a work which is a genre of its own. It is not a scholastic text, nor is it straightforwardly a spiritual treatise: it is, as Philip Caraman puts it, ‘a manual with the practical purpose of helping a man to save his soul and find his place in the divine plan. Even in its final revision in 1541 it is ... not a book to be read but a guide to be translated into practice’.

For von Balthasar, whose scholastic training left him frustrated and angry, and who had almost nothing but fierce criticism for the Prometheus self-assertion of modern philosophical thought, Ignatius’ concentration on ‘practice’ was immensely important. It was to fuel his conviction that the discovery of truth is consequent upon participation in the world: a world whose being we do not command or compel, but which ‘gives itself’ to us and only thus initiates our response. In other words, he was a critic of modernity’s obsession with epistemological issues (‘our’

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3 Adrienne von Speyr was a medical doctor whom von Balthasar met shortly after beginning his chaplaincy work in Basel in the 1940s. Under his direction she was admitted into the Roman Catholic Church, having been brought up as a Protestant, and was until her death the recipient of many visions and other exceptional graces. Von Balthasar and she maintained a very close relationship, and together founded the Johannes-gemeinschaft – an order of ‘secular institutes’. He was convinced that their respective missions were inseparable, and her visions had a deep influence on his theology. He made it his concern to have her experiences recognized in the wider Church, and published a great quantity of her writings, as well as transcriptions of their conversations. The best introduction to Adrienne is his book First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr, translated by Antje Lawry and Sr Sergia Englund (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1981).

activity of *gaining* knowledge). Rather, he insisted that the necessary conditions for the right operation of reason (reason being our faculty for the appropriation of truth) are beauty and drama (as things which have a kind of priority to our knowing endeavours). This is one of the main reasons why his great theological trilogy begins with an aesthetics, moves to a dramatics, and only then treats *Theo-Logic* (and in doing so reverses the order of the Kantian project, which moves from *pure reason*—the ‘true’—to *practical reason*—the ‘good’—and only then to *judgement*, in the context of which aesthetics is treated). There cannot be reflection on the truth of the Christian revelation until one is a player in its midst—living it out and *partaking* of it in committed action, and this is something that happens only when revelation elicits the necessary *desire* to partake.

The intellectual work of the theologian is thus no exception to what is a more general truth about all Christian vocational activity. Theology is done not outside or above the drama of Christian living; it is part of the drama, and von Balthasar’s writings try to express this. He is ‘concerned with expounding the word of God, which is as much a word of life as a word of truth’.

His heroes are the great teachers of the Church who were not the victims of a false separation between knowledge and life: rather they were complete personalities: what they taught they lived with such directness, so naively, we might say, that the subsequent separation of theology and spirituality was quite unknown to them. It would not only be idle but contrary to the very conceptions of the Fathers to attempt to divide their works into those dealing with doctrine and those concerned with the Christian life (spirituality).

Ignatius is for von Balthasar just such a ‘complete personality’—in continuity with the Fathers of the early Church. It is that same quality of ‘naivety’ which entrances von Balthasar, and from which he seeks to learn in reaction to the self-assertive rationality of the Enlightenment and its sciences of knowing. Ignatius exquisitely represents the readiness to receive: that active receptivity, or availability, to God which is in von Balthasar’s view the defining feature of sanctity. Ignatius preserves the perpetual openness that is the only proper response to a God who is ‘ever greater’. Ignatius understands the polarity which (via Erich Przywara) permanently animates von Balthasar’s theology also: the tension between love and fear, intimacy and distance, likeness and unlikeness. And yet, along with this very developed emphasis on the individual and his or her experience (the ‘lyric’ strain of Ignatius, which von Balthasar acknowledges in *Theo-Drama*),

Ignatius is a believer in the authoritative operation of the Spirit in the structures and institutions of the Church. Here, too, in key ways, he is von Balthasar’s tutor.

Von Balthasar, writing in volume I of *Theo-Drama*, states that the essential subject matter of drama is ‘human acts, intervening in [a pre-existing] constellation of roles’ where they then seek to exercise ‘a creatively transforming influence’. In his theodramatics, the pre-existing ‘constellation’ of roles is understood as God-given; God has created a world of particular agents and these agents have manifold tasks and influences. To borrow an image favoured by R.G. Collingwood, this created world

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7 Balthasar, *TD1*, p. 256.
is like a ‘saturate solution’, which means that in the realm of history we delude ourselves if we think that our agency is untrammelled; that ‘people are free to plan their own actions as they think fit and execute their plans, each doing what he set out to do and each assuming full responsibility for the consequences, captain of his soul and all that’:

A healthy man knows that the empty space in front of him, which he proposes to fill up with activities for which he accordingly now begins making plans, will be very far from empty by the time he steps into it. It will be crowded with other people all pursuing activities of their own. Even now it is not as empty as it looks. It is filled with a saturate solution of activity, on the point of beginning to crystallize out. There will be no room left for his own activity, unless he can so design this that it will fit into the interstices of the rest.⁸ (my emphasis)

And in von Balthasar’s terms for an individual to have ‘a creatively transforming influence’ in this environment requires the assistance of God’s grace, to personalize (in Collingwood’s terms to ‘crystallize’) the human creature as an agent, and help her to find her proper location in the constellation. This is the task of ‘finding one’s place in the divine plan’ (see Caraman above)—or ‘fitting into the interstices’—which Ignatian spirituality is designed to assist each individual to do.

Von Balthasar’s deep attraction to the Ignatian model of being personalized and made valuable in relation to the larger pattern of God’s purposes feeds his fundamental conception that Christian existence is enacted on a ‘world stage’—that Christian action, if it is undertaken in obedience to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, will be both deeply particular and also universally valid. Expressed in other words, the world stage for von Balthasar is a total environment of action, which in its entirety is sustained by the divine Giver, and in its particularity is shaped in its myriad movements and activity by the divine Spirit. And at the centre of the concrete relations played out on the world stage, there is a defining figure to whom all these movements and all this activity must eventually be related—and this is the figure of the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ.

Here we see the underlying trinitarianism of von Balthasar’s theodramatic vision. In what follows, I aim to show how von Balthasar’s dramatic sensibility is innately informed by this trinitarian structure—and always in an Ignatian spirit. This will lead us to a culminating consideration of von Balthasar’s view of the triduum—Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday—as the point at which the trinitarian ‘super-drama’ is most clearly discernible. This super-drama is the drama by which all other-worldly dramas are judged; it offers, we might say, an ‘aesthetic standard’ for the evaluation of all drama before and since. How von Balthasar deploys that standard, and whether it is successful as a theological strategy, will concern us in the conclusion to this essay.

The Drama of Encountering the Ever-Greater God

Father

Von Balthasar was, like Barth, a theological realist. He maintained that the reality of God precedes (and is independent of) all human knowing—hence his assaults on those brands of mysticism which suggest the identity of divine and human in the depths of the human subject, and their issue in Idealism and Romanticism of various kinds. It could be said that the whole of *The Glory of the Lord*—and in particular the opening volume, and the volumes on the history of metaphysics (IV and V)—are an exercise in critical realism.

The spirit of Ignatius is strong here, as we know from Ribadeneyra’s recollections:

In the presence of myself and many others [Ignatius] once said that, as far as he could judge, he could no longer live at all ... unless there was something which did not come from himself and which *could not* come from himself, but which could only come from God?9

Von Balthasar’s theology strives to evoke the awesome and sovereign reality of a God who far exceeds our every conception of him. This is a God of ever-greater dissimilarity (*maior dissimilitudo*):

Everything that [the human being] and the world is bears traces of God, but, in the end, it never manifests him. There is a certain similarity, but it dissolves in an ever-greater dissimilarity. Everything points to God, but he is the Wholly Other, the Unknown ... There is a *via affirmativa*, but it issues in the *via negativa*, in which we know and reverence God more profoundly, because we set aside all statements about him that do not describe him as he is. There cannot really be a third course, at all events not as a kind of synthesis of the two, in which knowledge by analogy—similarity in even greater dissimilarity—may be surpassed. It will be either the expression of the creature’s continued aspirations, ever unsatisfied, or else of the fact that God has revealed himself in a degree far beyond the possibilities of nature.10

To understand von Balthasar’s attitude to the Christian life, it is absolutely essential to appreciate this twofold emphasis—this polarity. If it becomes an intellectual commitment, that is because it already has its roots in the heart and in the spirit of the former Jesuit. The ‘definition’ of the *maior dissimilitudo* (classically in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215) appeals so much to von Balthasar, and has such prominence in his theology, because it expresses what he knows to be true of life before God: that love is caught up in ever-increasing awe (or fear); that human aspiration (the *via affirmativa*) has to be ‘overtaken’ (usually unexpectedly) by a divine grace from above which is quite ‘beyond the possibilities of nature’; yet that on the other hand

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(and this is the other pole) the finite and the concrete are not annulled or destroyed by this grace (this ‘dissimilarity’), but preserved in it—contrary to some of the suggestions of the German mystics and the religions of the East.

Von Balthasar and Ignatius are united in their articulation of this polarity. Indeed, as Hugo Rahner puts it, Ignatius is virtually ‘the sacred icon of what the Fourth Lateran Council defined’. Ignatius was a man seized and possessed by God, Rahner goes on, and because his whole being was possessed in this way, ‘he learned to respect and preserve his reverent sense of distance from all that is of God’.11 Were we, with Erich Przywara, to use the terminology of another time, we would call both the experience of Ignatius and the way he articulated it ‘dialectical’: the dialectic is that of the *analogia entis*, the analogy of being, in which God simultaneously bestows and withdraws from our creaturely being, calling us ever onwards into his mystery in all our activities of believing, hoping and loving, and whenever we contemplate the existing things of the world.

So the sovereignty of this God is exercised in making space for creatures to be energized as actors—to be drawn forth from themselves in awe and in love. This sets the great frame for the world theatre—its most fundamental conditions.

*Spirit*

This strong account of the transcendent otherness-in-intimacy of the Creator sits alongside a sensitivity to the concretizing work of the Holy Spirit, who moves in all the currents of thought and strivings for meaning that belong to the human spirit in its various contexts. It should be clear now just how concerned von Balthasar’s theology is to delineate God’s ‘supra-form’ in a way that respects worldly forms and allows them their own relative integrity. Christian perception does not abstract from the concrete. We are material beings. For this reason von Balthasar’s theology holds the *maior dissimilitudo* alongside a close and passionate attention to actual things: the lives of saints; paintings; symphonies; literary plays and the mechanics of staging them. This, too, is an Ignatian sensitivity. Ribadeneyra recalls:

> We often saw how even the smallest things could make his spirit soar upwards to God, who even in the smallest things is Greatest. At the sight of a little plant, a leaf, a flower or a fruit, an insignificant worm or a tiny animal Ignatius could soar free above the heavens...

Ignatius was fascinated by the smallest and most insignificant of things—finding God in them even when they seemed practically peripheral to the created world. Ignatius saw their place in the whole differently, because he saw them *de arriba* (‘from above’). Now most of the particulars that von Balthasar attended to reflect rather a developed taste for high culture (worms were not quite his style) but there is no questioning his desire to cast them in a new light—the *glorious* light ‘from above’. If the prayer of the Society of Jesus is as Jerome de Nadal described it, then it is von Balthasar’s prayer too:

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It is possible, in virtue of a special gift of grace and higher illumination, to attain to a consideration and contemplation of God in all things which are less than he or, in this selfsame light, to move upwards to ever higher and clearer truths, sensing with interior sweetness that the divine power is yet greater still ... It is a still higher gift when God bestows a grace and a most sublime illumination in which the supreme truths are all united together in one single embracing vision—and those who have experienced this feel that in this illumination they see and contemplate all else in the Lord.13

There is a unity here between the striving for the Ever-Greater, which is the creature’s orientation to the Source of his being, and the heightened attention to actual existents, which comes from life in the Spirit. And, as we have already noted, the Spirit is the power that moves to fit the individual believer (as an ‘actual existent’ who exercises freedom) to the larger constellation of active-receptive creatures who in their relation to God are the dramatis personae of the divine drama. The Spirit, in von Balthasar’s terms, is the like ‘Director’ of the theo-drama. The Spirit tempers the initiatives and idiosyncrasies of each individual believer to the larger whole—and this is why it is so important for von Balthasar (as for Ignatius) to give a robust account of the unity between ‘subjective’ experiences of the Spirit (in personal illumination and guidance) and ‘objective’ ones (in Church authority, spiritual direction and the ordained ministry).

A person needs to be trained in order to make the sort of dramatic choices that properly arise from ‘the fullness of the contemplation of the life of the Lord’. The Holy Spirit is this ‘trainer’, working to a significant extent through the channels of ecclesial life and habit. The individual believer is to accept the Spirit’s liberating discipline. For von Balthasar, Ignatius’ Spiritual Exercises show the one thing needful in this respect—they show it so well, in fact, that he regards them as ‘the practical school of holiness for all the orders’ and not just the Jesuits. What they offer a schooling in is ‘indiferencia’: indifference, which is to say that disposability which is humbly ready to serve the Lord as his ‘handmaid’. This is the highest example of an attitude which modulates through every period of history, from the apatheia of the Hellenistic world and the early Church Fathers, to Benedictine and Franciscan humility, to the purgation and abandonment of the Rhineland mystics, and then in the modern guises of the Schillerian ‘middle state’ of the artist, and the indifference of Hegel’s ‘first class’ (who exemplify the way that individual freedoms in the context of the state can become the medium of a far greater collective possibility in the drama of the Spirit: uniting subjective wills and objective structures in a life lived freely and corporately). Every age has had its insights about how the human creature is to find its true value. But the place where these insights receive their clear and archetypal expression is in the attitude of Mary—for von Balthasar, the holder of the most significant mission of all in the theo-drama. And her secret is her willingness to let the Spirit in—to be shaped in her mission by the simultaneously particularizing and universalizing work of the Spirit.

What issues from the contemplative encounter with the awesome God who is simultaneously *aliud* and *non aliud*, and from openness to the Spirit in the mode of *indiferencia*? The issue is a kind of Ignatian dramatics, for which von Balthasar is perhaps the most powerful modern advocate. The dialectic we have already looked at (the dialectic of the analogy of being) generates a dynamism at the heart of creation (a dynamism played out in history) which von Balthasar argues is only adequately construed as a divine-human *drama*. All of a sudden, revelation is demonstrated not to be a mere set of historical events, but a present ferment. All of a sudden it becomes apparent that one can have no real idea of the ‘truth’ of this revelation until one is caught up in it, relinquishing one’s claim to neutrality. ‘The saints’, as von Balthasar observes, ‘have always been on guard against such an attitude, and immersed themselves in the actual events of revelation.’

There could hardly be a better description of the *Spiritual Exercises* than this: an ‘immersion’ in revelation. Here again we have a firm indication that von Balthasar’s dramatics are in a vital way *Ignatian* dramatics. Von Balthasar’s *theo-dramatics* turn on ‘the mystery of the home-coming of one’s own freedom to the freedom of God’ which arises from this immersion. The missions that flow from such immersion animate and fructify the Church. They accomplish that ‘participation’ in God where personhood is not swallowed up but enhanced and honoured. This makes perfect sense to a man schooled in the *Exercises*, which are a propaedeutic to mission (and therefore also to drama), and which are geared wholly to bringing the individual face to face with her eternal destiny and calling. The *Exercises* are, if nothing else, designed to generate dramatic Christian life by negotiating and surpassing epic (the ‘normativity’ of the Gospel narratives) and lyric (my interpretative freedom) components alike. In George Schner’s words, ‘Making the narrative present through the integration of it by the work of creative imagination into “my” time and space perpetuates the story’s life.’ The individual who has really become a theological person by the reception of a mission will enter the drama. She will not want ‘to stop listening, not for a single moment, to what is being revealed, as though the content of revelation were an event long since concluded, over and done with, something there to be examined and probed like any other object of science’. Rather she will sit ‘with Mary ... at the feet of Jesus’.

This reference to sitting at the feet of Jesus, meanwhile, is our clue to understanding the crucial role of the incarnate one in von Balthasar’s conception of how the *theo-drama* works, and this brings us to a consideration of that person of

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the Trinity we have yet to treat in the present context. Von Balthasar’s pneumatology has shown us that even though we may recognize the fragmentariness of creaturely experience these fragments can be re-ordered by the Spirit in order to make them part of ‘world theatre’. It is not meant to be our task to get ‘behind’ the things of sense. They can be displayed in such a way that they are all shown to be mutually interrelated, all having their origin in God. But there is more to be said than this notion of ‘interrelation’ allows. God’s revelation is incarnate, so there is a concrete point of reference to be acknowledged in the midst of these interrelations. The order of the fragments is disclosed as having a true centre to it: the form of Christ. Christ, as we acknowledged in the introduction to this essay, is the true subject of history, who in-forms all created being. He gives definition to the multiplicity of creatures, not just by their relations to each other but by their common relation to him, for he is the one in and for whom all things were created.

In the particularity of Christ, there is within history the basis of an ‘acting area’. The world theatre needs a stage, and a stage needs definition. It has to be delimited—or delineated—in certain ways, which is not necessarily to imply that there is a limit on those who can be invited to play their part on it. For von Balthasar, the specificity of the acting area is not first and foremost spatially conceived, though it is highly concrete. The specificity of the acting area is personal. It is the space of relations established by Jesus Christ—who as the active, risen one is able to encounter and dramatically engage any number of his fellow human beings in the context of the world drama. All are invited to respond to him, and to interact with him. He is the unavoidable provocation to which each one of us must at some point or another react, and thereby take a stand which defines us in the wider constellation shaped around Christ by the Spirit.

Jesus Christ is therefore for von Balthasar the concretissimum ens. He stands within history as the form of forms: the material outline of divine beauty, goodness and truth from which other forms derive their own capacity to signify and be beautiful. To be seen as such, he must of course be illuminated by the light of the full revelation of the Trinity in and through him: his life must be seen as ‘meaning more’ than a merely human life. But this light of revelation does not eclipse his particular form, it confirms it: it shows the form in its full significance and beauty. His form exists in such a way that it can meet us on our own terms—with the ‘manifest’ quality of a lived history: uttered words, a cry, a death, and a commission.

**Von Balthasar’s Dramatic Aesthetic**

Now we have brought to light in all its essential dimensions the trinitarian underpinning of the theo-drama as von Balthasar conceives it. And it is in the Trinity that we have the basis of what we might call the theo-drama’s ‘aesthetic’. Francesca Murphy has shown that this aesthetic is in the end profoundly to do with the display of the divine love. Von Balthasar’s doctrine of God argues that the divine Trinity is animated by a radical, dispossessive love in which the persons fully donate and fully receive themselves from one another in a circling ‘simultaneity’ of kenotic exchange.
What this leads von Balthasar to do is to measure all actual instances of worldly form (including especially, in the *Theo-Drama*, literary form) in the light of this divine kenotic aesthetic. His aim here is to reinforce the fact that the divine revelation of God’s trinitarian life is in some way the ‘answer’ to all the world’s questions. Philosophy, ethics, art and all the other trajectories of human enquiry and self-expression inevitably—inasmuch as they circle around the fundamental questions of the world’s being, its origin and end—unfold within the comprehensive fact of the divine creative work undertaken through the Son and shaped by the Spirit. They all unfold within the theatre of the world, in which the play is ultimately about nothing more or less than the love of God in Christ.

This has massive effects on the way he organizes the vast amount of material available to him in his openness to the worlds of thought (ancient and modern) that lie beyond the recognized boundaries of the Church and its traditions of thought and teaching. Von Balthasar’s explicit concern—and it is commendable in some regards—is to respect the irreducible diversity of all human explorations of beauty, truth and goodness. But his theology requires him to hold fast to the belief that, even if they do not know it themselves, all these shapes must have some relationship to the Christ-form, which is the defining fulcrum of the world stage.

In specific relation to drama, we see this conviction in the story von Balthasar tells of the Western literary tradition, particularly in its use of the stage. He sees the theatre as offering at every point of its history (even if negatively, for example in the ‘theatre of the absurd’) an ‘illumination of existence’, and he uses volume one of *Theo-Drama* to highlight common themes or problematics highlighted by drama. These include, critically, (i) the struggle for the good; (ii) the confrontation with finitude (above all in the form of death); and (iii) the tension between the freedom of the individual agent and the demands of some external ‘authority’ (whether derived from the plot, the character’s social context, or some combination of the two: this von Balthasar describes as the ‘allotted role’ with which every character is faced, and which she may sometimes have to resist). Von Balthasar considers all these allegedly perennial themes and problematics of drama to be indicators of a basic orientation by human beings to an ultimate horizon of meaning. The temporal-spatial finitude of the performed (or authored) play always raises the question of ‘nonfinite meaning’, even if only implicitly, because it always invites a judgement not merely partial but final—though that final judgement may be elusive or deferred for as long as time runs its course.

In fact, time does not need to run its course ‘to the last syllable’ for such a judgement to be made manifest. Von Balthasar’s firm conviction is that the Passion of Christ is the summit of both the question posed by and the response to all this human dramatic exploration. He hears in the cry of dereliction from the cross—in the middle of history—a cry which does not in any way diminish all the particular cries of particular human beings in particular situations in the rest of human history. It is a cry in solidarity with them. It is therefore in non-competitive but sympathetic relationship with all the cries registered and mirrored in literary dramas, which themselves respond to and honour the actual suffering of human beings in their

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real, lived lives, as they press (i) for justice, (ii) against the final word which death seems to pronounce on their strivings, and (iii) for some reconciliation between the individual imperatives which drive them and their surrounding context. Yet as the cry of the incarnate Son of God Jesus’ utterance is also a ‘super-cry’, in the context of a ‘super-drama’ which can claim to incorporate all the dramas of human life. Like the many cries of the suffering in history (and incorporating them in some way), the cry of Jesus from the cross is hurled outwards as a challenge—a call for some sort of answering judgement from a watching adjudicator who may or may not respond. The key thing for von Balthasar is that this cry—in which all others in their particularity are incorporated—is answered. The dark horizon lights up. The silent adjudicator speaks. And the word uttered by the divine Judge is one of vindication of Christ’s act of obedient and freely accepted self-sacrifice. In responding in this way, von Balthasar feels able to say that all other cries can in principle hope to be answered too. The ‘shape’ of an answer has been disclosed which is in some sense transferable to other contexts, especially in the degree to which those contexts pose the question in terms that bear comparison with Christ’s own posing of the question.

Retrospectively, von Balthasar then reads the literary tradition looking for any posing of the question of existence that the Passion and resurrection of Christ will most naturally answer. He begins, in other words, to develop an aesthetic of suffering in which certain shapes of suffering—certain cries—will be privileged over certain other shapes. He tells the story of the West’s dramatic literature in a way that is governed by its search for models of Christ-likeness. So, for instance, in the evolution of ancient Greek drama—culminating in Euripides—he discerns advancing prototypes of ‘christoform’ self-sacrifice in the degree to which the fate of characters is embraced and willed by the characters themselves. He does this, as we have noted before, because he believes in the fact that there is only one world theatre, and therefore, in the end, only one play. It is thus that von Balthasar can argue, for example, that a certain glory is perceptible in Euripides’ vision:

From the beginning of the Peloponnesian War the motif of a sacrificial death for community, city and people comes to the fore but not exclusively so. It is frequently initiated by the late archaic thought that the gods demand a human sacrifice, whether for the expiation of guilt (Iphigenia in Aulis) or for the gaining of a favour (Heracleidae, Phoenissae) or as an institutionalised ritual (Iphigenia in Tauris, in which even the poet himself questions the reasons, as we have seen). But there is also the death for love, which is inspired not by a god but by personal love, and is either offered (by Pylades in Orestes) or carried out (Evadne in The Suppliant Women, Laomedea in the lost Protesilaus).

Everywhere it is freedom that is decisive, which appears in its most sublime form where the sacrificial death is first imposed as a necessity by gods or men. Thus the oracle in the Heraclidae demands the slaughter of a prince’s daughter, Macaria offers herself and underlines that her death is a free one: ‘This life is willingly yielded’ ...

For von Balthasar, seeing ‘the dramatic transformation of a sacrifice imposed by external necessity into one which is inwardly accepted’ is like ‘emerging from a dark

cave into the light of day, returning to the freedom and beauty of existence. It is here without doubt that the moment of glory lies for Euripides ..."20

His capacity to sustain this exercise is impressive. It enables him to rehearse again what we have already observed is a particularly Ignatian sensibility—an endorsement of the free-willed acceptance of suffering because of a belief that by such acceptance all suffering is appropriated and transformed. Free-willed acceptance makes an offering of what would otherwise seem merely to be blind fate. This corresponds to Ignatius’ own experience of being seized and possessed by God, and his turning of that divine initiative into an active receptivity, or availability. This radical, perpetual openness is the only proper response to God, in both Ignatian and Balthasarian terms.

A serious question remains here, and that is whether von Balthasar has really set himself the toughest challenges he could have done in seeking to engage the heritage of Western literature with the ‘super-drama’ of Christ. He wants to show that the Christian story is a match for anything that can be thrown at it—and in the two respects we have outlined: first, that it will not seem trivial or naive in comparison with the darkest points of human experience as registered in the literary record of the West; and second, that its abdication of a sufficient answer to all human suffering in the form of the resurrection will carry weight to a corresponding degree. In other words, and to reiterate, this means that the cry of Christ at the christological high-point of all drama (the Passion) must have the ring of a real cry—as real as any cry any human has uttered. And it means that the promise of God’s vindicating answer in the resurrection will have the power to offer hope to any cry, whatever the magnitude of the suffering it expresses.

The ‘aesthetic’ this may or may not succeed in exemplifying is one in which the measure of all beauty is mutual and radically self-emptying love—modulated christologically in obedience, availability for mission, and a disposition of praise and thanksgiving even in terrible adversity. This radical love as shown in the life and death of the Son is beautified further by being met by the answering love of the Father. This is the dramatic aesthetic discerned by Ignatius, and von Balthasar makes a worthy and creative custodian of it. For von Balthasar, it is the key to a truthfully critical attitude to the activity of the world theatre, and an essential means of evaluating what appears on its stage.

A provocative question one might leave on the table is this. Has von Balthasar made it too easy on himself by mining only drama from the literary tradition as his raw material for illuminating the human condition in its most extreme dimensions? What would have happened had he engaged in as serious and sustained a way with the modern novel, for example, in which the complex embeddedness of human characters in their interrelations and in the midst of all the exigencies of time finds a uniquely involved and layered literary expression?21 Stage dramas have their best exemplars in pre-modern or early-modern contexts. As Hegel has suggested, after Shakespeare drama wanes in its ability to do justice to the full multi-dimensionality

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21 I am grateful for a conversation with Kevin Taylor in the University of Cambridge which helped to clarify this point.
of human life in its social and historical context—it becomes ‘romantic’ or ‘private’ in its range of concern. The novel, meanwhile, appears in the ascendant—especially in the peculiarly historically-sensitive Anglo-Saxon context where the ‘realistic novel’ has its home. But von Balthasar does not treat the novel at length. How might his commendable instincts to show the relevance of the world-reconciling drama of Jesus Christ to all human situations (through an aggiornamento-inspired engagement with the West’s many literary displays of the great questions of human life) have been managed had he looked hard at the novel? His aesthetic might have been put through a new set of paces if he had.
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Section B
Retrieving the Past
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In *Truth and Method* Gadamer considers tragedy and the tragic to be “exemplary of aesthetic being.”¹ I intend to develop this claim along several complementary lines. First, I will argue that tragedy and the tragic provide Gadamer with a decisive counter-example by which to expose the reduction of “aesthetic being” under the purview of the “aesthetic consciousness.” Initially, I highlight the critical import of tragedy and the tragic by showing how they serve to challenge the presumptive universality of the aesthetic consciousness and the supposed self-evidence of the aesthetic dimension it supports. This challenge turns on the retrieval of art’s claim to truth. In tragedy Gadamer finds “a unique manifestation of truth”² that belies the contemporary condition of “aesthetic alienation” in which, according to Jay Bernstein, art finds itself “having lost or been deprived of the power to speak the truth.”³ Tragedy and the tragic are “exemplary” for Gadamer precisely because they resist appropriation by the aesthetic consciousness and thereby transcend the aesthetic dimension wherein art is divorced from truth. The truth that addresses us in tragedy makes a claim upon us as spectators such that we are drawn into an event of being that takes place in the work of art. Due to its claim to truth tragedy cannot be adequately conceived as an aesthetic phenomenon.

Further, I show that Gadamer’s understanding of art’s claim to truth is developed with deliberate reference to tragedy and the tragic. In fact, I argue that his hermeneutic ontology of the work of art is, in crucial respects, an appropriation of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy. The central sections of this essay therefore offer a

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³ J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 4. According to Bernstein’s usage, the term ‘aesthetic alienation’ ‘denominates art’s alienation from truth which is caused by art’s becoming aesthetical …’
reconstruction of Gadamer’s reading of the *Poetics*. Above all, his retrieval involves a re-interpretation of the mimetic dimension of the tragic work of art. For Gadamer, this does not consist in “imitation,” at least not if that is conceived as the reproduction of an original. Instead he understands *mimesis* as a presentation (*Darstellung*) in which something comes to presence so that it may be known and recognized in its true being. Aristotle, however, ties *mimesis* to both *mythos* and *katharsis*. On the one hand, *mimesis* requires the *mythos* or plot by which the narrated events are unified into a meaningful whole. Gadamer also holds that mimetic presentation involves a structure or configuration (*Gebilde*) by which it acquires the unity and ideality proper to the work of art. He thus retrieves the correlation of *Darstellung* and *Gebilde* from the association of *mimesis* with *mythos* in Aristotle’s account. On the other hand, Aristotle holds that the *telos* of tragedy consists in the *katharsis* of the tragic emotions. Responding in pity and fear, the spectator takes part in the tragedy by enabling the tragic truth of the depicted events to be presented and recognized as such. But the *katharsis* also involves a recognition of who we are that marks a transforming moment of self-knowledge. Gadamer retrieves this too, holding that recognition and self-recognition characterize the spectator’s engagement in all art and not just tragedy.

Finally, I indicate how Gadamer’s hermeneutic understanding of the work of art emerges from his interpretation of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy. For Gadamer, the spectator’s participation is considered essential to the being of the work. Responsive to the work and its claim to truth, the spectator belongs to the work of art. For this reason the role assigned to the spectator in Aristotle’s definition of tragedy becomes pivotal to Gadamer’s appropriation. Hermeneutically conceived, the work does not truly exist apart from this participation; it only “is” in its enactment. The work of art is now understood as an event of being in which a presentation takes place. Thus Gadamer’s interpretation of the *Poetics* associates *mimesis* with the presentation that takes place in the work of art. What takes place is a “happening of truth” (“*Wahrheitsgeschehen*”) that only occurs where the spectator actively takes part in the presentation of the work. Claimed by the work, one undergoes a genuine experience that does not leave the participant unchanged. The experience of art therefore involves the spectator in a claim to truth that is at once mimetic and cathartic, revelatory and transformative. For Gadamer, these characteristics are exhibited by the tragic artwork in an exemplary way. Insofar as it serves to “legitimate the knowledge of truth that occurs in the experience of art,” tragedy transcends the aesthetic. Gadamer’s interpretation of the *Poetics* thus appropriates Aristotle’s theory of tragedy for a hermeneutic ontology of the work of art.

I

In Gadamer’s estimation it is necessary to go beyond the dominant aesthetic concept of art and question the self-evidence of its supposed autonomy. “As soon as the concept of art took on those features to which we have become accustomed and
the work of art began to stand on its own, divorced from its original context of life, only then did art become simply ‘art’ in the ‘museum without walls’ of Malraux.’’

Art becomes “art” when it is conceived as an exclusively aesthetic phenomenon. But the purity and immediacy that mark the aesthetic are achieved only by removing everything considered extrinsic to the “aesthetic quality” of the work. “By disregarding everything in which the work of art is rooted (its original context of life, and the secular or religious function that gave it significance), it becomes visible as the ‘pure work of art.’” The “pure” work of art is thus the product of a process of abstraction that Gadamer attributes to the “aesthetic consciousness.” To experience the work “aesthetically” is to abstract from the work any “extra-aesthetic elements” that still cling to it, thereby differentiating the “pure” work of art from its purpose, function and even the significance of its content. Gadamer insists that this is an “aesthetic differentiation” inasmuch as it “distinguishes the aesthetic quality of the work from all the elements of content that induce us to take up a moral or religious stance towards it, and presents itself solely by itself in its [pure] aesthetic being.” Thus the aesthetic consciousness develops a concept of art as “art”—and nothing more. But, for Gadamer, art is more than “art.”

To do justice to art, he contends, it is necessary to abandon the abstractions of aesthetic consciousness and to transcend the “purity” of the aesthetic. This is especially true of the great art of the western tradition. “As far as so-called classical art is concerned,” Gadamer observes, “we are talking about the production of works which in themselves were not primarily understood as art.” Works of classical art were embedded in the functional contexts of life where they served different purposes, be they secular or sacred. Thus it is anachronistic (Gadamer calls it a “modernism”) to think that these works have therefore been subverted by another, alien purpose that renders them aesthetically “impure.” On the contrary, we find the religious or political function of classical works of art integrated into their very existence as works. Just as such works refuse aesthetic alienation from the life-world they likewise resist aesthetic abstraction of the “pure” artwork from its significant content. For Gadamer, it is hardly irrelevant that ancient tragedy belongs to one of the ages in the history of western art which neither cultivated aesthetic consciousness nor developed our modern concept of art, but gave rise to creations whose sacred or secular function was integral to their meaning and understandable by all. Indeed, tragedy provides the key example by reference to which he exposes the abstraction of aesthetic consciousness.

Gadamer observes that the tragic is a “basic phenomenon” of aesthetic being that, as a “structure of meaning,” not only exists in tragedy but in other artistic genres too (for example, epic). It is, moreover, found in life as well as art. For this reason, the

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5 Gadamer, RB, p. 19; KA, p. 110.
6 Gadamer, TM, p. 74; WM, p. 91.
7 Ibid.
8 Joel Weinsheimer, Gadamer’s Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 84.
9 Gadamer, RB, p. 19; KA, p. 110.
10 Gadamer, TM, p. 70; WM, p. 87.
Tragic is not an exclusively aesthetic phenomenon. In modern thought (Gadamer cites Richard Hamann and Max Scheler) the tragic has often been considered “extra-aesthetic,” a moral and metaphysical phenomenon that enters into the sphere of aesthetic problems from outside. However, such an outlook is shaped, implicitly or explicitly, by the principle of aesthetic differentiation. But the modern concept of the aesthetic as an autonomous domain does justice neither to the tragic, which it presents as purely aesthetic, thereby ignoring the ethical and religious import that is crucial to its nature, nor to the aesthetic, since the phenomenon of tragedy clearly shows that aesthetic being always transcends the confines of “aesthetic autonomy.” Where the principle of aesthetic differentiation prevails, it is impossible to do justice to tragedy and the tragic. To reclaim the truth to which tragedy attests it is therefore necessary to transcend the concept of the aesthetic as an autonomous dimension that first emerged in the late eighteenth century and came to pervade our understanding of art.

Gadamer turns to the example of tragedy and the tragic in order to recover art from these distortions because they embody the “principle of aesthetic non-differentiation” that, in his view, properly characterizes aesthetic being. From this perspective, the aesthetic consciousness is merely a “secondary procedure” that restricts us to a “purely aesthetic evaluation.” Abstraction of the artwork both from its original context of life and from the spectator precludes any meaningful access to the work. The aesthetic consciousness thereby fails to account for the capacity of art to address us, to “say” something to us about ourselves and our world. In short, it abstracts from art’s claim to truth. And yet in tragedy, as in all art, “it is the truth of our own world—the religious and moral world in which we live—that is presented before us and in which we recognize ourselves.” The aesthetic consciousness thus reduces the experience of art by alienating us from this deeper engagement with the work of art and its claim to truth. In the experience of art we are caught up in an event of truth in such a way that we belong to it. We thus find ourselves claimed by the work and responsible to what it says. Tragedy attests to such an experience of art because the participation of the spectator is essential to the tragic as a basic phenomenon of aesthetic being.

In order to make the case that tragedy exemplifies “the structure of aesthetic being as a whole,” Gadamer appeals to the account of tragedy that Aristotle sets forth in the Poetics. He finds that Aristotle’s definition of tragedy opens up “the whole scope of the tragic phenomenon,” especially where it refers to “the arousal of pity and fear effecting the katharsis of such emotions.” For Gadamer, this is Aristotle’s “decisive contribution” to our understanding of aesthetic being precisely because he includes the effect on the spectator in his concept of the tragic work of art. By this inclusion Aristotle confirms that the spectator is the one to whom the tragedy is addressed and with whom it achieves its proper completion. What comes to presentation in the tragedy—namely, the tragic—is thus presented for and recognized by the spectator.

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11 Gadamer, RB, p. 29; KA, p. 120.
12 Gadamer, TM, p. 124; WM, p. 133.
13 Gadamer, TM, p. 125; WM, p. 133.
14 Aristotle, Poetics c. 6 (1449b 28–9).
whose participation is integral to the “work-being” (Heidegger) of the tragic work of art. Gadamer’s retrieval of Aristotle’s Poetics seeks to overcome the limits of aesthetic consciousness by recovering an understanding of tragedy that exemplifies the hermeneutic structure of aesthetic being.

II

The Poetics is governed by the concept of mimesis which Aristotle develops with specific reference to tragedy and defines as the “imitation of action.” Despite the constriction this imposes, Gadamer seeks to retrieve mimesis for his interpretation of art. “For when it is correctly understood,” he avers, “Aristotle’s fundamental concept of mimesis has an elementary validity.”

Gadamer’s appropriation, however, abstracts from the reference to action in Aristotle’s definition. Mimesis, he claims, essentially consists simply in “letting something be there.” In mimetic presentation something comes to presence so that it may be identified as the being it is; hence it is only through the presentation that one knows who or what is presented. The mask in ancient drama, for instance, is not intended to hide the actor, but rather to present the hero; it is Oedipus we are meant to see there. As Gadamer writes, “when Aristotle describes how the onlooker knows ‘that is who it is,’ he does not mean that we see through the disguise and know the identity of the person dressed up. On the contrary, he means that we know who is presented.” Thus mimesis is presentation (Darstellung) in which something comes to presence so that it can be recognized and known for what it is.

Gadamer’s appropriation of Aristotle’s understanding of mimesis is subject to a further qualification. Aristotle construes mimesis in terms of mythos which he defines as the “structuring of events.” Typically translated as “plot,” mythos is the principal work of the poet whereby the events are organized into a unified whole that depicts the “single action” presented in tragedy. By unifying the recounted events mythos thus secures the intelligibility of the action. Gadamer does not adopt Aristotle’s definition of mythos in the Poetics, no doubt because it ties the work of art too closely to the narrative structure of tragic plots. Instead he deploys the broader concept of a structure or configuration (Gebilde) whereby what is presented acquires the unity and ideality proper to the work of art. What Gadamer does adopt, however, is the interrelation of mimesis and mythos which, for Aristotle, are strictly complementary terms: the “imitation of action” (mimesis) is largely a function of the “structuring of events” (mythos) created by the poet. Following Aristotle, Gadamer holds that mimetic presentation (Darstellung) is possible only by virtue of its ideal structure (Gebilde) while the ideality of the work only finds its fulfillment in mimetic presentation. Gadamer’s interpretation thus finds the principle of aesthetic

15 Gadamer, RB, p. 97; KA, p. 31.
16 Gadamer, RB, p. 119; KA, p. 83. Due to the centrality of this concept for Gadamer’s account, I will consistently translate his use of ‘Darstellung’ by ‘presentation’ (despite the frequent resort to ‘representation’ in English translations of this term in his work).
non-differentiation embodied (albeit implicitly) in the correlation of mythos and mimesis in the Poetics. Indeed, the “non-differentiation” of Gebilde and Darstellung in Gadamer’s discussion of art appropriates the “quasi-identification” of mythos and mimesis in Aristotle’s theory of tragedy.\(^\text{18}\) Even as I adopt Gadamer’s own focus on mimesis, its essential correlation with mythos must be kept in mind. In the following paragraphs I show how Gadamer’s appropriation reasserts the “elementary validity” of Aristotle’s concept of mimesis as matter of transformation, presentation, and recognition.

As the distinguishing trait of tragic poetry, mimesis does not mean “imitation”—at least not in the sense of a copy of an original that is already given. Instead Gadamer maintains that, for Aristotle, mimesis marks a transformation in which what is presented is affected by its very presentation. “All true imitation is a transformation that does not simply present again something already there. It is a kind of transformed reality in which the transformation points back to what is transformed in and through it.”\(^\text{19}\) That which is “imitated” is transformed by the artist’s “imitation” into a meaningful whole intended for an audience. The integral relation of mythos to mimesis in Aristotle’s account of tragic poetry suggests just such a transformation. As an artificial construct, the plot possesses a unity, definiteness, and necessity one does not find in the action it imitates. These qualities of the poetic construct “reflux,” as Thomas Prufer says, back upon the imitated action, thereby unifying, defining and ordering the action itself. Thus, “the artificial imitation refluxes on the imitated action as imitated, as itself represented in and through the ordered imitation. The spectators gaze upon the action itself as represented in and through the transforming and embellishing artifact constructed by the poet.”\(^\text{20}\) What is imitated is formed—and so transformed—by its very imitation.

Gadamer calls this the “transformation into structure” (“Verwandlung ins Gebilde”) and it marks the ideality of the work as a repeatable configuration. Such transformation pertains to the tragic drama as a work of art. For it is as a work that art “transforms our fleeting experience into the stable and lasting form of an independent and internally coherent creation [Gebilde].”\(^\text{21}\) Through such transformation the action of the drama is, Gadamer says, “lifted out (herausgehoben) of the ongoing course of the ordinary world” and “enclosed in its own autonomous circle of meaning” such that “no one is prompted to seek some other future or reality behind it.”\(^\text{22}\) As an independent structure of meaning, a Gebilde, it no longer permits any comparison with reality and so resists being measured by any criterion of verisimilitude. As a transformed world, the world of the work refers to nothing outside itself by which its veracity might be measured. “It is raised above all such comparisons—and hence

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19 Gadamer, *RB*, p. 64; *KA*, p. 302.
21 Gadamer, *RB*, p. 53; *KA*, p. 142.
above the question as to whether it is real—because a superior truth speaks from it.”

For this reason the transformation into structure finds its full significance as a “transformation into the true” (“Verwandlung in das Wahre”). “From this viewpoint,” Gadamer writes, “reality is defined as what is untransformed and art as the elevation (Aufhebung) of this reality into its truth.”

This retrieval of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy yields Gadamer’s central claim about mimesis—namely, that it is a transformation in which a presentation (Darstellung) of true being takes place. For Aristotle, the unifying structure of the plot renders action intelligible by enabling us to recognize patterns of probability and necessity that constitute the “poetic universals” to which he alludes. But poetry does not simply see the universal as if it were already given; it rather makes the universal “spring forth.”

The imitation transforms the reality imitated by highlighting and clarifying what it imitates thereby revealing what would otherwise remain hidden and withdrawn. In short, imitation reveals the true essence of the thing. According to Gadamer, “imitation enables us to see more than so-called reality. What is shown is, so to speak, elicited from the flux of manifold reality … It is no longer just this or that thing that we can see, but it is now shown and designated as something.”

Thus the relation between the imitation and what it imitates cannot be reduced to a relation of resemblance. However, this does not entail that the imitation bears no relation to the truth of what it imitates. Prufer confirms this point: “The imitated action is heightened and sharpened by the imitation into being more truly itself than it would be if it were not imitated and thus made available for contemplation through the transforming imitation.”

Mimesis is therefore no mere imitation, a simple duplication of reality; it is rather a “bringing-forth,” a presentation in which what is brought forth is the true being of what is presented. For Gadamer, “the situation basic to imitation … not only implies that what is presented is there, but also that it has come into the There more authentically.”

In Aristotle’s account the composition of the plot is responsible for bringing forth the “poetic universals” from the particular actions it imitates. But Gadamer’s retrieval of mimesis goes further in its emphasis on the role of the spectator who he sees as co-responsible for such bringing forth. “The ‘known’ enters into its true being and manifests itself as what it is only when recognized.” Recognition (Wiedererkenntnis) here does not mean simply seeing something again with which we were previously acquainted. Instead, recognition involves the joy of knowing more than what is already familiar. It is, as Aristotle holds, a genuine learning experience in which we achieve an understanding of something that, up to that moment, had eluded us. “In recognition what we know emerges, as if illuminated, from all the

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23 Gadamer, TM, p. 112; WM, p. 117.
24 Gadamer, TM, p. 112; WM, p. 118.
25 Ricoeur, Time and Narrative I, p. 42.
26 Gadamer, RB, p. 99; KA, p. 32.
27 Gadamer, RB, p. 129; KA, p. 91.
28 Prufer, Recapitulations, p. 19.
29 Gadamer, TM, p. 114; WM, p. 120.
30 Gadamer, TM, p. 114; WM, p. 119.
contingent and variable circumstances that condition it; it is grasped in its essence. It is known as something.\textsuperscript{31} To recognize something as something is to let what is presented become manifest in the presentation and thereby known in its true being. As cognition of the true, recognition therefore involves an act of identification “in which we do not differentiate between the presentation and the presented.”\textsuperscript{32} Only when it is recognized in the imitation, and thereby identified as something, is the imitated brought forth so that it becomes manifest in its truth. For Gadamer, “there is no doubt that the essence of imitation consists precisely in the recognition of the presented in the presentation.”\textsuperscript{33} Since recognition fulfills the non-differentiation of presentation and presented, Gadamer holds the spectator to be integral to the mimetic process of bringing something forth.

III

Gadamer goes further in retrieving the essential role of the spectator. Referring again to the \textit{Poetics}, he emphasizes that Aristotle’s definition of tragedy “included its effect [Wirkung] on the spectator.”\textsuperscript{34} This effect involves the tragic emotions of pity and fear and their \textit{katharsis}. Aristotle believes pity and fear to be a correlated pair of emotions that are only fully evoked by the tragic action presented in the tragic drama. As Ricoeur observes, “fear and pity are inscribed \textit{in} the events \textit{by} the composition insofar as it moves \textit{through} the sieve of the [poet’s] representative activity.”\textsuperscript{35} Thus the tragic emotions are constructed in the work where the plot presents the events \textit{as} pitiable and fearful.\textsuperscript{36} But no matter how well it is composed, the tragedy only achieves the effect proper to it if its presentation arouses pity and fear in the spectator. Aristotle states that pity “has to do with the man who undeservingly suffers misfortune” and fear with “the man like us” who suffers such misfortune.\textsuperscript{37} These sympathetic feelings are aroused in the audience by the affinity created with the tragic figures. By effecting a “mimetic identification” of the spectator with the tragic hero, the tragic emotions elicit recognition of the vulnerability of humanity and the conditions of existence that we share in common.

Although Gadamer does not sufficiently underscore the point, the mimetic identification established by the tragic emotions is precisely what enables the spectator to recognize the tragic dimension of the events depicted. Here, as Gadamer maintains, the spectator completes what the tragedy as such is. For only in pity and

\textsuperscript{31} Gadamer, \textit{TM}, p. 113; \textit{WM}, p. 119.


\textsuperscript{33} Gadamer, \textit{RB}, p. 99; \textit{KA}, p. 31.

\textsuperscript{34} Gadamer, \textit{TM}, p. 126; \textit{WM}, p. 134. Gadamer’s emphasis.

\textsuperscript{35} Ricoeur, \textit{Time and Narrative I}, p. 50.

\textsuperscript{36} Aristotle gives special attention to those elements of the plot that enhance their pitiable and fearful quality: \textit{metabole}, the drastic change of fortune (from happiness to unhappiness) due to an unforeseen calamity; reversal (\textit{peripeteia}) and recognition (\textit{anagnorisis}), plot devices that heighten the emotional response by concentrating the tragic shift in one shattering moment.

\textsuperscript{37} Aristotle, \textit{Poetics} c. 13 (1453\textalpha\ 5–6).
fear is the truth of the tragic course of events disclosed as tragic. Only through the tragic emotions is it possible to recognize the tragic depth of what has transpired. Here we see how such recognition belongs to the sort of knowledge proper to mimesis: what is revealed is the true being of the tragic and that truth is further revealed as one that must be suffered rather than cognized. To know the tragic dimension of life is not to grasp its content in concepts and propositions, but to endure its horror in pity and fear. What tragic knowledge teaches above all is the fragility of human existence and its exposure to that which exceeds our capacities for action and knowledge. “In tragedies we are reminded that we live in a world larger than that of our own making or control, and yet a world to which we are answerable.”38 Gadamer finds this insight expressed in Aeschylus’s motto: “learning through suffering” (“pathei mathos”). By suffering the disappointments and deceptions of experience what one learns is the uncertainty of plans and predictions, the futility of efforts to control the future, and the frustration of totalizing conceptions. It affords us insight into human finitude. Through suffering, Gadamer says, one gains “insight into the limitations of humanity, into the absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine. It is ultimately a religious insight—the kind of insight that gave birth to Greek tragedy.”39

Gadamer believes, however, that we misconstrue pity and fear if we consider them to be merely psychological states. Indeed, we miss the profound insight conveyed by tragic wisdom if we render the tragic emotions as subjective responses.40 Indeed, Gadamer argues that the traditional translation of eleos and phobos as “pity” and “fear” carry connotations that are far too subjective. Neither should be understood as inner states of mind; rather “both are events that overwhelm man and sweep him away.” Eleos is not the self-regarding emotion typically associated with pity. “Eleos is the misery [Jammer] that comes over us in the face of what we call the miserable.”41 Likewise, “phobos is not just a state of mind but, as Aristotle says, a cold shudder that makes one’s blood run cold …” In its correlation with eleos,

39 Gadamer, TM, p. 351; WM, p. 363. Martha Nussbaum stresses this barrier in the alliance she forges between Aristotle’s ethics and Greek tragedy. “The great tragic plots explore this gap between our goodness and our good living … They show us reversals happening to good-charactered but not divine or invulnerable people, exploring the many ways in which being of a certain good human character falls short of sufficiency for eudaimonia.” (Martha Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 382.)
40 Gerald Else criticizes Aristotle’s construal of pity and fear, arguing that Aristotle’s account of the tragic emotions rests on fraudulent correlation (we fear in our own case what we pity in others) that renders them too self-regarding. In his view, Aristotle reduces pity and fear to moral feelings and thus flattens their true tragic dimension. Although Gadamer would undoubtedly agree with Else’s positive description of the tragic emotions, he does accuse Aristotle of misrepresenting them or their correlation. (Gerald Else, Plato and Aristotle on Poetry, ed. Peter Burian (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 142.)
41 Gadamer, TM, p. 126; WM, p. 135.
“phobos means the shiver of apprehension that comes over us for someone whom we see rushing to his destruction and for whom we fear.” *Eleos* and *phobos* are thus “modes of *ekstasis*, of being outside oneself, which testify to the power of what is being played out before us.”

I would argue that, for Gadamer, Aristotle’s description of the tragic emotions underscores the mode of being proper to the spectator. The tragic drama must be presented to the spectator, but this does not dissolve the drama into the subjective experiences of those watching it. Rather, the contrary is true: “the being of the spectator is determined by one’s ‘being there present’ (*Dabeisein*).” Being present in this sense does not merely mean being there along with something else; it means participating in the mimetic presentation of the tragic events. As a closed structure of meaning the tragedy does not of course invite intervention. The audience is set at an “absolute distance” from the tragic events as they unfold on the stage that “precludes any practical or goal-oriented participation.” Nevertheless, this “signifies the distance necessary for seeing and that makes possible a genuine and comprehensive participation in what is presented before us.” Watching a tragic drama is therefore a genuine mode of participation insofar as one is “totally involved in and carried away by what one sees.” The tragic emotions mark the moment of rupture and dispossession in the experience of tragic truth (just as their catharsis marks, as we shall see, the moment of reconciliation and affirmation). Being present thus has the character of being outside oneself. But such an ecstatic condition should not be construed as the mere negation of being composed within oneself. Instead, “being outside oneself is the positive possibility of being wholly with something else.” Being present thus involves a self-forgetfulness that consists in giving oneself over to what one is watching. For Gadamer, then, *eleos* and *phobos* constitute the ecstatic mode of being present proper to the spectator of tragedy; they attest to the participation of those who are borne away by the presentation of the tragic events.

The fact that Aristotle’s definition of tragedy includes its effect on the spectator confirms for Gadamer that the spectator belongs essentially to the playing of the tragic play. That tragedy has a certain effect on the spectator is not incidental, but integral to the tragic. And the same is true for aesthetic being in general. “The spectator is an essential element in the kind of play we call aesthetic.” The “aesthetic distance” that determines the way in which the spectator belongs to the play is an element of tragedy. But the distance inherent in being a spectator has nothing to do with the principle of aesthetic differentiation. “The spectator does not hold himself aloof at the distance characteristic of an aesthetic consciousness, enjoying the art with which something is represented, but rather participates in the communion of being present.” Thus the spectator’s distance from the tragedy is not reducible to a subjective act of the aesthetic consciousness; it is rather an “essential relation” determined by the tragic

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42 Ibid.
43 Gadamer, *TM*, p. 121; *WM*, p. 129.
44 Gadamer, *TM*, p. 124; *WM*, p. 133.
46 Gadamer, *TM*, p. 125; *WM*, p. 133.
as a structure of meaning. As a unified structure the tragic drama “is a closed circle of meaning that of itself resists all penetration and interference.” Consequently, the spectator can do nothing but watch as the tragic events unfold and behold in misery and horror the oncoming catastrophe. Yet it is precisely by being present that the spectator attests to the inevitable course of these tragic events. Gadamer’s retrieval of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy thus underscores the essential relation between the mimetic presentation and the spectator’s participation. The mimetic presentation heightens the pitiable and fearful quality of the tragic events it presents thereby intensifying their impact on the spectator; carried away in pity and fear, the spectator experiences the tragedy as a meaningful whole and recognizes the tragic truth it reveals.

IV

According to Aristotle, the telos of tragedy is achieved with the katharsis of the tragic emotions. Hence the “proper effect” of tragedy consists in the peculiar pleasure that “derives from pity and fear” and yet is produced “by means of imitation.” On the one hand, Aristotle stresses the importance of the poetic “imitation,” even treating the katharsis as a function of the plot which structures the pitiable and fearful events. On the other hand, Aristotle also understands katharsis as a “purification” of the tragic emotions that has its seat in the spectator and consists in the transformation of the pain inherent in these emotions into the pleasure distinctive to tragedy. Although sometimes treated independently by commentators, I follow those interpreters who, like Paul Ricoeur, hold that these two aspects of tragedy are complementary: while the katharsis is experienced by the spectator, it is also “constructed in the work by the mimetic activity.” Without diminishing the import of the poetic composition, however, Gadamer’s discussion addresses only the “subjective alchemy” (Ricoeur) of the cathartic experience.

On Gadamer’s reading, tragedy effects the “purification” of pity and fear as the emotions strictly associated with the tragic. Despite issues of translation, Gadamer believes that by katharsis Aristotle means the “tragic pensiveness” that overcomes...

48 Gadamer, TM, p. 126; WM, p. 135.
49 As Gadamer says: “What is understood as tragic must simply be accepted” (TM, p. 126; WM, p. 135).
50 Aristotle, Poetics, c. 14 (1453b 12–3).
51 Ricoeur, Time and Narrative I, p. 50. Ricoeur understands katharsis as a purgation that is effective both ‘inside’ the poetic work and ‘outside’ in the spectator. Indeed, he argues, ‘the dialectic of inside and outside reaches its highest point in catharsis. Experienced by the spectator, it is constructed in the work’. (Ibid., p. 50.) Else, however, detachs catharsis entirely from the spectator, arguing for an ‘objective’ interpretation according to which katharsis pertains solely to the imitated events which are ‘purified’ of any ‘polluted’ intent. (See Aristotle’s Poetics: The Argument (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 423–47.) Gadamer, however, emphasizes the katharsis undergone by the spectator. My reconstruction follows Ricoeur’s ‘dialectical’ interpretation and sees Gadamer’s account as deepening our understanding of what the purification of the tragic emotions means for those witnessing the tragic drama.
the spectator at a tragedy. He describes such pensiveness as a condition of relief and resolution in which pain and pleasure are mixed. The vexing question is: “How can Aristotle call this condition one of purification?” What is the “impure” element in feeling and how is it removed or “purified” in and through the tragic emotions? Gadamer’s answer is that “being overcome by misery and horror involves a painful division.” Overwhelmed by the tragedy presented before us we recoil in the face of the catastrophe that overtakes the tragic hero and reject the inevitability of the tragic course of events. “There is a disjunction with what is happening, a refusal to accept that rebels against the agonizing events.” And yet, Gadamer asserts, “the effect [Wirkung] of the tragic catastrophe is precisely to dissolve this disjunction from what is.” He holds that the removal of this painful division is the source of the pleasure that Aristotle attributes to tragedy as its proper effect. Thus the purification of the tragic emotions is what enables us to reconcile ourselves to the tragic. “We are freed not only from the spell in which the misery and horror of the tragic fate had bound us, but at the same time we are freed from everything that divides us from what is.”

For Gadamer, such tragic pensiveness involves a kind of reconciliation in which we come back to ourselves. Torn outside ourselves by the power of the tragic events, overtaken by the misery and horror that they provoke, the cathartic effect enables the return to ourselves from this ekstasis in order to face the truth of what is. To admit, accept, and finally affirm this truth is the meaning of katharsis. But what exactly is affirmed here? Certainly it is not the justice of a moral world order. As Gadamer notes, “tragedy does not exist where guilt and expiation balance out, where a moral bill of guilt is paid in full.” Instead it is the very imbalance of guilt and fate that marks the events as tragic. For the essence of the tragic is characterized by the excess of tragic consequences. “Obviously it is the disproportionate, terrible immensity of the consequences that flow from the guilty deed which is the real claim upon the spectator. The tragic affirmation is the fulfillment of this claim.” Such tragic affirmation involves self-recognition and has the character of a genuine communion. “What is experienced in such excess of tragic suffering is something truly common. The spectator recognizes himself and his own finiteness in the face of the power of fate.” Through the suffering of the tragic hero, we are compelled to face our own vulnerability to disaster, exposure to suffering, and powerlessness before fate. Accepting that “this is how it is” is a kind of self-knowledge for the spectator “who emerges with new insight from the illusions in which he, like everyone else, lives.”

Gadamer turns to Aristotle’s discussion of katharsis precisely because it is here that the recognition of who we are takes place in Greek tragedy. According to the Poetics, such recognition is both a function of the mimetic presentation and an experience that the spectator undergoes. The mimetic presentation of the tragic events enables the spectator to recognize, for instance, that Oedipus is the one who, driven by some implacable fate, brings the very catastrophe upon both the city and

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52 Gadamer, TM, p. 127; WM, p. 136.
53 Gadamer, TM, p. 127; WM, p. 136. (This citation applies to all quotes from Gadamer in this paragraph.)
himself that he seeks to avoid. But by eliciting pity and fear the tragedy of Oedipus also enables the spectators to recognize that their lives too are delivered over to fateful forces they cannot ultimately control. Hence Gadamer holds that there is more to recognition than the cognition of essence. “For it is also part of the process that we recognize ourselves as well.”54 The self-recognition afforded by the tragedy rests upon the “mimetic identification” with the tragic hero whose fate arouses the spectator’s pity and fear. Gadamer writes: “in the traumatic experience of the tragic, an act of identification, a deep and disturbing encounter with ourselves overcomes us.”55 Here, as spectators who are genuinely present to the tragedy, we come to an insight about ourselves, about the extreme possibilities of human action and the concealed limits of human knowledge. Amidst the misery and horror of the tragic catastrophe we encounter ourselves in the cathartic recognition that “This is you.” We not only recognize the full scope of the calamity that has befallen Oedipus, but we also see ourselves in the empty sockets of his eyes as human beings who are likewise exposed to suffering and ruin.

On Aristotle’s account, the mimetic identification attains its highest pitch when the reversal of fortune occurs at the same moment that the tragic hero discovers who he is. In this terrible moment Oedipus encounters the fate he has tried so desperately to evade; he now recognizes himself to be the murderer of his father and husband to his mother. At the very moment he also finds the one he has so persistently sought; he now recognizes himself as the one who bears the curse that is laid upon the city. In this shattering moment of self-recognition Oedipus is compelled to recognize in himself another, an otherness of identity, a strange and estranging revelation that forever alters who he is. The self-image reflected in tragic drama is that of a deinos, “an incomprehensible and baffling monster, both an agent and one acted upon, guilty and innocent, lucid and blind, [who] … can dominate the whole of nature yet who is incapable of governing himself.”56 What we learn from the reversals and discoveries of tragedy is that, without warning, things can convert into their opposite and that, like Oedipus, we too are finally enigmatic to ourselves. Here lies the pathos of tragedy that involves the suffered knowledge of what cannot be resolved, but only endured. “It is the knowledge that praxis is riddled with ambiguities and contradictions that are opaque, and yet … powerfully disruptive. It is also the knowledge that one cannot lift oneself out of this torn condition.”57 In Gadamer’s words, we learn the

54 Gadamer, RB, p. 100; KA, p. 32. Gadamer reasserts the mythico-religious background of tragedy that Aristotle neglects. Insofar as the Poetics insists on the intelligibility conferred by the plot constructed by the poet, the role of the gods and fate are accordingly diminished. Halliwell even notes that Aristotle ‘deliberately reinterprets the possibilities of tragic drama so as to make the religious ideas of myth marginal to its purpose’. (Halliwell, The Poetics of Aristotle, p. 12.) Gadamer, however, affirms the import of fate, even arguing that the self-recognition afforded by tragedy ‘was made possible and supported by the whole world of the Greek religious tradition …’ (Gadamer, RB, p. 100; KA, p. 32.)

55 Gadamer, RB, p. 100; KA, pp. 84–5.


57 Schmidt, Germans and Other Greeks, p. 59.
“enigma of human existence”—namely, “we know and yet do not know ourselves in the struggle between nature and spirit, animality and divinity, a dissension that is yet inseparably united in human life.”

V

According to Gadamer’s analysis, tragedy and the tragic are exemplary of aesthetic being. Hence he finds it necessary to transcend the abstractions of aesthetic consciousness and the reduction of aesthetic being they entail. Above all, he is concerned to retrieve the claim to truth to which the experience of art attests. In this effort, I have argued, the tragic work of art plays a critical role. I conclude by showing that his appropriation of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy enables Gadamer to develop his understanding of the artwork as an ontological event which includes the spectator. “My thesis,” he writes, “is that the being of art cannot be defined as an object of an aesthetic consciousness because … the aesthetic attitude is more than it knows of itself. It is part of the event of being that occurs in presentation and belongs essentially to the play [of art] as play.” As a consequence, the mimetic presentation that takes place in the tragic drama cannot be separated from its performance because it is only in its being played that the self-presentation of the work takes place. “The playing of the drama,” he says, “ask[s] to be understood … as the coming-into-existence of the work itself.” Here the appropriation of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy opens onto a hermeneutic ontology of the work of art where the work is conceived as a presentation in which an event of being takes place that is at the same time an event of truth.

First, the work of art has the mode of being of an event. For Gadamer this means that the play only exists in being played, that the work of art only “is” in its performance. This is the import of his terse claim: “All art lies in its enactment (Vollzug).” This is most evident with the so-called “performing arts” such as tragic drama where the work is truly “there” only in and through its performance. Playing their roles in the tragedy, the actors are taken up into the presentation of the play, performing the work so that “it comes out.” But the play itself is also a meaningful structure that is intended for an audience in whom it achieves its genuine significance. Hence “the play itself is the whole, comprising players and spectators.”

In fact, Gadamer continues, “it is experienced properly by, and presents itself (as it is ‘meant’) to, the one who is not acting in the play but watching it.” In this respect the spectator is no mere observer of what occurs, but a genuine participant, that is, “one who … literally ‘takes part.’” Here the distinction between performer and spectator is essentially overcome. Indeed, “the genuine reception and experience of the work of art can only exist for one who ‘plays along,’ that is, one who performs in

58 Gadamer, RB, p. 76; KA, p. 325.
59 Gadamer, TM, p. 115; WM, p. 121. Gadamer’s emphasis.
60 Gadamer, TM, p. 116; WM, p. 122.
63 Gadamer, RB, p. 24; KA, p. 115.
an active way himself.” Participating in its presentation, the spectator thus belongs to the being of the work of art.

Second, through the work of art a presentation occurs. The performance of the play, enacted through the participation of the spectator, accomplishes the self-presentation of the work. For Gadamer, this is the “original” meaning of mimesis that he retrieves from Aristotle’s Poetics. Mimesis now names the event of presentation by which something comes to presence in the work such that it is presented in its true being. This is a far cry from the idea of imitation as the likeness of a copy to its original. Indeed, “the presentation of essence, far from being mere imitation, is necessarily revelatory.”64 And yet this is not just true of tragedy for “in every work we encounter something like mimesis …” Hence Gadamer believes “tradition is justified in saying that ‘art is always mimesis,’ that is, it brings something to presentation (sie bringt etwas zur Darstellung).”65 As a “bringing forth” we have seen that such presentation involves the participation of the spectator. In fact, mimesis contains within itself “an essential relation to everyone for whom the presentation exists.”66 Such reference to the spectator is clearly implied where he states that “the meaning of the word ‘mimesis’ consists simply in letting something be there …”67

Third, the being of the artwork includes its effect on the spectator. Art addresses us; it is anspruchsvoll. In other words, the work speaks to us (uns anspricht) by making a determinate claim (bestimmter Anspruch). To participate genuinely in the work of art is to submit oneself to its claim. But the claim does not just demand that we understand ‘what’ is presented, but that we understand ourselves in light of that ‘what.’ In the case of tragedy, the spectator’s engagement with the work is exhibited by the mimetic identification effected through the tragic emotion evoked by the work. Indeed, the moment of self-recognition is marked by the kartharsis of these emotions. For Gadamer, however, this is true of all art. By compelling us to confront ourselves, art transforms us. The experience of art is a genuine experience that does not leave one unchanged. In the experience of tragedy we are torn outside of ourselves by the sheer force of the tragic events and yet are nonetheless returned to ourselves. Stripped bare of ethical and cognitive resources we find ourselves exposed before the ruthlessness of fate. This is the claim that tragedy makes upon us. But every genuine experience of art is such that I suddenly find myself defined by the work’s claim “as if it mirrored a part of myself that I may hardly know how to recognize but which I cannot renounce.”68

64 Gadamer, TM, p. 114; WM, p. 120.
65 Gadamer, RB, p. 36; KA, p. 126. Translation altered.
66 Gadamer, TM, p. 114; WM, p. 120.
67 Gadamer, RB, p. 119; KA, p. 83.
followed by the challenge—“You must change your life.” The claim demands more than a change in perspective; it demands a veritable self-transformation. The work’s claim to truth thus calls for a transformation that, at its most profound depth, is both a renewal and retrieval of oneself.

In this essay I have argued that Gadamer appeals to tragedy and the tragic in his effort to transcend the aesthetic and affirm art’s claim to truth. Bearing witness to the truth that takes place in the experience of art, tragedy exposes the abstractions of aesthetic consciousness which falsify that experience. Gadamer’s retrieval of the question of truth focuses on the Poetics because he finds there a theory of tragedy and the tragic that confirms mimesis as the presentation of being that occurs in the experience of art. Aristotle’s definition of tragedy also provides confirmation of its effect on those who, witnessing the tragic events, experience a transforming katharsis. Even more, by its inclusion of the spectator, that definition offers Gadamer the opening by which he appropriates the Aristotelian theory of tragedy and the tragic to a hermeneutic ontology of the work of art. Hence tragedy is exemplary for Gadamer because it testifies to the being of the work of art as event of presentation that, enacted by the spectator, makes a claim to truth that is at once mimetic and cathartic, revelatory and transformative.

69 Gadamer, RB, pp. 151, 35; KA, pp. 153, 125.
Chapter 4

The Beautiful after Thomas Aquinas: Questioning Present-day Concepts

Günther Pöltner

When we look at the beautiful in Thomas Aquinas, we encounter two difficulties. The first has to do with the fact that Thomas rarely spoke about the beautiful. We have no *quaeestio disputata*, not even an *articulus* devoted to the beautiful. He touches on the question only rarely, though these several remarks are heavy with implications: they lead us into the heart of his thinking and have to be read in that context. The second difficulty stems from the fact that access to the way Thomas handles the question is complicated by the common understanding of the beautiful in an aesthetic sense. The word “beautiful” has lost in our day much of its meaning. We tend to think of the beautiful as pleasing, attractive, pretty, decorative, elegant, enlightening; at its best it affords us spiritual delight; at its worst it emerges from the beauty parlor. This common way of handling the word has its roots in the aesthetic notion of the Beautiful, which is a thoughtless and superficial simplification of the latter.

As for the aesthetic meaning of the beautiful, this is not the time or the place to give it extended consideration. I do no more, and I know I simplify, than recall two points. One, aesthetics relates the beautiful to the experience of the senses and looks on it from the point of view of someone’s feelings. It defines the beautiful through the effect it has on its beholder. The idea of the true is hierarchically superior to that of the beautiful. Two, as a result of handling the beautiful subjectively, aesthetics ends up with a polarity separating beauty and being—being in the sense of bare facticity. Now, the normative form of our relation to reality is scientific research. And so from beauty there arises nothing real; its appearance amounts finally to something illusory that satisfies one’s need for protection and comfort.

As we could expect, raising the question that way is alien to Thomas. He does not ask if and how the beautiful affects me. He does not wonder what impression it makes on me. He wants to know what it is. He wants to know how the beautiful manifests itself. How does it end up as a given? He is interested in understanding the beautiful ontologically.

We can divide Thomas’s references to the beautiful into two groups. The first group consists of those passages where he seems, at first view, to touch on the matter “objectively.” Here he usually singles out its “debita proportio sive consonantia” (*Summa theologiae* (STh) I, 39, 8) (the balance and accord among some thing’s

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1 Translated by David Flood, OFM, with minor adjustments by Oleg Bychkov.
many components) and then “claritas” (STh I, 39, 8) (splendor or resplendence). Into the second group go those passages where Thomas speaks about the beautiful in relation to the good. The beautiful is the same as the good, different only in meaning (“pulchrum est idem bono, sola ratione differens,” STh I–II, 27, 1 ad 3). “Idem secundum rem—sola ratione differens” is the way in which Thomas expresses the unity and the difference of being’s transcendental determinations. And what holds for the good—that is, the fact that it is not limited to the morally good—holds as well in its different way for the beautiful: it is not limited to one category but appears in all categories. We speak of a beautiful conversation, a beautiful time. We speak about the presence of people in that way. We call a celebration beautiful and designate as beautiful both useful instruments and works of art. In short, we use the word beautiful analogically. We can define the beautiful as little as we can define the good. Thus we cannot take Thomas’s statements as elements of a definition or as criteria of beauty.

1. Identity and Difference of bonum and pulchrum

1.1 Identity of bonum and pulchrum

The beautiful is identical with the good insofar as the actual thing is concerned (“pulchrum et bonum in subiecto ... sunt idem,” STh I, 5, 4 ad 1). Wherever we have to do with the beautiful, we have to do in a certain way with the good. The beautiful is in its way something good. And, conversely, where we have to do with something good, we always have to do in a certain way with something beautiful. The good is in its way something beautiful. The factual identity of the beautiful and the good comes from the forma, that is, from that through which something is what it is (“super eandem rem fundantur, scilicet formam,” STh I, 5, 4 ad 1). Beauty comes with the being of what is and depends on what and how something is. It is that which is, of itself, that is beautiful and not something about it. When we say this, we have said something important about the claritas or the splendor of the beautiful. Beauty is not a subjective appearance or an illusionary radiance of reality. The appearance of what is beautiful is not a deceptive outward look of reality, but the very shining forth of reality. Beauty is the real brilliance of brilliant reality. This is one way in which Being reveals itself.

1.2 Difference of bonum and pulchrum

The beautiful and the good are factually identical and only conceptually distinguished (“sola ratione differens,” STh I–II, 27, 1 ad 3). The distinction appears only to ratio, reason as capable of understanding being. We use the terms beautiful and good to name different aspects of the meaning of being. Yet the difference is not only a mere logical one, to which nothing in the thing corresponds. Thomas found the factual
basis of the difference in the way the good has first of all to do with aspiration ("bonum proprie respicit appetitum," STh I, 5, 4 ad 1). For its part the beautiful had to do with a capacity to know ("pulchrum autem respicit vim cognoscitivam," STh I, 5, 4 ad 1). We call beautiful what pleases us as we gaze at and grasp it ("pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent," STh I, 5, 4 ad 1).

The good and the beautiful agree insofar as in both desire comes to rest and both give rise to pleasure (placere). They differ in the way each brings desire to rest. As for the good, that occurs through that which is itself ("de ratione boni est quod in eo quietetur appetitus," STh I–II, 27, 1 ad 3), whereas for the beautiful it occurs through looking ("ad rationem pulchri pertinet quod in eius aspectu seu cognitione quietetur appetitus," STh I–II, 27, 1 ad 3). So we can say that the beautiful adds to the good something that has to do with knowledge ("pulchrum addit supra bonum quendam ordinem ad vim cognoscitivam," STh I–II, 27, 1 ad 3), in the sense that something is called good when it merely pleases aspiration, whereas something is called beautiful when its comprehension pleases ("ita quod bonum dicatur id quod simpliciter complacet appetitui; pulchrum autem dicatur id cuius ipsa apprehensio placet," STh I–II, 27, 1 ad 3). Additio in Thomas indicates an express statement of a certain understanding or grasping of being. When we use the transcendental determinations of being (nomina transcendentia), we do no more than make explicit what we implicitly understand when we say ‘being’ ("secundum hoc aliqua dicuntur addere supra ens, in quantum exprimunt ipsius modum, qui nomine ipsius entis non exprimitur," De veritate (Ver.) 1, 1). So we can take what Thomas says in the sense that with beauty there is some drawing into the foreground of something about the good, but also about being, that is never absent from the good; it is experienced with the good, but is not experienced clearly or expressly.

2. Convenientia boni (ratio boni)

We read in De veritate 1, 1 that the good belongs to the universal agreement of being with the anima humana (convenientia animae et entis). Thomas continues with what Aristotle says about the anima humana, that it is in a way everything ("est quodammodo omnia," Ver. 1, 1). Thanks to this anima we are open to all being and consequently receptive to everything that exists. Vice versa, that which is in agreement with the human spirit ("res nata est animae coniungi et in anima esse," STh I, 78, 1). A human being, as a spiritual entity, and that which is, as ‘being,’ relate to one another and in this relation are one. When we say “anima est quodammodo omnia,” then with the word est we do not mean ontic identity, but performative identity, identity in the sense of a single occurrence. That is what we have in mind with convenientia. Just as we have potential with regards both to knowledge and to aspiration, in the same way being accords with us in a double fashion. The word ‘true’ expresses being’s accord with the capacity to understand (vis cognitiva), while the word ‘good’ expresses its accord with the aspiration of the will (vis apetitiva, voluntas) ("convenientiam ergo entis ad appetitum exprimit hoc nomen bonum," Ver. 1, 1).
What we say about the *appetitus* in general, we say as well about the aspiration of the spirit through the will. *Appetitus* is a movement (*motus*)\(^4\) or an inclination,\(^5\) unleashed by the good (*bonum*) to which one aspires. Here we find a fundamental order that cannot be reversed. It is not that something is good (in imagination or in reality) because we aspire to it, but the other way around. To will always means basically to answer: we respond to the good (imaginary or real) showing itself to us. Because *all* human acts have their origin in the will (“*voluntas ... est principium operationum quae in nobis sunt,*” *Summa contra Gentiles* (ScG) IV, 19, n. 3558), *all* human acts possess the structure of a response: not a response as reply but as conformity or *cor-response*. By willing we conform or *cor-respond* to the good (apparent or real). *Appetitus* or *voluntas* does not designate a fixed category of performances; it designates rather the *basic character* of all human acts. Humans have the task of performing our existence. For that reason we are open to aspiration’s possibilities (*vis appetitiva*).

As something else is being accomplished and preserved, in accordance with the good’s own being, we say about the good that it is “*secundum esse suum perfectivum alterius et conservativum*” (Ver. 21, 1). That is good which imparts itself to another and lets it share in itself, so that the other can seize its own possibilities of being and so realize itself. Aspiration completes itself when the good imparts what it is and the other shares in that goodness (*participatio*).\(^6\) For that reason, according to Thomas, in the case of goodness aspiration comes to rest *in the good itself*: “*De ratione boni est quod in eo quietetur appetitus*” (STh I–II, 27, 1 ad 3). Because aspiration’s basic meaning is *answer*, rest does not mean stagnation, but the completion of movement. When love is complete, the attraction that the loved one exercises on the lover does not cease but achieves itself (“*amatio ... perficitur in attractione amantis ad ipsum amatum,*” *Compendium Theologiae*, 46, n. 83).

It is the *presence* of the good that elicits joy and lets aspiration reach happy rest: “*Gaudemus cum adest*” (ScG IV, 19, n. 3559). And, conversely, whenever we can rejoice and be happy, our joy and happiness follow the *presence* of what is good for us. If not, then there remains nothing more than desire: “*Voluntas enim fertur in finem et absentem, cum ipsum desiderat, et praesentem, cum in ipso requiescens delectatur*” (STh I–II, 3, 4).

It is true that we want to rejoice and be happy for the sake of joy and happiness themselves and not for the sake of anything else (“*Delectatio propter se, et non propter alium appetitur,*” STh I–II, 2 ad 6). But when we look at it closely, we want to rejoice at *something* and be happy about *something*. We need the *ground* of rejoicing and being happy. Joy and happiness are consequent phenomena (“*Delectatio ... est ... quodam consequens,*” STh I–II, 2 ad 6). More precisely they only follow the *presence* of the good, when one truly shares in the good, and not simply expects it or even imagines one has it (“*Delectatio autem adventit voluntati ex hoc quod finis est praesens: non autem e converso ex hoc aliquid fit praesens, quia voluntas*

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\(^{4}\) ‘*Appetitus est quasi motus ad rem*’ (STh I, 5, 4 ad 1).

\(^{5}\) ‘*Inclinatio in intellectuali natura voluntas est*’ (ScG IV, 19, n. 3558).

\(^{6}\) ‘*Finis ’est’ ... dilectum et quasi delectabile ab his quae finem participant*’ (Ver. 21, 2).
delectatur in ipso,” STh I–II, 3, 4). We have to keep in mind this connection between happy rejoicing and presence when Thomas explains that the essence of the beautiful consists in aspiration coming to rest in the sight or in the knowledge of the beautiful (“Ad rationem pulchri pertinet quod in eius aspectu seu cognitione quietetur appetitus,” STh I–II, 27, 1 ad 3).

3. **Convenientia pulchri (ratio pulchri)**

We draw attention to two points in the way Thomas expresses himself. One, the fact that he speaks about *apprehensio* and *aspectus* as well as *cognitio* indicates that by *cognitio* he does not mean categorial knowledge in the sense of judgment, but rather the transcendental knowing which enables judgment. He is speaking about the grasping or perceiving of being (*intelligere*, *apprehensio*), that is, about the understanding of being. In *De veritate* 1, 1 we read that what is perceived first of all by the intellect is ‘that which is’ as such;7 and in *De veritate* 21, 4 ad 4 we read about the *apprehensio intellectus* in the same context.8 Two, Thomas presents the usual way in which the beautiful relates to the capacity to understand (*ordo ad vim cognoscitivam*) as an *additio pulchri ad bonum*, and not *ad ens*. Accordingly the beautiful is not synonymous with the True (*verum*).

This allows the following observations. One, the beautiful supplies us with knowledge, not however in the sense of a judgment. Two, beauty is not the same as the preceding knowledge that presents something as worth pursuing, knowledge that is the presupposition for every act of the will, in the sense of the well known phrase: *Nihil volitum nisi praecognitum*. When we grasp something as worth pursuing, that does not at all mean we have experienced the beautiful. Three, in like degree we do not experience the beautiful if we do no more than look at an object without bothering about categorial knowledge. Beauty is not the initial phase of conceptual knowledge.

Because humans are knowing beings, in the transcendental meaning of the term, that is, beings who understand being, something can appear to us as being. Whatever we might encounter as being is present to us through knowing it (*intelligere*): “fit praesens nobis per actum intellectus” (STh I–II, 3, 4). Here we have to recall the performative identity mentioned above. It is not that something appears to us first and then gets perceived or understood. Rather it shows itself, it appears (*aspectus*) as our perception (*cognoscere*, *intelligere*). One is the other. So Thomas can speak about “aspectus seu cognitio” or about “apprehensio” without distinguishing between the two. It is perception (*intelligere*) that makes the exploration of being at all possible. It allows us to determine ‘something that is’ categorically, to pursue it, to avoid it and so on. That is so because it is not only that something is present to the human beings we are, but at the same time the *being-present* of something is present as well. Thanks to our *vis cognoscitiva*, it is not only that something appears to us, but at the same time *self-appearance* itself *appears* to us. It is true that we mostly pay

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7 ‘Quod primo intellectus concipit quasi notissimum, et in quo omnes conceptiones resolvit, est ens’ (Ver. 1, 1).

8 ‘Illud quod primo cadit in apprehensione intellectus est ens’ (Ver. 21, 4 ad 4).
no attention to this whatsoever, save when we encounter the beautiful. In beauty appearance itself strikes the eye. The act of appearing presents itself as such and takes us captive. The instance and manner of any given appearance of something meaningful suddenly astounds us as we encounter it in the clarity and splendor of its beauty. For that reason we call beautiful what pleases as it appears and is seen: “pulchra enim dicuntur quae visa placent” (STh I, 5, 4 ad 1). (“Pulchrum autem dicatur id cuius ipsa apprehensio placet,” STh I–II, 27, 1 ad 3.) And because the instantiation of a being arises out of its form, the beautiful affects us in the manner of a causa formalis (“pulchrum proprie pertinet ad rationem causae formalis,” STh I, 5, 4 ad 1).

At this point it is neither our happy participation in the good, the quies appetitus in re ipsa, nor the mere fact or the mere expectable presence of something good that catches our attention. What strikes us is that something like this is at all possible and has happened to us! In the presence of the beautiful we succumb to the primary fact that good moments really do present themselves, that meaningful realities truly open up to us, and that we are at all offered a chance to enjoy the good. When we call a day, a conversation, or time together beautiful, we mean: “How wonderful that such possibilities do indeed come about! How wonderful that such things are at all possible!”

The rest of aspiration (quies appetitus) does not mean the final condition of some action of the will. No great effort, no insistent pursuit, precedes the experience of the beautiful. The beautiful occurs prior to all effort. What occurs prior to all effort and blesses us with its presence bestows itself as gift. For that reason everything that presents itself as gift and happens to us gratuitously we call beautiful. It works, it is successful, it is something that makes us free and expansive.

What is experienced as a gift stands in a relation of specific correspondence with the possibilities of our being. It relates to these possibilities in a debita proportio sive consonantia (STh I, 39, 8). Something seen is beautiful if it corresponds to our ability to see in a way that alerts us to what it is that we see—colors and luminosity—but at the same time to what it means to see and how blessed we are to have this ability to see. The same is true of all other human performances. “Pulchrum in debita proportione consistit: quia sensus delectantur in rebus debite proportionatis, sicut in sibi similibus” (STh I, 5, 4 ad 1). And the converse is true as well: we experience beauty wherever we become alert to receiving the gift of being’s possibilities and to knowing how delightful it is to have the chance to seize upon our own possibilities.

The debita proportio does not only encompass the relations of the beautiful to ourselves, but characterizes the beautiful itself as well. That is beautiful which is in accord with its being, not in any way, but in a successful, harmonious way (consonantia). Each instance is different. A beautiful discussion consists in the harmonious relation between the respective contributions. A beautiful time arises out of the way conditions fit together. A beautiful picture results from the harmony of the composition. We cannot determine beforehand, with the help of a set of criteria, how things are to come together to result in harmony and delight. We have to wait until

9 ‘Quae habent colorem nitidum, puchra esse dicuntur’ (STh I, 39, 8).
it happens. The particulars of the beautiful that Thomas lists are not to be confused with the characteristics of an a-historical ideal of beauty.

Beauty is the disclosure of *convenientia*, of the performative identity of ‘anima’ and ‘ens’ as *convenientia*. When we deal with the *verum* and the *bonum*, the performative identity arises out of one pole or the other, out of the ‘anima’ or out of the object. In the case of the beautiful it comes from itself as *performative identity*. We should not confuse the pleasure (*placere*) mentioned by Thomas with that superficial attention that only incidentally notices that something appears here. Nor should we confuse what Thomas calls the beautiful with that which is merely agreeable but does not engage us in any way. On the contrary: we are enthralled by the very actuality of the disclosure of what is, certainly, already good. For that reason the experience of beauty is a “quies appetitus in aspectu seu cognitione.”

We can summarize Thomas’ thoughts on beauty in the simple phrase: “Beauty reveals to us that it is good to be.” We notice that Thomas takes the basic ideas of his ontology from the sphere of gratuity and gift. Being is what has been received (“esse receptum vel participatum,” Ver. 21, 5). Consequently a being is being (*ens*) “per participationem” (STh I, 3, 4). A being is by having its being (“ens simpliciter est quod habet esse,” STh I–II, 26, 4). That means that it has been given to a being to be. Now if we allow that according to Thomas the gift-nature of being reveals itself precisely in beauty, then we might wonder if we should consider his reflections on the beautiful as the secret center of his thought.

However that might be, we can say that in his few but extremely dense references to what makes the beautiful beautiful Thomas distances himself unmistakably from the aesthetic interpretation of the beautiful. We know that the aesthetic paradigm has long been in crisis. That opens up the opportunity to encounter the beautiful once again. That is, of course, very different from exposing oneself to some concrete life experience of beauty. (It is good to mention, as an aside, that it certainly is not enough to criticize the aesthetic interpretation of the beautiful by going back to the sublime. If we take that route, we do not avoid aesthetics, for the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime is itself still an aesthetic one.) We can imagine Thomas saying that the foremost task is to raise the question about where we encounter the beautiful first of all. And that occurs precisely in our relation to being and not through concrete life experiences. Otherwise one is left with the aesthetic reduction of the beautiful to insignificance.

10 ‘Motus ... cognitivae virtutis terminatur ad animam’ (Ver. 1, 2).
11 ‘Motus appetitivae virtutis terminatur ad res’ (Ver. 1, 2).
12 ‘Ad rationem pulchri pertinet quod in eius aspectu seu cognitio quiescat appetitus’ (STh I–II, 27, 1 ad 3).
13 Translators’ note: Pöltner here employs, as clearly distinct, two German terms *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* (or *Erleben*), which are usually translated by the same English term ‘experience’. *Erlebnis/Erleben* in this case should be understood as an actual temporal life occurrence (as in ‘gaining something through actual experience’), while *Erfahrung* as becoming aware of something (thus the translation ‘encounter’).
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Chapter 5

Divine Delight: *Acceptatio* and the Economy of Salvation in Duns Scotus

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On Ash Wednesday 2004, Mel Gibson’s much discussed film, *The Passion of the Christ*, opened nationwide. While much of the buzz about the movie centered on possible anti-Semitism and the level of conservative Catholicism within Gibson’s family, little has been said about the way the film deals with the economy of salvation, or the question of soteriology. To be sure, such a topic belongs to the circles of theologians and specialists. For this reason, I preface my remarks on Scotus’s soteriology with the recent film. As we know, *The Passion* has had a success that is remarkable; clearly the film touches upon our deepest intuitions about the nature of suffering and how it relates to love, particularly to God’s love. Where one stands on the nature of divine love (whether we must earn it through significant personal effort or whether it is always coming to meet us) informs both one’s anthropology and one’s eschatology. The three central elements—anthropology, soteriology and eschatology—are of a piece. A negative anthropology informs a retributive soteriology and a punitive eschatology. An optimistic anthropology frames a soteriology and eschatology that reveal generosity and love rather than justice. What is significant in Scotus’s framing of these key elements is the way in which he centers all within an aesthetic view founded on divine love, creativity, liberality and delight.

This particular aesthetic framing is, I would argue, clearly Franciscan, with roots in the tradition (particularly in the aesthetic elements he inherited from Bonaventure) and in part from his reflection upon Stoic elements present in Cicero’s *De Officiis*. As he brings together the Napoleonic and Stoic traditions on the centrality of beauty for a fully rational and human life, Scotus corrects the Neoplatonic (erotic) trajectory with the Incarnational downward (agapic) move of Christianity; he replaces the impersonal Stoic natural law tradition with the personal divine ear, graciously delighting at the sound of the morally good act that is, additionally, performed out of love. The aesthetic metaphor of listening to harmony is the tool by which the Subtle Doctor completes his soteriological correction of Anselm. The harmonic insight enables Scotus to present the nature of divine creative action in the world, the generous divine response to human fallenness and the divine artistic design to bring all things into union.
I. The Background: Bonaventure, Cicero and Anselm

Bonaventure’s vision of the mind’s road to God is heavily metaphysical and laden with aesthetic elements, as creation leads to the divine Artist and as apprehension of beauty leads to union with God as beauty beyond description. Bonaventure’s own Neoplatonic vision, from physical to intellectual beauty, and from intellectual to beauty’s foundation, is significant in its vertical ascent from creation to Creator, from image to source. Formal or exemplar causality grounds beauty and is the scientific manner by means of which beauty reveals itself, whether in proportionality of elements or harmonic tones. Bonaventure presents both visual and auditory imagery for beauty, and ties (as does Augustine) the numerical elements of beauty to music and harmony. Thus, when Scotus offers images that play upon visual and auditory metaphors he does not invent or introduce anything into the tradition that had not already been present in Bonaventure, or even earlier thinkers, like Alexander of Hales who identified *bonum honestum* (intrinsic goodness) with intelligible beauty. What is innovative in Scotus is, as we shall see, the way the divine mind and ear function as do the human, responding to beauty in the world and in the human heart. Thus the vertical ascent for Scotus meets a vertical descent of love in the charitable act.

In addition to the Bonaventurian elements, there are also Stoic and Patristic sources that emphasize proportion and harmony as natural and rational foundations for the existence of beauty as well as the human experience of delight in beauty. Here, the tradition, most clearly represented by Cicero’s *De Officiis*, grounds moral discussion of beauty on the objective foundation of the natural and rational order. The requirements of order are impersonal and eternal, they admit of no personal divine foundation. Harmony and beauty are grounded in the certainty of mathematics and this, on the nature of numbers and the numerical relationship of proportion.

Stoic sources offered a basis from which to elaborate a moral or ethical discussion of good actions. This basis was beyond debate, insofar as the requirements of natural law were eternal and therefore indisputable. Scotus *personalizes* the natural law in his discussion of the natural law giver, who acts *de potentia absoluta/de potentia ordinata*. For Scotus, the eternal principles of natural law are themselves the manifestation of the desire of the natural law giver who has chosen to create a certain type of world with certain characteristics.

Finally, Anselm’s position on the Incarnation and Redemption in *Cur Deus Homo?* sets forth the traditional response to the question of the passion and death of Christ and their role in effecting our salvation. This sort of ultimate sacrifice was required by justice for the *felix culpa* of our first parents: such a sin required such a punishment. The sufferings of Christ made up what was lacking as payment for human fallenness. Anselm’s authority on this matter was undisputed: Bonaventure and Aquinas both followed him. This vision places human fallenness and sin at the center (thus a negative anthropology), requires the suffering necessary to pay for

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1 See Sr Emma Jane Spargo, *The Category of the Aesthetic in the Philosophy of St Bonaventure* (St Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1953).

such a sin (thus a retributive soteriology), and casts God in the role of judge and punisher.

When we consider how Scotus presents the order of merit, or acceptatio, we shall notice several subtle shifts. First, he enhances the Bonaventurian schema to include the vertical divine descent along with the human ascent of love. Second, he personalizes the Stoic model of moral foundationalism to account for objective moral goodness yet avoids an impersonal universe in which forces function at the expense of freedom. Finally, he offers an alternate to Anselm’s position founded upon divine design from all eternity. The fact that the Incarnation was part of God’s eternal plan makes the passion and death of Jesus a different sort of event than repayment for a debt. It is not sin, therefore, but the person of Christ who stands at the center of the economy of salvation. Framed in generous design and artistic intentionality, Scotus’s soteriology emphasizes the particular Franciscan predilection for divine freedom in the form of creative generosity, for creation, incarnation, salvation and eternal reward. Here the aesthetic model offers a single insight that integrates freedom, creativity and generosity.

II. **Acceptatio and the order of merit**

For Scotus, the order of merit, established by divine acceptatio, lies at the intersection of human and divine love: between the highest order of moral perfection and the order of the divine. It is defined by love, since (for Scotus) the difference between an act that is morally perfect (that is, completely in accord with right reason and performed in a morally appropriate manner) and an act that is meritorious is the fact that the meritorious act is a morally perfect act informed (or inspired) by love for God. This act, done out of charity, always receives the highest reward: the divine response of delight. Acceptatio is a foundational theological concept grounded in Scotus’s incarnational vision. He defines the meritorious act, that which is worthy of acceptance and reward, with the example of the death of Jesus.

I say that just as everything other than God is good because it is willed by God and not vice versa, so this merit [of Christ] was good to the extent that it was accepted. Therefore it was merit because it was accepted. It was not the other way around, namely because it was merit and good, therefore it was accepted. (Ordinatio III, distinction 19)

Accordingly, Christ’s suffering and death were indeed redemptive, but not because they paid the price for original sin. They were redemptive because they were undertaken out of love and were thereby accepted by God.

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4 In Wadding-Vivès 14: 718. This text was foundational to Allan B. Wolter’s ‘Native Freedom of the Will as a Key to the Ethics of Scotus’ and is carefully explained in his ‘The Un-Shredded Scotus: A Response to Thomas Williams’ in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 77 (2003): 315–56.
What are we to make of this shift from the act to its acceptance as ground for the order of merit? First, it does not mean that Anselm’s appeal to justice should be dismissed. The explanation that bases salvation on a justice-model of retribution is at best incomplete and, at worst, in error when it promotes a negative anthropology. The scales of justice had to be set right, and indeed they were, but not by the intense suffering undertaken by Jesus. It was not the suffering of Jesus qua act that effected our salvation; it was the divine response to that act. In other words, it was because the act was done out of love that it was united to the accepting divine will, and thus to its reward as merit. This means that suffering qua suffering does not effect redemption, either by natural or impersonal standards of justice, as a Stoic model might suggest, and as one might interpret from the film The Passion of the Christ. Nor does it mean that the actions by which we were saved completed a type of vertical ascent that somehow “attained” what was needed to make up for the sin of our first parents. On the contrary, even if someone such as Jesus had suffered that much and even if by a strict impersonal or mathematical computation of justice this would have been enough to right the scales once more, if that act had not been inspired out of love, and love for God, the act would not have been redemptive.

For example, even though Judas willed the passion of Christ and God willed that same passion, Judas did not will in harmony will the divine desire. Scotus states, “Thus it is necessary that our will be confirmed to the divine will, not after the manner of being similar, but after the manner of obeying a commanding will … and in this way such an obedient will is right, not because it wills what God wills, but because it wills something God wills that it will.”

In this way, according to Scotus, our redemption was effected in the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before Jesus died, rather than on the cross the next day. It is not that his act of love in the Garden was pleasing and accepted because it set the scales of justice right; rather, it set the scales right because it was an act done out of love. The suffering and death of Good Friday were the unfolding effects of an event that had already taken place. In this way, divine acceptatio fulfills the order of justice because it is based on love, not suffering. For Scotus, the affection for justice (our moral foundation and natural disposition to love the highest good for itself alone) finds its perfection in charity (love for God), as the moral order is itself incomplete without the order of merit.

In the order of merit, the vertical ascent of human desire and action enters the domain of love and encounters the divine descent of love and generosity. The two free potencies (divine and human wills) converge on the perfectly good act, both naturally and morally, done out of love for God. The divine will and the human will unite in this object of love. The human will places the object before the Lord and the divine will lovingly accepts. In this loving acceptance, both the object and the human person are caught up into divine life. Delight, then, characterizes this moment because the two wills are joined in union, as lovers of a common object.

The order of merit, defined by acceptatio, belongs clearly to the theological domain. It depends upon the nature of God, the personal God revealed in Scripture.

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This personal God chose to create the world at a particular moment in time. *Acceptatio*, the final piece of the divine plan culminates divine intentionality from the foundation of the world. Salvation history unfolds as a single movement of love that informs human experience. Scotus sees no distinction within the movement of intentionality, between the graciousness of the creator, the redeemer and sanctifier. Creation, Incarnation and Salvation are three phases of one single divine intention. Nothing, not even human weakness, has interfered with the realization of divine desire. As both ordered and ordering love, *acceptatio* is part of the overall divine intention to reveal and share graciousness and mercy. Like divine action recorded in Scripture, the act of acceptance expresses the divine joy and, in particular, the delight with which God responds to every human action done out of love.

Scotus likens *acceptatio* to divine applause for human efforts at loving; the divine joy at the sight of human generosity. God’s freedom meets human freedom; God’s love encounters human love. In *acceptatio*, God freely and lovingly embraces a human action performed out of love. This action, however great or small, is accepted and rewarded. Indeed, where the order of merit is concerned, Scotus affirms only one certainty: God’s freedom and love are so immense, that we can count on a reward far beyond anything our actions deserve.

And so, it is well said that God always rewards beyond our worth, and universally beyond any particular value which an act might merit. This merit is beyond nature and its intrinsic goodness; it is from a gratuitous divine acceptance. What’s more, even beyond that justice which would commonly reward an act, for God rewards by means of pure liberality.  

Divine goodness does not stop there, for in addition our sins will be punished far less than they deserve.

### III.  *Acceptatio* and the Franciscan perspective

The highest human perfection, then, is not justice (or even acting out of the affection for justice). This is the fulfillment of moral perfection, but not yet a perfection that shares in divine life. Rather, the highest perfection is love, and generous love in imitation of God’s outpouring in creation, redemption and salvation. Divine *acceptatio* is the manifestation of generous freedom according to a Franciscan perspective. Just as Francis was free to throw all his possessions away and rely completely on the love of God, so God is free to distribute rewards, not so much to the completely undeserving (since God can never reward the sinner for sin, nor punish the good person for being good), but far beyond the actual amount that might be determined in a calculation of strict justice. This sort of God is depicted in the parable told by Jesus in Matthew 20:1–16, where the generous master who pays everyone the same, and wonders why some complain because he is generous.

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Generosity is thus rendered rational; indeed, it is rationality itself. In the generous act, the person pours forth, not unreflectively nor because of any external constraint or condition that requires action of a particular sort, but because of integrity. Indeed, at this moment generosity meets integrity, as the deepest reality of the divinity is generous and intentional love, mercy and forgiveness. The reason God acts in this way, Scotus argues, is because this is the sort of person (or Triune communion) that God is. This God is clearly *not* the God of the philosophers, or the intellectuals of his time. It is not the God of Aristotle or Plato: a God understood to be Ground of Being, Unmoved Mover, Necessary Principle or Form of the Good. In his critique of Aristotelian, Stoic and Neoplatonic models, Scotus argues, Christianity has something that really is Good News.

**IV. Acceptatio and divine integrity**

Scotist *acceptatio* is tied closely to divine integrity. In *Ordinatio* IV, distinction 46, Scotus considers how it is that God’s justice is mercy.\(^8\) In answer to the question of the coincidence of justice and mercy, especially in forgiveness of sinners, Scotus begins with a presentation of two notions of justice. The first is from Anselm, the second from Aristotle. The Anselmian understanding of justice involves rectitude of the will served for its own sake. The Aristotelian understanding of the term deals with this rectitude in relationship to another. In other words, *justice* can refer to the self, to what character and integrity require as well as to due proportion to something or someone other than oneself, giving someone what he or she deserves. An act may be just in either or both senses. I can act justly toward myself as well as toward another.

In the case of divine justice, God could rightfully act by virtue of either perspective. God can either respond according to the object (what it is owed, or according to a strict sense of impersonal justice) or according to the divine nature (what God owes Himself, so to speak, or in a way that allows for generosity). God’s integrity far exceeds any demands the external object might make on divine action. God’s deepest justice, then, is justice to the divine nature.\(^9\) God must always be God, regardless of the circumstances. This is the metaphysical requirement of divine identity. When, however, we remember that the creature is what it is because of the prior act of divine choice in the order of intentionality, God’s action according to the divine nature is also in harmony with the earlier divine creative action that brought this creature into being. So, even when God does act out of Anselm’s sense of justice, the creature is still getting what it deserves because *the deepest value of that being has already been given by God.* To say that such a being receives what it

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\(^8\) An English version of this is reproduced in *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality*, pp. 238–55.

\(^9\) ‘I say that God is no debtor in any unqualified sense save with respect to his own goodness, namely, that he love it. But where creatures are concerned he is debtor rather to his generosity …’ *Ordinatio* IV, d. 46 in *Will and Morality*, p. 253.
deserves is not to say it merits on its own. Indeed, what it deserves belongs to the order of created goodness chosen by God in love.¹⁰

What had appeared as two different perspectives on justice now collapses into one, in light of the divine nature and the original act of divine desire to create this world, the order of intentionality. Since God’s nature is love and generosity, this means quite simply that God’s justice is mercy, forgiveness and generosity. For this reason, we cannot know what reward awaits us, for indeed, “eye has not seen, nor has ear heard, what God has stored up for those who love him.” (1 Cor. 2:9)

V. Divine acceptatio and aesthetics

Finally, in divine acceptatio all the aesthetic dimensions of Scotist thought come together: divine creativity, divine generosity, divine delight. Insofar as acceptatio partakes of the order of divine intentionality, it is the fulfillment of creation. Insofar as acceptatio reveals the rationality of generosity, it replaces the retributive model with that of charity. Insofar as acceptatio reveals the divine response to human acts, it affirms the particular Franciscan attraction to beauty.

There are several textual passages which illustrate Scotus’s predilection for aesthetic imagery, for both the moral and meritorious orders. In his presentation of the divine response in the order of merit, Scotus likens it to the pleasure experienced by one who listens to beautiful music.¹¹ In both his Lectura and Ordinatio I, dist. 17, Scotus explains that just as harmony is pleasing to the listener, the fullest human action (where moral goodness is informed by love) possesses the fullest harmony and is, therefore, most pleasing to the divine ear. In both texts, Scotus develops the relationship of the morally good act as harmoniously ordered whole.¹² Just as the chords of a harp are the result of the harmonious blending of the various strings, played in a particular order that is itself beautiful, so the overall chord is constituted by an objective relationship of ordering of its parts. This objective relationship of goodness has its subjective counterpart in the receptive divine ear. At the close of Quodlibet Question 17,¹³ Scotus explains the fourfold goodness within the act: voluntary, virtuous, charitable and meritorious. Taken in light of our reflections thus far, this fourfold goodness could be understood as a four-note chord, where each additional level adds to the beauty and richness of the sound, as harmony adds to harmony without destroying the earlier beauty of the chord.

¹⁰ ‘In an unqualified sense where a creature is concerned, God is just only in relationship to his first justice, namely, because such a creature has been actually willed by the divine will.’ Ibid., p. 255.


¹² Ordinatio I, d. 17, n. 152 (5:211).

¹³ Scotus, God and Creatures, p. 398.
Lest one think that such a metaphor reveals a capricious divine aesthetic response that has more to do with pleasure than reason, it is important to refer to other examples of auditory judgment in Scotist texts. The highest metaphysical speculation that Scotus offers can be found in the *Treatise on God as First Principle*. In this text, Scotus seeks to conclude his reflection with the affirmation that *ens infinitum*, the philosophical expression that most closely touches divine being, is a meaningful term (one that does not contain a contradiction). He demonstrates this with an appeal to the subtle ability of the mind to detect contradiction more surely than the ear detects dissonance. The mind is like the ear, he reasons, having a most subtle ability to judge truth and falsehood. Divine delight at human love belongs to the highest and most subtle level of rational judgment.

The ultimate communion of each person (and all creation) with God is mediated by the divine act of acceptance, *acceptatio*. This act is the fullest completion of the first act of creative freedom; it accomplishes the divine order of intention. As a Franciscan, Scotus views the divine design as relational love. In the human response of love to the created order, understood as the gift of a loving Creator, we participate in the return of all to God. This is not a return that constitutes a long and arduous journey, for just as the father ran out to meet the returning prodigal son, so too love is racing down time to meet us.
Hans Urs von Balthasar has an unerring instinct for what is most important in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Of course it is possible to quibble on minor matters, but von Balthasar thoroughly understands the keen theological passion that permeates Hopkins’s deeply individual and sensory aesthetic. Von Balthasar well explicates from Hopkins’s spiritual writings and gleans from his poetry the sacramental kernel of the concept of inscape. We shall see in a sonnet, “Hurrahing in Harvest,” how the fount of the theology of this sacramental encounter is the Scotist theory of the Incarnation, which Hopkins named the Great Sacrifice.¹ But, contrary to von Balthasar’s assumptions, deep things (though not all of the deep things) in Hopkins’s poetry are accessible to those who have no experience of faith or sacrament. Von Balthasar leaves unexplored this wider aesthetic experience, especially in its Scotist foundations; yet those philosophical grounds reveal a most pregnant manifestation of what von Balthasar calls the “form” in creation. Scotus is called the “Marian Doctor” with reason. Indeed, von Balthasar recognized and even celebrated the Marian implications of this theology in Hopkins, whose love of the Marian Doctor followed rather than preceded his devotion to the Virgin. We shall see how Hopkins grounds his Mariology in the work of John Duns Scotus, as he brings to light in his wonderful philosophical lyric, “Duns Scotus’s Oxford.”

As von Balthasar’s errors about Hopkins are few and minor, but still worth noting, it is good to deal with them quickly; most are on the level of biography. For instance, Hopkins did not make the Ignatian Exercises central to his prayer life for the whole time of his life as a Jesuit; towards the end, he found them depressing and avoided the Exercises except when required to do so (and then, according to Joseph Feeney, SJ, he appears to have spent an inordinate amount of time on the meditations on sin from the first week, rather than moving methodically through the four “weeks” of the Exercises).² In judging Hopkins’s poetic heritage, von Balthasar is less generous than need be in acknowledging the Christianity in Wordsworth;

¹ The best discussion of this concept is in David Anthony Downes, The Great Sacrifice (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983).

Wordsworth himself recognized that as a young man he had attributed to Nature a morality he had learned from his Presbyterian nurse. Von Balthasar is, on the other hand, rather more generous than necessary about the theological depth of the Tractarian principle of reserve, which sapped so much of Hopkins’s passion for the physical world from his Oxford poetry. That Victorian attempt to keep young men from overindulging in religious emotionalism is not quite the same as a full-blown negative mystical theology. But these are matters on the periphery; von Balthasar’s instinct for what is important to Hopkins is impressive and edifying.

*The Glory of the Lord* accurately delineates how ‘instress’ and ‘inscape,’ Hopkins’s coined words, refer to an interaction between the observer and the thing observed—as in the high Romantic epistemology of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, an interaction that demands a yielding of self to the reality of the thing observed. Moreover, Hopkins embraced John Ruskin’s recognition of the element of sacrifice involved in such attention. Von Balthasar welcomes it too: “The artist has an idea which must be realised and which accepts no excuses until the creator has expended his last energies in the service of the coming-into-reality. Service of the beautiful can constitute the hardest kind of asceticism.” That sacrifice imitates in a creaturely way the sacrificial action of God in attending to the good of other beings, which is creation. Indeed, the sacrifice of the Crucifixion is a sort of magnification, under conditions of sin, of God’s enormous love and condescension in giving of himself to create. Scotus speculates that the Incarnation was the final cause and the first intention of creation (Hopkins calls it the “first outstress”). If the Incarnation is indeed that good for which all other goods were established, then the human nature into which God was to incarnate Himself was next in the order of intention. Scotus explains the connection between the Divine Son and the glorified humanity this way:

> We can deny that predestination concerns persons only, for if God can love a good other than himself, not only when it is a person, but also when it is a nature, then for its sake he can also select and ordain in advance some good suitable to it. Consequently he can choose (1) glory and (2) the union as the means of glory, not only for the person, but for some nature.  

An architect thinks of a house and then plans what it ought to be made of. It is in this manner that Mary, the “house of gold, the tower of ivory,” in which Christ was to

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4 Probably the best introduction to the concept of reserve among the Tractarians, at least as aesthetes, is G.B. Tennyson, *Victorian Devotional Poetry: The Tractarian Mode* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). However, the primary texts that most likely influenced Hopkins are more thoroughly treated in Margaret Johnson, *Gerard Manley Hopkins and Tractarian Poetry* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1997).

5 Balthasar, GL1, pp. 220–21.


7 These are invocations of Mary from the Litany of Loreto.
be enfleshed, was destined to that glory. Von Balthasar’s intimacy with Hopkins is especially evident in his recognition of how, for the Jesuit poet, Mary both symbolizes and embodies nature. She is, for Hopkins, a sort of \textit{res et sacramentum}—the thing-which-is-also-a-sign—of both human nature and all the natural world. Human nature requires, depends upon, the natural world. Mary is an ordinary human, living like the rest of us amidst earth and sky, air and water, dependent upon all the structures of the universe, from gravitation and the intricacies of molecular biology, to political and family organization, to the theological context of Jewish law. But despite her limitation to a particular location and moment of history, she is a sign of the relation of all creatures to Christ. While remaining herself, she bears a meaning beyond herself: she stands for all nature. Through the predestination of the Incarnation, human nature and all physical nature are raised (as in Romans 8:21) to perfect harmony with the God who by grace calls it into being and into glory.

Human nature involves the particularity of bodies and the senses. In the words of John Keats, whose sensory vividness meets one in Hopkins’s verse early and late: “axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses.” We begin, then, where Hopkins begins—with experience. Hopkins brings us the taste of individual self, the inescapable particularity of point of view. He lives in a world of things concretely and individually known as other selves, whether human, animal or even inanimate; their otherness is absolute and incommunicable.

Von Balthasar scours Hopkins’s spiritual writings to delineate the ineffable individuality that Duns Scotus called \textit{haecceitas} and Hopkins called “pitch.” One must, by the way, distinguish the two terms; Hopkins discussed \textit{pitch} only in terms of the selfhood of rational beings. Living in the fourteenth century, Scotus discussed individuation for all classes of beings, as well as nature and personhood, but not with the primary motive of investigating the experience of individuality, as post-Romantic thinkers have done. Scotus was engaged in disputes about epistemology, trying to forge a language for distinguishing a thing’s nature from its body (he makes arguments, for instance, that turn on the existence of individuals without physical bodies) without losing sight of individuality. Scotus takes individuality to be logically prior to the “mere accident of existence” and the nature (human angelic, and so on) in which a self might be clothed.

Thus, individuality, seen from Hopkins’s more ontological view of Scotus’s distinctions, appears to be decreed before even one’s nature. Both agree fully that individuality can be shared with no other being. Hopkins seeks—and finds—this incommunicable individuation especially in two places: in his experience of perception and of moral responsibility. Responsibility is linked to perception; not

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10 One of the characteristic argumentative strategies of the Subtle Doctor is to point out epistemological pitfalls in the syntax of his opponents’ apparently simple affirmations or denials.
only is it true that none of us sees quite what any other sees, but that we must be true to what we see.\footnote{12} He writes, “[W]hen I compare my self, my being-myself, with anything else whatever, all things alike, all in the same degree, rebuff me with blank unlikeness.”\footnote{13} Scotus had given him this language of rebuff; he says any created thing is “repugnant” to sharing self with any other creature. Its “thisness” (haecceitas) makes it so; each creature is oriented toward its particular end, which cannot be shared. Only God, who is oriented in love towards all things, has a self which rebuffs no other self. But humans, according to Hopkins, “taste” all things through the self. One’s self is, in first intention, a “positive infinitesimal” of capacity to love—specifically, to love in a unique way some aspects of God’s beauty. “Pitch” constitutes a sort of aesthetic final cause for a rational being.

Experience is unique to each individual perceiver because of each one’s pitch—each one’s predestination, as it were, to a particular taste of God’s glory. So Hopkins is deeply experiential. Let us follow him into the “Half an hour of extreme enthusiasm” in which he produced a sonnet, “Hurrahing in Harvest.”\footnote{14} The episode is sacramental; the things the poet sees are full of the Christ of the Eucharist.

Hurrahing in Harvest
Summer énds now; now, bárbarous in béeauty, the stóoks ríse
Around; up above, what wind-walks! what lovely behaviour
Of silk-sack clóuds! has wilder, wilful-wávier
Méal-drift moulded ever and melted acróss skíes?

I wálk, I líft up, I’ líft úp heart, éyes,
Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour;
And, éyes, heárt, what looks, what lips yet gáve you á
Rápтурous love’s greeting of realer, of rounder replies?

And the azurous hung hills are his wórld-wieldíng shoulder
Majestic—as a stallion stalwart, very-violet-sweet!—
These things, these things were here and but the beholder
Wánting; which two whén they ónce méet,
The heárt réars wings bólíd and bolder
And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.

Here we meet one place, one speaker, one moment in his life: summer ends now. He sees the ingathered harvest—“stooks” are bound groups of sheaves.\footnote{15} We look up with him: “what wind-walks!” Wind and “Spirit” are the same word in many

\footnote{12} There is an excellent introduction to the development of this Victorian sense of personal responsibility in perception – Romantic in its roots, and petering out in aesthetes such as Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde – in Patricia Ball, \textit{The Science of Aspects: The Changing Role of Fact in the Work of Coleridge, Ruskin and Hopkins} (London: Athlone Press, 1971).

\footnote{13} Hopkins, \textit{Sermons and Devotional Writings}, p. 123.


languages, and most particularly in the Biblical languages Hopkins knew. Hopkins took puns seriously; we should be alert. The “meal-drift” of the clouds brings fine flour to mind. On a windy day, the shifting clouds really can look like the flour dust thrown off one’s hands in baking bread. He lifts up first his eyes, and then his heart, as in the sursum corda of the Mass; this is a moment of grace. The grain field is a real grain field in harvest, yet in the perception of this speaker—it would be hard to deny that it is Hopkins the priest—this field sacramentally participates in the reality of the Body of Christ “our Saviour” Who can be met in the breaking of the bread. This is not a sacrament per se; it is not a sign with public, legal significance regarding one’s relationship with the Church. The speaker is encountering grace directly rather than through a ritual sacramentum. Nevertheless, the cognitive and emotional effects are as full as if it were fully sacramental.

Yet the spiritual encounter here recorded should not eclipse the fact that on the literal level, the event is a walk by an English farm, with clouds and the shoulder of a mountain behind it, on a windy day in the summer of 1878. It is a particular physical place and time; and the meeting with Christ takes on startlingly physical dimensions: “eyes, lips” and “rapturous love.” Jesus is no symbol but a Man, a man as well as God the creator; the Incarnation is the reason why the physicality of nature is the physicality of the Creator. The mountain shoulder is God’s shoulder; the stallion and the violet speak (to ears that are ready to hear) of Christ in his terrible grandeur enforcing the decree of earth’s creation and in the feathery delicacy of His love. Then Hopkins moves from perception into analysis, to tell us of what von Balthasar recognizes as the “objective” reality of grace: he says, “These things, these things were here and but the beholder/Wanting.” The repetition points us to the presence of both the physical and the spiritual in this harvest, as in the Eucharist, which its imagery invokes. It is not that Hopkins particularly felt the need for a savior on that windy July day; Christ simply is the Saviour who has redeemed the world out of nothingness, in Hopkins’s pithy phrase. If one reaches out to make the scene fully real, as Coleridge admonishes us to bring dead things into fullness of being with our imagination, we will find in the fullness of creation the redeemer. Von Balthasar is quite right in saying that nothing is projected upon the scene; Hopkins uncovers it through “a mood of great, abnormal in fact, mental acuteness.” But the attention that can discover Christ in the clouds and the hills is only possible through grace. According to von Balthasar, the experience of faith is the sine qua non of a theological aesthetics; faith is essential as the Christian’s way of knowing. And yet it is nonsense to say that grace is necessary to an understanding of Hopkins, or

17  Hopkins, Sermons and Devotional Writings, p. 170.
20  Balthasar, GL1, p. 133.
else the faithless who “fable and miss,” as Hopkins put it, would never reprint him so much (or write so many articles about him!). How can his works be so utterly infused with grace and sacramentality that one can speak of them exclusively in terms of their theological content, and yet so intellectually cogent that another can understand them with thorough integrity from a secular point of view? Readers can interpret the poem as enthusiasm about the inspiration provided by nature without any reference to Catholic sacraments. According to Hopkins the whole world is nothing but news, word of God; yet even the subject matter of poems that trumpet the active presence of Christ in the world can be understood with consistency from a thoroughly secular frame of mind. Hopkins knows infallibly which he prefers, yes; but he does no injustice to the coherency of visions of reality besides his own.

Von Balthasar thought of Hopkins the poet as the “selfless self of self” raised up by grace, so he discounted the possibility of a secular revival of interest in Hopkins, though he called for more scholarship on the poet. Von Balthasar does notice, far more fully than most critics in English, how Hopkins finds multiple instresses and inscapes of transitive things, but does not pursue how these multiplicities relate to the aesthetic experience of those without faith.

Any single thing can have as many inscapes as there are perceiving minds to call them forth, and different inscapes at different times; each thing is a bounded infinity of inscapes. Under the sway of Newman’s powerful epistemology of real and notional knowledge, Hopkins invented the concepts of inscape and instress as ways of talking about the particular perceptions of multiple realities. (Newman was recopying the first part of The Grammar of Assent in one room of the Oratory in the same weeks that Hopkins was giving birth to the very word “inscape” in another). When he later read Scotus, the young poet was thrilled; inscapes correspond very closely to a concept that is frequently encountered in Scotus: formalitates (also called by Scotus realitates, realities). These are multiple intellectual realities in individual things, waiting to spring into actuality through the work of an observing mind.

21 Hopkins, Sermons and Devotional Writings, p. 129.
That leap into psychological encounter Hopkins very much appreciated. He spoke of reality under the image of a pomegranate, which shows a different pattern depending on the place in which it is sliced. He calls each aspect of a thing a “cleave of being,” revealing but not exhaustive about the reality to which it gives us access. Scotus, through some fierce and complex argumentation, had argued for a clear way of distinguishing realities from mental fictions. And he had to; multiple accounts of the same thing are frequently construed as fictions. Scotus insists that there can be truth in multiple concepts of the same thing by asserting that the reality of mental entities, in particular, *formalitates*, is diminished—but not null. *Formalitates* correspond to inscapes as the concept of *haecceitas* does to pitch—not with absolute identity, but closely enough to electrify the student Hopkins with recognition.

In Hopkins a person’s *pitch* can be described as one’s final cause as conceived and predestined by God. Von Balthasar sees how one’s pitch is fulfilled by attending to inscapes in the world according to one’s peculiar capacities. Grace can raise a person, Hopkins says, to a “higher pitch,” at which new understandings dawn; and one can refuse grace and lapse into one’s ordinary pitch. Because of the multiple inscapes, the many realities, available in the individual things one encounters, it is possible to perceive the same world truly, albeit differently, with and without grace.

Hopkins emphasizes in his journals as well as his verse that the realities in a thing amount to more than two. Otherwise, there would only be the usual, secular way of seeing things and the right, holy way. But in fact he himself can catch the inscape of the same thing different ways at different times. He attends to the individuality of his subjects only to find them bursting with multiplicity. So he loves puns; he loves multiple meanings. His poems have arguments that can be followed on different levels—personal, ecological, philosophical, theological; he arranges even his rhythms in such a way that one can legitimately scan a counterpoint poem more than one way at once (“for we do not forget what the rhythm is that by rights we should be hearing”). Indeed, his very conception of poetry is not so much that one ought to have a high religious purpose—for he is perfectly willing to acknowledge fine poets who do not—as to have a fascination with the way language doubles back on itself. He deeply enjoys the fact that language has meaning and has structures of sound and syntax that can be perceived independent of the meaning. He loves the beauty of these multiple patterns, and even more the beauty of arranging these patterns in an orderly relation to one another. He distinguishes poetry from other utterance because the poet attends to this sort of beauty.

Poetry is speech framed for contemplation of the mind by the way of hearing or speech framed to be heard for its own sake and interest even over and above its interest of

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meaning. Some matter and meaning is essential to it but only as an element necessary to support and employ the shape which is contemplated for its own sake.27

And so in a poem the reader is to call forth as inscape not merely a single argument but also the inscapes of repeated figures of rhetoric, sound and meter. Like every other reality, a poem is unified, but multitudinous. The joy of it is in the artistry—that it has been deliberately arranged by a human being to proclaim its own richness, which the poet recognizes. Poetic language imitates the world’s many inscapes by displaying its own. Real relations of sound and other patterns overlay real relations of meaning. Thus one thing, a poem, potentially has many layers of beauty: in diction, in chiming sounds, in rhythms, in patterns of imagery and syntax and conventions of poetic form. Each has a unity in itself which calls to the mind of a reader who actively receives it—what Hopkins called ‘instressing.’ Just a little chart of the way Hopkins connects assonances and consonances in a poem offers opportunities for surprising intellectual pleasures. Yet each of these unified patterns contributes to a larger unity. Chiming sounds mark the emphatic syllables, which help the reader with the tangled syntax; the complications of the syntax establish patterns in the dramatic structure and in the images; and these in turn contribute to the various layers of argument, each of which can be enjoyed for its own sake. Hopkins spoke of “bidding” the reader into new encounters with inscape.28 His poems constantly draw the reader from one aspect of meaning to another—not all at once, as he explained to Bridges, but “so that lines and stanzas should be left in the memory and superficial impressions deepened ... without exhausting all.”29

Hopkins practiced all these things in his poem to Duns Scotus:

Duns Scotus’s Oxford
Towery city and branchy between towers;
Cuckoo-echoing, bell-swarmed, lark-charmed, rook-racked, river-rounded;
The dapple-eared lily below thee; that country and town did
Once encounter in, here coped and poised powers;

Thou hast a base and brickish skirt there, sours
That neighbor-nature thy grey beauty is grounded
best in; graceless growth, thou hast confounded
Rural rural keeping—folk, flocks and flowers.

Yet ah! This air I gather and release
He lived on; those weeds and waters, these walls are what
He haunted, who of all men most sways my spirits to peace;

Of reality the rarest-veined unraveller; a not
Rivelled insight, be rival Italy or Greece;
Who fired France for Mary without spot.

29 Hopkins, Letters to Bridges, 50 (13 May 1878).
Yvor Winters thought this was a pretty good nature poem about Oxford spoiled by sentimentality about some obscure historical figure at the end.\textsuperscript{30} The poem is of course a nature poem; that’s just not its only inscape. One can also look at it as a slice, a cleave of autobiography: we see Oxford as Hopkins did, in a way deliberately private and odd: the branches, the towers, the birds—we spend most of our time looking up and then some looking down along the riverbanks. Hopkins carries us along with him in trying not to look at the brick suburbs. Why this biographically peculiar view of a place? Hopkins believes the more true a poet is to his individual vision the more he can show other people inscapes they didn’t know before but can perhaps learn to catch.

The towers and branches are real, though towers and branches in liturgy and scripture certainly loom behind them; the larks, like poets, charm the place; the rooks screech, cloaked in black like tutors; Hopkins considers the lily and the river, and then speaks sadly of the way in which they have not been considered. Once town and country were well-balanced powers here, and both honored; now “Thou hast a base and brickish skirt there,”—an ugly nineteenth-century suburb—“sours/That neighbor-nature thy grey beauty is grounded/best in.” The key to the argument (on more than one level) is the neighbor nature—we ought to love our neighbors even if they’re trees. We endanger something beautiful if we indulge in too much “growth” at our neighbor’s expense. One can generalize an undercurrent about self-indulgent personal growth, though urban sprawl is the primary topic. Clearly Hopkins is mounting, among other things, a political argument about city planning. We must attend to folks, flocks and flowers, and grant each its particular dignity. Is this sonnet a nature poem? Autobiography? Politics? Yes; and more!

Though the poem is scanned as a sonnet, it does not scan exactly as iambic pentameter. Hopkins called its peculiar meter ‘sprung rhythm,’ wherein the number of unstressed syllables can vary between emphatic stresses. Sprung rhythm can be either more terse or more spacious than normal meter, which Hopkins called “running rhythm.” The opening quatrain is very spacious; one of the lines has sixteen syllables where ten might be expected. Under five of them the poet marked an outrider, a mark which in his system of scansion allows extra syllables to act as exceptions to the counting. In two other places in this poem, to this critic’s ear, an outrider might have been appropriate, though Hopkins did not mark one. Sprung rhythm runs rampant in the quatrain about the natural world adorned with manmade towers that blend in with the landscape; we get rigid pentameter when we see the “base and brickish” town, with an outrider only where the rural slips back into the poet’s rhetoric.

“Duns Scotus’s Oxford” is roughly an Italian sonnet in its rhyme scheme, and so we are signaled to look for a change in argumentative direction in the sestet that comes after the eighth line. Here Hopkins begins to speak of Scotus, and breaks forth again into rhythmic variation, giving us pentameter with the second foot reversed in the second and third lines of the sestet. His metrical notes indicate that he considers

this effect to be especially disruptive to established metrical order. \(^{31}\) Hopkins engages in this metrical disruption when he is speaking of Scotus, whose reputation suffered in the subsequent tradition because, as Hopkins says, he “knew too much ... saw too far.” \(^{32}\) When he contrasts Scotus with Aquinas and Aristotle (“Italy or Greece”) we get a curious metric figure—two dactyls before the caesura, three iambs afterwards. Hopkins used it earlier in the poem in detailing the encounter between the “coped and poised powers” of town and country; Scotus gets the countryside! And when Hopkins comes to the reference to the Immaculate Conception, he uses the most forceful of sprung effects—monosyllabic feet. The rhythmic pattern is in itself a comment on the argument; but in other ways too the sonnet is an aesthetic celebration of music made between sound and sound, and the thematic connections between sound and sense. Look at the patterns of alliteration—b and t in the first quatrain give way to the same b with a hissing ‘s’ in the second, for instance. There are all sorts of echoes in the ear—for instance, “lark-charmed, river rounded” (emphasis mine) coupled with feminine internal rhymes in the first quatrain. In the second quatrain the alliteration on gr growls at the new housing development. We are to attend to the very words; and more. Our action is sacrificial as well as aesthetic if what we do is done in grace and justice, with grace given its full theological weight of meaning.

Oxford as Hopkins knows it is graceless in every sense of the word. What Winters saw as a nature poem is also a lament for the fallen religious and moral state of Oxford since Scotus’s day. Hopkins loves Oxford, it is clear; and he loves Scotus; but what is the connection, except that Scotus once lived there?

The fact is that the love in this poem flows from Scotus to Hopkins as much as vice versa. In telling what he saw by faith Scotus has loved Hopkins. Hopkins rejoices that there’s a physical reality they both have encountered—river, weeds, even air—just as both have encountered the same spiritual realities. The poet now sees, literally and figuratively, both the humble and the noble things that Scotus called to notice with his incarnational vision. Thus the philosopher sways the poet’s spirits to peace. Scotus has brought him the ability to look patiently to another’s good and bring it to life, like dove brooding on a nest—or a philosopher on an insight. Aristotle the Greek taught him about perception; Aquinas of Italy taught him theology; but Scotus’s insight opened Hopkins to inscapes by unraveling “realty”—realitates, formalitates. So there is an argument here about Scotus the philosopher and the way Hopkins has been inspired by him to account philosophically for his desire to love and accept all the inscapes he could find of many-sided reality.

But the ending is curious. Is it merely because he wants us to know about Scotus’s most famous accomplishment that Hopkins ends the poem by referring to his defense of Mary and the Immaculate Conception? It would be rash to think so; the last line is the most rhetorically powerful position in a sonnet. We must look back and catch yet another inscape. And it is worth our while to look for a moment to his other poems to see why Hopkins refers to Mary. “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” praises a heroic nun who called upon Christ in the midst of storm, bringing forth his presence to her

\(^{31}\) Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘Author’s preface’, p. 46.

dying shipmates; she did it by “Wording it how but by him that present and past./
Heaven and earth are word of, worded by?” Hopkins connects that nun’s action to
Mary’s Immaculate Conception, which prepared her for the conception of her Savior:
“for so conceived, so to conceive thee is done.” Then the poet speaks of another kind
of conception, which also brings Christ forth: “But here was a heart-throe, birth
of a brain,/Word, that heard and kept thee and uttered thee outright.” Mary is for
Hopkins a model of absolute truth to one’s pitch, of pointedly chosen and enacted
liberty in love. Hopkins loves Oxford and therefore wishes it to come into its own
true fullness of liberty. Hopkins wants Oxford to do what Scotus has taught him to
do, and what Oxford philosophy has failed to do since Scotus. The Oxford Hopkins
knew was Protestant Oxford, which abandoned all sacramentality and fled from the
honor due to Mary. Hopkins thinks that even its new architecture shows how it has
abandoned that complete yielding to God, conceived as the Beautiful, and to love.
Mary is the model of contemplation of the beauty of God, and of yielding of self to
the good of others. Unlike Mary, who is full of grace, and who waxed great with the
divine Child, Oxford has a sterile and “graceless growth.” Oxford with its towers and
lilies should philosophically conceive Christ, the Word of God, and thereby emulate
Mary, the Tower of David and lily of chastity. The inscape of theology underlies
the inscapes of philosophy, of politics, of personal recollection, of aesthetic reverie,
even of artistic regard for sound patterns; and yet all these other realities live in the
poem—this particular poem about this particular city, seen through one pair of eyes
in a particular time. Von Balthasar understands the Marian basis of Hopkins’s nature
poetry as few other critics have done; and this poem about Scotus illustrates it as
completely as any in the Hopkins canon.

In “Duns Scotus’s Oxford,” readers do not encounter a single haecceitas of
Oxford; that is too singular to be communicated; but we meet many inscapes. The
final cause of a university is to be—as Mary is called in another of her titles—the Seat
of Wisdom. That is its being, and it is, in Hopkins’s phrasing “but a halfcreation,” a
failed being, if it does not teach the fullness of divine love. The generous teaching
of His fullness is God’s will for teachers. The fulfillment of Oxford’s final cause (its
pitch, were it a single conscious being) lies in that generous love of both learning
and teaching. Scotus has taught Hopkins many ways to “answer the end” of his being
by saying “Glory be to God!” Scotus has brought him to the wild growth and the
waters and even the walls of the beautiful city, haunted by the image of yet another
city with a river, the New Jerusalem. In God’s will, finally, is our peace; and peace
is what Scotus brings to Hopkins. The more inscapes we can conceive, the greater
can be our love; the fullest individualism is the deepest commitment to the good
of others. We must tell one another: “Look! Look!” in the arts because to learn to
look is the precondition for the Christlike, creative giving of self. Hopkins called it
the Great Sacrifice in which we are all called to participate. God sacrificially loves
all things into existence itself. Then being, which calls to us from the things of the
world, waiting to spring forth into actuality, comes to its fruition in being known.

33 Hopkins, Sermons and Devotional Writings, p. 239–40.
PART II
Von Balthasar: Some Criticisms
The absence of the transcendental concept beauty from Christian, and particularly from Catholic theology, or rather (since theology seems too restrictedly intellectual) from Catholic theological, spiritual and liturgical sensibility, has proved a great disaster, so Hans Urs von Balthasar sought to show. The ‘theological aesthetics’ offered in Herrlichkeit, far from being some optional extra, should be regarded as the only—or at any rate the most accessible—way to retrieve something like the sensibility which once sustained natural theology and indeed any Christian faith worthy of the name. In his ‘theological aesthetics’, Balthasar sought to show how beauty—glory, majesty, Herrlichkeit—was, and could and must again be, the entry point for encounter with the divine: the ambience, the imaginative environment so to speak, in which alone the sacred might become accessible and even, to an extent, perceptible and visible. Those with no perception of beauty, in this sense, so Balthasar suggests, soon lose the ability to worship and even to practise love of neighbour.

Thus, in the first movement of what (as we know, whatever he foresaw at the outset) turned out to be much more than a theological aesthetics—extending into dramatics (the good) and logic (the true)—Balthasar rehabilitates the Glory of the Lord as revealed throughout the Scriptures, uniquely and definitively in the history of Jesus Christ, the ‘form’ in which the triune God chose to be incarnate in history. The beautiful, the glorious, the majestic, the herrlich, draws those who behold it beyond themselves, ultimately into the transfiguring communion in the mystery of the triune Godhead which is eternal life.

Fächer der Stile, the second volume of Herrlichkeit, came out in 1962. Running to nearly 900 pages, it was split into two when it appeared in English, as Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles (1984) and Lay Styles (1986). The three mottoes with which the original was prefaced were redistributed, so that the quotation from Charles Péguy appears in Lay Styles while the quotations from Bonaventure and Francis Thompson introduce Clerical Styles. Epigraphs are often ignored, none is translated in the original German volume. Though of course a priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins is treated in Lay Styles: it seems appropriate, anyway, to recall the lengthy quotation from Francis Thompson, another English Catholic poet, with which Fächer der Stile opens:
The Church, which was once the mother of poets no less than of saints, during the last two centuries has relinquished to aliens the chief glories of poetry … she has retained the palm, but forgone the laurel … Fathers of the Church (we would say), pastors of the Church, pious laics of the Church: you are taking from its walls the panoply of Aquinas; take also from its walls the psaltery of Alighieri. Unroll the precedents of the Church’s past; recall in your minds that Francis of Assisi was among the precursors of Dante, that sworn to poverty he forswore non [sic] Beauty, but discerned through the lamp Beauty the Light God … What you theoretically know, vividly realize: that with many the religion of beauty must always be a passion and a power, that it is only evil when divorced from the worship of the Primal Beauty. (The omissions are Balthasar’s.)

Presumably Balthasar liked these remarks because they show that an English Catholic poet, writing in the 1880s, recognized that the Catholic Church had abandoned poetry, Dante, ‘worship of the Primal Beauty’, and so on, to ‘aliens’—a loss that Thompson dates back ‘two centuries’, thus to the late seventeenth century. Presumably Thompson meant that, in response to the Reformation, the Catholic Church abandoned poetry for rationalistic apologetics, preferring philosophical argument to creative imagination.1

Balthasar takes the story much further back than the late seventeenth century, however. It becomes rare, after Thomas Aquinas, to find among professional theologians any who could ‘treat the radiant power of the revelation of Christ’.2 Rather, since then, ‘it is primarily the laity who, out of an adequate theological culture and with a more powerful vision and deeper creative insight than the theologians of the schools, carry forward the concern and guarantee its effectiveness with a breadth and depth which escapes the professional theologians’ (GL2, p. 15). Indeed, the great exponents of the theology of divine glory whom Balthasar intends to highlight ‘not seldom feel themselves to be, and behave like, representatives of the ecclesiastical “opposition” and have to take on themselves the corresponding fate of the exiled, the misunderstood, the outlawed’, Verbannte, Verkannte, Verfehmte—which is not at all astonishing, he adds: ‘rather, it manifests, in the main, a burning concern for the most genuine concern of the Church and of theology—“Dante! Pascal! Péguy!”—which they see is being inadequately defended by the run-of-the-mill clergy’, beim durchschnittlichen Klerus (GL2, p. 15).

As he allows, Balthasar has no time to trace the genealogy of this movement of ‘opposition’ in the detail that is required. For the most part, he suggests, it represents a protest ‘against a narrowing-down of Christian theology merely to the training of

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1 Francis Thompson (1859–1907) was a ‘Lancashire Catholic’—code in English Catholic circles for a member of a Recusant family, brought up in the then somewhat remote region in which a few Catholic families survived the Reformation. Briefly a seminarian at Ushaw, the great seminary in the neighbourhood of Durham, in the north of England, Thompson did not persevere to priestly ordination. In later years, destitute in London, he was rescued by friends and eventually enabled to publish his poems, from about 1888. By far the most famous is, of course, ‘The Hound of Heaven’. Thompson also published work in prose, e.g. Health and Holiness: A study of the relation between Brother Ass the Body and his Rider the Soul, which appeared in 1905, with a preface by the Anglo-Irish Jesuit George Tyrrell, still (if barely!) in good standing with the Church (he was to be excommunicated as a Modernist).

2 Balthasar, GL2, p. 15.
pastors or to academic specialization and the timeless pursuits of the schools’. Against this narrowing-down, the ‘opposition’ demands ‘an understanding of revelation in the context of the history of the world and the actual present’ (*GL*2, p. 15).

Alongside Dante, Balthasar lists Raymund Lull, Nicholas of Cusa, Erasmus, Luther, and Las Casas (*GL*2, p. 15), as bearers of this ‘oppositional’ tradition. When he comes to discussing these ‘oppositional’ theologians at length, however, in his studies of ‘lay styles’, he chooses a considerably different list: Dante, indeed, but then St John of the Cross, Pascal, J.G. Hamann, V. Soloviev, Hopkins and Péguy.

St John of the Cross and Gerard Manley Hopkins were of course priests, unlike the other five—the point is, however, that they were not ‘professional theologians’, *Fachtheologen*. With more than ‘an adequate theological culture’, initiated as they were into sixteenth and nineteenth century scholasticism respectively, and with ‘a more powerful vision and deeper creative insight’ than any scholastic theologian, these two poets were not engaged in mere *Schulbetrieb*: Balthasar’s characteristically scornful term for the work of seminary professors. Throughout the centuries since the late Middle Ages, but no doubt, for Balthasar, especially with the triumph of neoscholasticism in the early twentieth century, the thinkers concerned with ‘the worship of the Primal Beauty’ were ‘alien’ to the official theologians, in ‘opposition’, outsiders.

Obviously there are several related themes. Once the perception of God’s beauty and the inherent attractiveness of revelation have been lost, then it becomes impossible for the ordinary man or woman to see any value in being religious at all, since the embodiment of God’s presence is no longer visible in the Christian religion, so Balthasar argues. He writes, never as an academic theologian, but precisely as one of the ‘pastors’, we may even say ‘Fathers’ of the Church, to whom Francis Thompson appeals. The long-term aim of Balthasar’s trilogy (aesthetics, dramatics, logic) is evidently to replace the then standard neoscholasticism with an alternative which would reopen the imaginative world, the poetic space, where God’s self-revelation was once upon a time perceptible and can again be so.

Balthasar traces the catastrophe back to the split between monastic and scholastic theology. Irenaeus, Augustine, Denys, Anselm and Bonaventure, the five writers discussed at length under the heading of ‘clerical styles’, take for granted, and write within, a sense of the manifest loveliness of revelation and thus of the Church. Since Dante, however, the ‘passion and power’ of the ‘religion of beauty’, to recall Thompson’s phrases, must be looked for outside the mainstream Catholic tradition. Hamann was not a Catholic at all, Soloviev only late in life and controversially. Dante, Pascal and Péguy were lay men, with variously uneasy relationships with the Church of their day. John of the Cross suffered a great deal from harassment and little less than persecution from colleagues and ecclesiastical superiors.

II

How much of an ‘alien’ was Hopkins? In what sense, to what extent, should he be classed among those whom Balthasar refers to as *Verbannte, Verkannte, Verfehmte*?
Gerard Manley Hopkins died in 1889, aged 44, of typhoid fever contracted in the rat-infested house of the Jesuits in Dublin. Poems appeared in 1918, edited by Robert Bridges, his friend from Oxford days. It took twelve years to sell the edition of 750 copies. It was only in 1930, with the second enlarged edition, edited by Charles Williams, that Hopkins finally burst on the scene, not as a belated Victorian poet but rather as an excitingly innovative ‘modern’ poet.

Hopkins seems not to have felt an outsider in the English poetic tradition, nor even frustrated at being unpublished. ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’, his greatest poem, was scheduled for publication in the Jesuit journal The Month in July 1876. The Month had published Newman’s poem ‘The Dream of Gerontius’ in 1865. There was no editorial hostility to what then seemed fairly ‘difficult’ verse. Indeed, the editor (Henry Coleridge SJ) knew about ‘a new sort of poetry [in America] which did not rhyme or scan or construe’—Walt Whitman, presumably. He wanted Hopkins to omit the (very few) scansion marks in ‘The Wreck’, which Hopkins refused to do. Years later, Coleridge seems to have said he was unwilling to publish something he could not understand. In 1878, at any rate, Hopkins said that The Month did not ‘dare’ to print the poem. It is not entirely clear what he meant by that—probably just that the extremely contorted syntax, rather than the dramatic Christological implications, was too unlike the standard religious verse of the time.

After all, Hopkins had written some of that. ‘The Silver Jubilee’, the only poem in English that Hopkins ever saw printed, as it turned out, was well received by his fellow Jesuits, set to music and performed as a glee one Sunday evening, and printed in a 20 page pamphlet at the request of the bishop whose anniversary of ordination it celebrates.

As we know, however, it was not only the editor of the Jesuit journal who was unwilling to publish Hopkins’s most characteristic poetry. Loyally, Robert Bridges saw his friend’s work into print—eventually; but he never pretended to like it. Indeed, the defensive and apologetic tone of his Preface to the First Edition left a mark on the reading of the poetry which may be detected even at the present day—this notwithstanding the enthusiasm of the ‘Hopkins cult’, as W.H. Gardner called it, in the wake of the Second Edition, with poets such as W.H. Auden and many others less well remembered, imitating Hopkins’s style.

Hopkins—so a whole generation of poets, critics and readers discovered—makes the language work in the way Shakespeare does, physically, dramatically, by alliteration, repetitions, interior rhymes, inversions, telescopings, omission of relative pronouns, and so on, and preferring words of native Old English origin, extending into Dorset dialect, and incorporating Welsh poetic devices.

In New Bearings in English Poetry (1932), the Cambridge critic F.R. Leavis was among the first to introduce Hopkins as a radical intervention in the English poetic canon. Interestingly, in the chapter on Hopkins reprinted in The Common

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3 It is amazing to think that his brother Lionel Charles Hopkins, ten years his junior, a distinguished scholar of archaic Chinese scripts, died in 1932 at the age of 98. Even more amazingly, their sister Millicent died in 1946, at the age of 97, a Sister in the Anglican religious community formerly at All Saints, London Colney. But for the rats Hopkins might have lived into the 1920s.
Pursuit (1952), Leavis cites some verses by Rossetti in order to insist that ‘religion in Hopkins’s poetry is something completely other than the religion of Beauty’. In Rossetti we have a ‘shamelessly cheap evocation of a romantic and bogus Platonism’, exemplifying ‘in a gross form the consequences of that separation of feeling … from thinking which the Victorian tradition, in its “poetical” use of language, carries with it’. Rossetti, ‘the hierophant of Beauty, the dedicated poet of the cult, predecessor of Pater who formulated the credo’, could not be more different, so Leavis insists, from Hopkins, ‘the devotional poet of a dogmatic Christianity’, whose ‘religious interests are bound up with the presence in his poetry of a vigour of mind that puts him in another poetic world from the other Victorians’. In Hopkins there is ‘a vitality of thought, a vigour of the thinking intelligence, that is at the same time a vitality of consciousness’. Furthermore, as regards his ‘addiction to Duns Scotus’, it suffices to say, so Leavis goes on, that this ‘lays a peculiar stress on the particular and the actual, in its full concreteness and individuality, as the focus of the real’. That is fine, so Leavis believes. In ‘Binsey Poplars’, obviously a ‘lament’, Hopkins ‘embraces transience as a necessary condition of any grasp of the real’—in contrast with ‘the Victorian-romantic addicts of beauty and transience’, like Rossetti, who ‘cherish the pang as a kind of religiose-poetic sanction for defeatism in the face of an alien actual world—a defeatism offering itself as a spiritual superiority’. Leavis goes on to relate Hopkins, in ‘the subtlety … apparent in the tropes, conceits and metaphorical symbolism’ to the seventeenth century poets such as George Herbert. Far from valuing the early-Victorian Romantic background to Hopkins’s poetry, as we shall find Balthasar doing, Leavis dismisses it with scorn; nor does he attach much importance to the metaphysics of Duns Scotus. Leavis, on the other hand, certainly sees Hopkins as rooted in the tradition of English poetry. In refusing any connection with the Pre-Raphaelites, and playing down the influence of Scotus, Leavis provides an interesting foil to Balthasar’s interpretation.

However diversely his poetry has been accounted for and situated in retrospect, Hopkins seems never to have lost confidence in the value of what he was doing—indeed the criticisms of the friends to whom he submitted his compositions only confirmed him. It was not as a poet that he felt ‘alien’.

III

Hopkins’s academic brilliance at Oxford did not repeat itself in the years of training as a Jesuit. At the end of the final hour-long oral examination in Latin he was judged to have passed but not creditably enough to warrant staying on for a further year, let alone being groomed to join the professorate. Ordained in 1877 he spent a year teaching in a Jesuit school but was soon moved to Farm Street, in Mayfair, the most fashionable Catholic church in London at the time. It looks as if his superiors found him impossible to place: a year at St Aloysius’ in Oxford, less than a year at St Joseph’s Bedford Leigh near Manchester; a year or so in Liverpool, eight weeks in Glasgow; his tertianship, two years teaching classics at Stonyhurst College, and finally the fateful appointment to Dublin. Neither with potential as a theologian nor, evidently, with much success in any of the several, fairly diverse parishes in which
he served, it seemed best to assign him to teach the classics in which he shone at Oxford—but in Ireland.

By the time he arrived in Dublin in 1884, aged 39, Hopkins was seen by friends and colleagues, affectionately, as ‘eccentric’, somewhat ‘droll’. ‘To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life/Among strangers ...’, as he wrote, soon after arriving in Ireland (probably in 1884/5). In fact, as the biographies make clear, Hopkins made friends wherever he served as a priest; he had an affectionate nature, to which others easily responded. Nevertheless, it is easy to see why he also had a sense that he was ‘the stranger’. For one thing, as a priest, he was never anywhere long enough to settle and feel secure. Moreover, unlike many ‘converts’ in those days, Hopkins never had to break the strong bonds of affection with his family: while they never rejected him, he could not but feel something of a stranger among them. More profoundly, however, like many ‘converts’ at the time, he no doubt felt a stranger among the majority of his fellow Jesuits, ‘cradle’ Catholics. Worst of all, as a highly patriotic Englishman, he certainly felt a stranger in Dublin, entirely surrounded by Irish colleagues, some of whom were Irish nationalists in their political and cultural allegiances.

For such reasons, as Balthasar says, Hopkins may be classed as sharing the fate of ‘the exiled, the misunderstood, the outlawed’—though that translation of verfehmte, in his case, is over-dramatic. He hated the grind of teaching. He felt totally alienated from the Irish and their aspirations. Nevertheless, he made friends also in Dublin. He frequented J.B. Yeats’s studio, and saw a good deal of Katherine Tynan as a result. He was befriended by Miss Cassidy, the elderly heiress of a brewing fortune, and spent happy days with her at Monasterevan in Co. Kildare (now the site of an annual Hopkins conference). However, the group of five or six sonnets we know as the ‘Terrible Sonnets’ were begun within a year of his arrival. These extraordinary poems, as Robert Martin says, ‘are the expression of a doubt so profound that it can often find comfort only in the belief that death may be not eternal salvation but utter and welcome annihilation’.4 There was something more deeply alienating in Hopkins’s soul than detestation of Irish nationalism, and the frustrations of teaching.

IV

Balthasar makes a great deal of Hopkins’s ‘English inheritance’.5 Hopkins ‘administers a great inheritance in a way at once unique, sovereign and pregnant with future implications’. Even more significantly than John Henry Newman, Hopkins brought ‘the English inheritance’, das englische Erbe, ‘home to Mother Church when he trod the path from Oxford, beyond Newman’s Oratory, into the novitiate of the Jesuits’—something, indeed, which he did ‘with a finely discriminating mastery’ (GL3, p. 353). ‘Formed through and through by the English spiritual tradition—Geistestradition— … he passes back beyond all his lineage to the origins’—more literally, ‘he goes back through everything derivative to the sources’ (GL3, p. 353).

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5 Balthasar, GL3, p. 353.
Later, again, we are told that he ‘brings the great English tradition back home into the Church by his own creative achievement’ (GL3, p. 391).

Hopkins inherited a great deal from his family: drawing, making music, writing poetry, as they all did, as Balthasar recalls. His father, we may add, who ran an extremely successful marine insurance firm in the City of London, published three volumes of verse as well as technical books on marine insurance. Hopkins’s mother, it is a pleasure to record, valued his poetry, and lived to see Poems come out in 1918 when she was 97.

Balthasar highlights Hopkins’s years at Oxford, studying the classics, attending the lectures Matthew Arnold delivered as Professor of Poetry, and so on. He was coached by his tutor Walter Pater, as a potential first-class honours student. In these years, 1863–66, he was ‘completely immersed in the whole aesthetic world view that characterized the mid-Victorian period’ (GL3, p. 354).

In fact, as more recent biographies show, Hopkins was taught much more by Benjamin Jowett and T.H. Green, not that he liked what either stood for; and Ruskin was surely vastly more important for his aesthetics, as indeed Balthasar notes later (GL3, pp. 362–3).

Hopkins greatly enjoyed his time as an undergraduate. Socially as well as academically very successful, he made life long friendships, not only with Robert Bridges. In the Balliol College photograph, taken in 1863, Hopkins looks pensive but entirely integrated with the group of his fellow undergraduates.

V

To reach Pater’s rooms in Brasenose College, Hopkins had to pass the carved stone features of Scotus in Radcliffe Square, though for all we know he perhaps never noticed it. When he returned to Oxford as a priest 11 years later he composed the wonderful sonnet ‘Duns Scotus’s Oxford’ (dated ‘Oxford, March 1879’ in one manuscript, 1878 in another). By then, at any rate, John Duns Scotus was ‘of all men’ the one who ‘most sways my spirits to peace:/Of reality the rarest-veined unraveller; a not/Rivalled insight, be rival Italy or Greece’. It was years after graduating from Oxford that Hopkins realized that ‘these walls’ had been ‘haunted’ by Scotus.

The Aristotelian Thomism, or perhaps rather the Suarezianism, which Hopkins was taught as a Jesuit scholastic, holds that there is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses. However, neither Aristotle nor Thomas Aquinas allows that there can be a science of the singular. On the contrary, the genus informs the species and the species informs matter; but there can be no knowledge of the singular or particular this.

On 20 February 1875 Hopkins wrote to Robert Bridges from Saint Beuno’s College in North Wales that he was reading John Duns Scotus, and that he cared for him ‘more even than Aristotle and more pace tua than a dozen Hegels’.6 Nearly three years earlier, while browsing in the library at Stonyhurst, in July or

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early August 1872, he hit on a sixteenth-century edition of the *Scriptum Oxoniense super Sententiis*, which had come to the college four years previously as part of the benefaction of Edward Baddeley, a convert lawyer: ‘At this time I had first begun to get hold of the copy of Scotus on the Sentences in the Baddely [sic] library and was flush with a new stroke of enthusiasm. It may come to nothing or it may be a mercy from God.’ So excited was he that ‘when I took in any inscape of the sea or sky I thought of Scotus’.7

Scotus, though now generally thought to have been born at Duns, a town in Scotland only a few miles from the border with England, was regarded in Hopkins’s day as English. The first documented event in his life is his ordination to the priesthood in the Order of Friars Minor at Saint Andrew’s priory in Northampton, England, on 17 March 1291. Scotus lectured at Oxford, then at Paris, perhaps at Cambridge and finally in Cologne, where he died on 8 November 1308, aged about 40. Even if any interesting distinction may be countenanced in the Middle Ages between educated men born in Scotland and those born in England, we may surely agree that Scotus belonged to an international Latin world in which a man’s birthplace was of little importance, especially if he left it at an early age, as an early sixteenth-century historian claims about Scotus.

Balthasar’s point, anyway, is that in these years as an Oxford undergraduate, Hopkins was privileged to be immersed in a form of ‘theological aesthetics’: ‘Nowhere in Europe had the word *beauty* such a magical sound as in the England of that time; nowhere else had the Platonic and Epicurean antiquity so immediate a presence, nowhere else had the Dante of the *Canzoniere* and the *Vita Nuova*, the world of the Troubadours and the Florence of the *quattrocento* awakened such a life as with the English pre-Raphaelites’—such as Millais, Holman Hunt, D.G. Rossetti (*GL*3, p. 354). In effect, so Balthasar contends, this ‘religion of beauty’, to which Christian and in particular Catholic Europe had become indifferent, survived in England, anyway at Oxford. Clearly, his picture of early-Victorian Romanticism is much richer than that which we noted in Leavis.

Briefly, according to Balthasar, ‘the unprecedented character of Hopkins’ language, *das Unerhörte an Hopkins’ Sprache*, is a theological phenomenon and can be understood only in this way’. That is to say, so Balthasar seeks to persuade us, the uniquely innovatory element of Hopkins’s poetry is properly intelligible only in Christian theological terms. From the outset, however, so Balthasar insists, the originality of this theological aesthetics is rooted in ‘the English spiritual tradition’ (*GL*3, p. 353)—‘for which, in contrast to Continental thought, there has never been any opposition between image and concept, *Bild und Begriff*, myth and revelation, *Mythos und Offenbarung*, the apprehension of God in nature and in the history of salvation, *die Anschaung Gottes in der Natur und in der Heilsgeschichte*’ (*GL*2, p. 19).

Newman’s *Grammar of Assent* is unintelligible, Balthasar says, outside the context of this tradition that acknowledges the place of the imagination in thought—*diese Tradition des Bilddenkens*—given classical expression by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in a way somewhat parallel to Schelling (*GL*3, p. 354). This tradition

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is alive and well in such works as The Glass of Vision by Austin Farrer (1948) and Words and Images by E.L. Mascall (1957).\textsuperscript{8}

‘Where on the Continent ecclesiastical modernism sought to take over the ideas of the imaginary character of concepts and also of dogmatic symbola thereby earning the sharpest of censures—so that the two worlds were violently split in two—just there English theology, reared in an hereditary empiricism, sensed no danger and preserved the native rights of imagery [Bild] in religious thought, and therefore in Christian theology, right up to the present day [1962]’ (GL\textsuperscript{3}, pp. 353–4).

The English were never tempted to confuse image and concept, they respected the place of images, models, imagination, in thinking about religion; they did not confuse images and concepts, to the extent that they would regard the concepts in religious discourse as disguised and displaced images. On the Continent, in contrast, there was such a divide between reason and imagination, in mainstream Catholic thought, that when the Modernists misinterpreted concepts as if they were images, there was nothing that the Church could do but issue the well-known anti-Modernist condemnations.

Balthasar writes quite lyrically about the English tradition: ‘A mistrust of the value of universal concepts, a consciousness of the irreducibility of the individual, be it material or personal, is as old as English intellectual life’, das Bewusstsein von der Unableitbarkeit und Unrückführbarkeit des Einzelnen, mag es sinnlich oder geistig-personal sein (GL\textsuperscript{3}, pp. 354–5).

The philosophies of Locke and Hume express something of this consciousness but by no means the whole of it; the natural theism in Coleridge and Wordsworth represent something of it but again by no means all; the Pre-Raphaelites and the Oxford Platonists of Hopkins’s day are ‘variations of an ancient theme’—but again ‘not at all the theme itself’. The genealogy of Hopkins needs to be traced to Milton, Purcell and Shakespeare, and ‘behind them’ to Duns Scotus.

He disliked Swinburne (as bad as Wagner!) and Browning; he once liked but advanced beyond the ‘sensuous immanence’ in which Keats was entangled; Wordsworth seemed more a philosophical than a poetic accomplishment; Blake seemed ‘crazy’. Only faced with the ‘Christian poetry’ of Milton did Hopkins meet ‘the mythical image that, throughout English Romanticism up to Hopkins’ time, had retained an astonishing, almost archaic, liveliness’ (GL\textsuperscript{3}, p. 356)—\textit{eine erstaunliche, fast archaische Lebendigkeit}. And—‘towering over all’—there was Shakespeare, ‘the greatest creator of unique, incomparable characters’ der grösste Gestalter einmalig unvergleichbarer, einsam von allen abgegrenzter Charaktere. In sum:

Always for Hopkins it is a matter of such uniqueness, of a vision that penetrates beyond all laws, all Platonic ideas and Aristotelian forms, to the incomparability of just this individuality, whether it be, as with Milton, Purcell, Shakespeare, the uniqueness of genius or the uniqueness … of each image met with every day in nature or the world of men’. Hence Scotus has to be for Hopkins the best thinker, with ‘thisness’, haecceitas, as

the basis for any consideration of universal constructions of things; only in particularities
do these universal constructions ‘touch the ground of reality’.

In the unique, the irreducible, there shines forth for Hopkins the glory of God, the
majesty of his oneness, to whose ultimate, creative artistry the incomprehensibility of
worldly images bears witness. (Im Einmaligen, Unableitbaren leuchtet für Hopkins die
Herrlichkeit Gottes auf, die Majestät seiner Einzigkeit (oneness), von dessen abgründiger
erfinderischer Bildkraft die Unerfindbarkeit der weltlichen Bilder Kunde gibt.)

At this level the English genius gathers together the results of the experience of
Antiquity into itself … Any considerations of ‘form in general’ at any stage of universality
becomes preparation for what Hopkins intended by the always unique oneness of the
individual form that only emerges in the Christian encounter between the absolutely
personal and free God and the fully personal creature—here alone truly monos pros
monon—and just this fundamental experience had to lead Hopkins back to Ignatius and
his Spiritual Exercises, where for the first time in the history of Christian spirituality
everything is placed on the knife edge of the mutual election that takes place between
God and man, behind which retreats any consideration of ‘perfection in general’ (GL, p.
357).

This would take us into the second half of Balthasar’s discussion of Hopkins, and
in particular into his profound theological meditation on ‘The Wreck’. We confine
ourselves here, however, to the question of the nature of the ‘English inheritance’
which Hopkins, in his poetry, ‘brought home’, so Balthasar alleges, into the Roman
Catholic communion. From Scotus, through Shakespeare and Milton, so Balthasar
contends, an especially English tradition may be traced of dwelling poetically on the
singularities and idiosyncrasies of things—a tradition that was at least retrieved, for
Catholic Christianity, in the poetic achievement of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

VI

To substantiate this contention, Balthasar directs us ‘to go back behind all his
experience of upbringing’ to Hopkins’s ‘almost primeval experience’, ein Urerlebnis
(no ‘almost’) namely of ‘the English countryside’ (GL, p. 359). In all his writings
‘there breathes everywhere, uniquely and unmistakably, the English countryside
…’—‘no cultural landscape, not at all a romantic or mythological landscape, but, as it
were, a primeval landscape’—Urlandschaft—‘landscape as wilderness’ Landschaft
als Wildnis—‘woods, hills, green upon green, always a strong wind, driving clouds,
the closeness to the sea, the moors and highlands with quick-flowing brooks and
heather, the surge of the waves, islands wild and yet with a Southern mildness’ (GL, p.
353).

This experience of ‘landscape as wilderness’ Balthasar suggests, we find in
‘Inversnaid’, the first of Hopkins’s poems that he cites:

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wilderness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.
The poem celebrates, Balthasar says, ‘the gloomy, brown mountain stream, rushing
down between heather and ripping fern’.

The poem was conceived on a day trip from Glasgow. Inversnaid is not as we
picture typical ‘English countryside’. Long before 1881, when Hopkins visited the
site, it was no longer ‘primeval landscape’—indeed by then it was the paradigm of
a cultural, mythologized landscape. Loch Lomond was already the most frequently
visited beauty spot in the Highlands of Scotland, barely in the Highlands, in the
scenic country designated the Trossachs, the ‘bristled country’, made famous by
Walter Scott in The Lady of the Lake (1810; Loch Katrine, however, not Loch
Lomond)—still quite wild but fitting into the highly romantic image of Scotland
which Scott created and which remains very much in place even today.

Scott lived through the American Revolution, the French Revolution (his wife
was a refugee), the Napoleonic Wars and in Britain the Industrial and Agrarian
revolutions in England and Scotland—yet his landscape of the Highlands of Scotland
is as mythological and cultural an invention as one could imagine. Moreover, if there
is wilderness to be found in Scotland (as there still is), this is because much was
depopulated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, through emigration
however voluntary, to Canada and the United States; as well as to the new industrial
cities. To some extent the cultural and cultivated wilderness, the grouse moors of
the rich who come for some weeks every year to hunt deer, shoot grouse and fish
for salmon, and so on; would still fairly be described as wild landscape—hardly,
however, as ‘primitive’ as Balthasar supposes.

It is difficult to find landscape in England one would regard as primeval, untouched
and uncultivated—moors in Yorkshire, Dartmoor in Devon, perhaps. Hopkins saw
much more of such landscape in North Wales, round St Beuno’s.

‘Inversnaid’ is a bad example, of ‘English landscape’; yet Balthasar’s point
remains. Hopkins was keen to rediscover ‘the true Arcadia of wild beauty’9 There
is ‘a raw nakedness and unmitigated violence’ that shock him when he goes back to
re-read his poems (GL3, p. 360). He is out ‘to achieve this impression of the harsh,
the abrupt, the unruly’; ‘a tense, utterly objective contemplation of the primal power
of nature’; ‘bitter north wind, hail and sleet’; the breakers of the sea; ice, trees, water
flowing over stones; the colours of sunset; endlessly the clouds; and so on; ‘all this
was a complete attentiveness that has nothing to do with romantic outpourings of
the feelings but rather reminds one of the attentive eye of a Goethe; with a desire for
objectivity that lays claim to the whole man through and through’, as Balthasar says
(GL3, p. 360).

VII

How much has this poetry of wildness and wilderness to do with the ‘image thinking’
of such Oxford theologians as Austin Farrer and E.L. Mascall?

The Glass of Vision is the text of Farrer’s Bampton lectures delivered in the University church in Oxford and handsomely acknowledged by Mascall in his Words and Images. Neither Farrer nor Mascall would have been happy to hear themselves described as theologians in the tradition of ‘English empiricism’. For a start, for us now, it is not easy to make out exactly what status Farrer and Mascall now enjoy as English or Anglican or Oxford theologians; or enjoyed when Balthasar was writing about them; or enjoyed in their own day. Mascall was never regarded as a typically Anglican theologian. Words and Images, as a polemical intervention, is uncharacteristic: mostly his work is openly and deliberately neo-Thomist in inspiration, frequently quoting Roman Catholic thinkers, such as Jacques Maritain and Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange.

Farrer was not a Thomist; but in the context of Oxford in his time, with logical positivism and linguistic empiricism and suchlike in the ascendant, he counts as the principal philosophical theologian seeking to defend the possibility of metaphysics. His book, Finite and Infinite (1943), perhaps his most substantial work, attempts to analyse theological statements in the spirit of the Oxford of those days. The Glass of Vision surprised his colleagues when it came out, by the remarkable weight Farrer gave to image and imagination. In fact it is the third lecture of the eight before we find Farrer arguing that the thought of Christ, that is to say, Christ’s own thinking, was expressed in certain dominant images, such as the Kingdom of God, the Son of Man, and Israel. He applied to himself the prophecies of a redemptive suffering for mankind attributed to Israel by Isaiah and Jewish tradition; he ‘displayed, in the action of the supper, the infinitely complex and fertile image of sacrifice and communion, of expiation and covenant’. These ‘tremendous images ... are not the whole of Christ’s teaching’ but without them the teaching would be instruction in piety and morals, it wouldn’t be supernatural revelation.

Medieval theologians were on the hunt for theological propositions when they read Scripture, out of which a correct system of doctrine could be deduced by logical method—‘in theory, at any rate’, Farrer says in parenthesis, perhaps conceding this is a pretty wild claim; anyway ‘if we set about the quest in that way we close our ears to the voice of Scripture’. The modern tendency is to hunt out historical record, which also blocks our hearing the voice of God in Scripture. ‘We have to listen to the Spirit speaking divine things: and the way to appreciate his speech is to quicken our own minds with the life of the inspired images’. Farrer takes the doctrine of the Trinity as his example: you can hunt for propositions, you can take the modern way of the research-degree thesis; but if we look at what Paul writes it is clear that his thought centred round a number of vital images, which lived with the life of images, not of concepts.

The fourth lecture, the key lecture in the series, introduces the distinction between problems and mysteries, taken from Gabriel Marcel, as Farrer says. He goes on to defend the possibility of metaphysical thinking; it is ‘just contemplative thinking … Whenever the mind contemplates the deep mystery of what it is to know or to love,

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11 Ibid., p. 44.
12 Ibid., p. 45.
or to be an embodied spirit, or to be subject to the form of time, and yet able to rise above the temporal stream and to survey it: whenever we consider the vitality and the richness, the inexhaustible individuality of the being whom as wife or friend we love, etc … when we advance from curiosity to admiration, and stand upon the brink of awe: then we are thinking in the form from which metaphysical philosophy arises.\textsuperscript{13}

Chapter 5 follows, on natural theology; Chapter 6 on images and archetypes; Chapter 7 comparing biblical prophets with great poets; Chapter 8 arguing that the kind of criticism relevant to the New Testament is literary criticism, insisting that the ending of St Mark’s Gospel (Mk 16:8) ‘has poetic inevitability’.\textsuperscript{14}

Farrer was rejecting a purely propositionalist view of the truths of Christian faith. On the other hand, he was distancing himself just as much from the existentialist ‘encounter’ theologies so popular in the 1940s. He was heartened by retrievals of the possibility at least of metaphysics in Christian reflection but asks if this was all that different from Jacques Maritain in \textit{The Degrees of Knowledge}. Re-reading the book now, we must find it unavoidable to ask what exactly the cognitive capability is that Farrer means to assign to imagination, and what exactly the connection is that he envisages between the rational truths of metaphysics and the revealed/revealing images of the New Testament.

Mascall’s book is much narrower, more local in scope. Explicitly in the line of Farrer’s; it attacks the outlook in Anglo-Saxon philosophy at the time according to which there are only two types of knowledge, two types of truth, two types of statement which can be significant: knowledge about sense-objects and knowledge about the truths of logic; empirically testable propositions and tautologies; the outlook that derives from David Hume. Mascall goes on to attack John Locke. Finally he insists that what he is out to expound is broadly speaking the Thomist-Aristotelian philosophy of perception, knowledge, and truth; quoting Josef Pieper, going on to insist on the contemplative or receptive functioning of the mind as \textit{intellectus}; so then an attack on the empiricism of Hume, as revived in G.E. Moore, Bertrand Russell and H.H. Price—not to forget Gilbert Ryle: ‘over against the Cartesian view of the world as an exhaustively intelligible presentation lying patiently before us for our detached and dispassionate examination … we must set the view of the world as essentially mysterious and yet not entirely alien to us, a world into which we can penetrate in part and which we can know in part, but only if we approach it in the attitude of contemplation and humility.’\textsuperscript{15}

Mascall then directs us to \textit{The Glass of Vision}, and particularly to the distinction between problems and mysteries, which Farrer takes from Gabriel Marcel. ‘Natural mysteries … in order to penetrate the phenomenal skin of the perceptual world … we must learn to contemplate [things, persons] with humility and wonder … A contuition of God … [which] needs training like any other skill. It will not come easily to anyone who has never learnt the art of contemplative reflection …’

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 77.
\item \textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 139.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Mascall, \textit{Words and Images}, p. 76.
\end{itemize}
Invoking Farrer, Mascall suggests that we ought to take much more seriously the active part which is played by the sensible image in the cognition of reality—in particular in our cognition of the divine reality from which all other reality draws its being. He says this largely because of the central part which images hold in God’s self-revelation in Scripture—he needn’t dwell on this at length, it has been discussed so well in *The Glass of Vision*. Farrer does all this even better in his books on the New Testament especially in *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St John’s Apocalypse* (1949)—a ‘great work’—‘for the understanding of the images it is not necessary for us to get behind them to a non-metaphorical understanding of fact … The images themselves illuminate us.’ This is simply contemplation, Mascall says; there is a parallel between the way in which the contemplative metaphysical approach to the natural mysteries can lead by an analogical passage to the God who is nature’s creator and the way in which by living with and feeding upon the great revealed images of the Bible we can be led to knowledge of the supernatural mysteries of the Christian faith—thus Mascall recapitulating Farrer.

Mascall’s intervention; attacking the standard view at the time that perception is essentially identical with sensation, is a rejection of empiricism, as he was familiar with it in the Oxford of his day. Over against that Mascall insists that perception is primarily an intellectual act, an act in which the mind uses the phenomenon as an *objectum quo* and passes through to grasp the concrete trans-sensible reality whose nature is not that of sensible but of intelligible being. He could not be more ‘neoThomist’.

This leads him to criticize the ideal of the cognitive process which, on the basis of its remarkable success in an important field of experience, has been extended in logical positivism, linguistic empiricism, and so on, to cover experience as a whole—the idea of knowledge as detached, discursive and arrested at the level of phenomena. Over against this Mascall sets another ideal of knowledge as involving commitment, contemplation and penetration beneath the phenomenal level. So while like other branches of human activity theology makes widespread use of concepts it is involved also in the use of images, if only because images are the means God has chosen in order to reveal his thoughts to us human beings—and here Mascall declares again his debt to Farrer.

The ‘hereditary empiricism’, ‘the English inheritance’, which Balthasar celebrates and discovers in the poetry of Hopkins, seems a pretty ambivalent legacy if we attend to the criticisms offered by Farrer and Mascall, in the books to which Balthasar refers us. Neither Farrer nor Mascall shows much interest in ‘primitive landscape’, English or otherwise. They were surely always much more at home in Oxford college gardens. Mascall at least, as a devout neoThomist, might have regarded Scotus as the beginning of a wrong turning in medieval Catholic metaphysics and sensibility. In books such as *A Rebirth of Images* and *The Glass of Vision* (not forgetting his commentary on Mark’s Gospel), Austin Farrer certainly showed how to practise Christian theology both conceptually and poetically—and there is perhaps a sense in which Hopkins might be brought into the discussion. Currently, however, even the few theologians who have any interest in the work of

Farrer seem to have no inclination to engage with these books of his. If it is in Farrer and Mascall that the ‘English inheritance’ that Hopkins brought home to the Catholic Church is to be found, as Balthasar says, then it has to be said that this ‘inheritance’ remains to be rediscovered.
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Apart from their concern for the rhetorical properties of the word proclaimed (and sometimes sung), most Protestants have been notoriously deficient in developing a theologically informed Christian aesthetics. Most particularly, the aniconic and even iconoclastic tendencies in the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions have inhibited the exploration of the Christian significance of the concept “beauty.” The visual arts in all their manifestations have most significantly suffered from theological neglect. Such episodes as the smashing of images by the more zealous followers of Andreas von Karlstadt, the whitewashing of the murals in the churches in Zurich, and the destruction of the stained glass windows in Anglican chapels by Cromwell’s Ironsides are so infamous as to need no rehearsal. The epitome of this tendency may have been the New England Puritans’ desire to make their meeting-houses indistinguishable from purely utilitarian secular buildings, devoid of any of the visual trappings of sacrality. However much many Protestants might wish to dismiss these events as bizarre aberrations, they were, however, not absurd anomalies, but were plausible expressions of part of the deep logic of certain types of Protestant theology. Of course, in spite of occasional outbursts of iconoclasm there have also been powerful and profound visual aesthetic traditions within Protestantism, and even within the Reformed and Anabaptist traditions, both of which at various times have developed elegant minimalistic styles. And, of course, within the history of Protestant theology there have been episodes of sustained attention to theological aesthetics, by such notables as Jonathan Edwards, the Mercersburg apologists for the Gothic revival movement and the Arts and Crafts movement, Paul Tillich and his students, Nicholas Wolterstorff and others in the Dutch Reformed heritage, and thinkers informed by various types of postmodern theory, such as George Pattison. However, in spite of these striking bright spots, theological reflection on the significance of aesthetic phenomena has usually been sporadic and often peripheral within the Protestant heritage.

The work of the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar on the theological significance of the concept “beauty,” which shows sensitivity to many historical Protestant theological emphases, can help overcome this limitation and suggest fruitful avenues for the elaboration of a Protestant aesthetics. Balthasar’s work intersects with crucial Protestant themes at several points. Balthasar makes the exposition of Biblical narrative central to his theological method, thereby exhibiting a family resemblance to the Protestant enthusiasm for the principle of *sola scriptura*. Furthermore, Balthasar focuses on the epistemological priority of the *analogia fidei* to the *analogia entis*, a theme that resembles the general Protestant habit of situating
reason within faith. Finally, Balthasar affirms the centrality of justification by grace, regards sanctification as a response to God’s forgiving love, and makes the cross central to the work of Christ. These shared concerns make his work amenable to Protestant appropriation.

Moreover, the correctives and challenges concerning beauty that Balthasar provides are not peripheral to the most basic dynamics of the theological task; they are not mere addenda to more foundational theological topics. Rather, Balthasar’s reflections about beauty issue from the general contours of his theological vision and his reconceptualization of every significant doctrine. The logic of Balthasar’s work illustrates how theological aesthetics must inform and flow from the most basic dynamics of Christianity, rather than being a mere doctrinal appendage. Interestingly, many of these sweeping correctives that Balthasar offers Protestantism are not necessarily a function of his Roman Catholicism, but are more typically rooted in the unique particularities of his theology. But whether he is being typically Roman Catholic or more idiosyncratic, many of Balthasar’s theological motifs serve as counterweights to themes that Protestantism may have developed too undialectically.

In spite of the corrective potential of his proposals, there are liabilities to using Balthasar as a source of guidance for the construction of a Protestant aesthetic. He himself may be guilty of an excessive concentration on one particular dimension of Christianity, and may promote a theology that is too architectonic, resting on a foundation that is too narrow. As a result, Balthasar can foster an appreciation of certain types of aesthetic phenomena, but may be less than helpful in grasping others, including some that are dear to many types of Protestants. In order to explore both the promises and the liabilities of Balthasar’s thought, I will examine his basic theological motifs, the ways in which they can constructively supplement and challenge traditional Protestant theological emphases, and conversely the ways in which Protestant theological themes can make Balthasar’s own aesthetics more multi-dimensional. Throughout this exposition I shall assume that theology in general and theological aesthetics in particular must be responsive to the complexity and messiness of the Christian life, and that an overly systematic approach tends to encourage reductionism and to minimize the ad hoc, contextual, and tensive nature of Christian claims. As David Kelsey has argued, theology is a bit more like a mobile by Alexander Calder than it is like a building erected upon a foundation.¹

Of course, Balthasar’s most fundamental potential contribution to such a conversation is his foregrounding of aesthetic categories in the interpretation of Christianity.² This emphasis differentiates him from theological traditions that have stressed the duty of obedience to the sovereign law-giver or the need to establish the truth of revelation and then adjust one’s behavior and affect appropriately. Either explicitly or implicitly, such traditions have foregrounded the “good” or the “true” as the foundational categories from the roster of the transcendental attributes of Being. But, according to Balthasar, the true and the good have no attraction without beauty.

² Balthasar, *GL* 1, p. 18.
Balthasar observes that without a sense of the intrinsic delightfulness of goodness, “Man stands before the good and asks himself why it must be done and not rather its alternative, evil.” In regard to the putative primacy of the true he protests, “In a world that no longer has enough confidence in itself to affirm the beautiful, the proofs of the truth have lost their cogency.” Consequently, Balthasar concludes that wonder in the face of the sheer splendor and active luminescence of Being is humanity’s most primal disposition to the cosmos and to God, and should be at the basis of the Christian faith. Without this sense of delight in God, the fundamental motivation of faith gets misconstrued as faith’s capacity to promote some allegedly logically prior, and supposedly even more primal, human purpose, such as the resolution of guilt or the overcoming of uncertainty. But, insists Balthasar, our creaturely neediness is not the source of our most basic passions, and utility is not our highest value. Unfortunately, according to Balthasar, Protestantism, particularly in its Lutheran manifestation, has ignored the sheer attractiveness of Christ’s beauty and adopted a soteriological perspective emphasizing our need for justification and the utility of the benefits of Christ. This is an example of the more general problem that emerges whenever the bonum is deprived of the voluptas that should be the mark of its beauty, for then “the relationship to the good remains both utilitarian and hedonistic: in this case the good will involve merely the satisfaction of a need by means of some value or object.” Given such a foregrounding of the gratuity of justification, interest in the revelation of God’s essential Being evaporates and is displaced by a focus on the allegedly contingent justifying act of God, an act so contingent that it actually hides God’s splendor. In subsequent developments of Protestant theology, faith, grace, and Christ are of interest only in so far as they help inaugurate a humanly desired and imagined situation of justice for society or self-actualization for the individual. Jesus’ significance is reduced to his capacity to satisfy antecedently felt needs. The life, death, and resurrection of Christ have instrumental value only. Against this tendency to treat God as an instrumental good, Balthasar argues that the intrinsic beauty of Christ’s self-giving love, a love that awakens in us an unexpected joy and delight, must be at the core of all Christian faith. Such a recovery of a sense of the sheer beauty of Christ’s love and its attractive power could serve as a necessary corrective to the unfortunate Protestant proclivity to reduce Christianity to a program for the satisfaction of individual or corporate desires.

While this criticism of much of Protestantism’s narrowly soteriological focus is certainly valid, perhaps Balthasar one-sidedly focuses on the intrinsic attractions of self-abnegating love without paying sufficient attention to the irreducibly creaturely, and therefore needy, aspects of human being. Both the Lutheran and the Reformed heritages, in different manners, have emphasized the ways in which human creatures

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3 GL1, p. 19.
4 Ibid.
6 GL1, p. 45.
7 GL1, p. 152.
8 GL1, p. 46.
necessarily and legitimately look to God for solace, support, and strength. As creatures of a beneficent God who has graciously bestowed life upon us, we humans have a justifiable interest in our own temporal and spiritual well-being. For Luther, a hunger for personal forgiveness and reconciliation with God was intrinsic to our creaturely status. In a somewhat different way, John Calvin identified trust in the provident nature of God and God’s concern for the individual as a component of all true piety, and Schleiermacher famously emphasized the feeling of absolute dependence on God’s sustaining power. These motifs resist total reduction to enrapt delight in the Other for the Other’s own sake. (Admittedly, Balthasar does talk about human needs, including the need for hope in the face of death, but these are swallowed up and largely forgotten in the individual’s enchantment with Christ’s beauty.) Perhaps both creaturely neediness (which entails some self-concern) and self-oblivious wonder are equally central aspects of our being, existing in a sort of dialectical tension that defies systematization. We try, as best we can, to integrate our call to be extravagant lovers of our neighbor, and our delight in the facticity of all our neighbors, with the more self-protective hopes and fears that typify all creatures. While the intrinsic attraction of Christ and his self-sacrificial love must be highlighted as an antidote to unrestrained spiritual narcissism, perhaps we should not forget the more need-gratification aspects of beauty. Art that serves such prosaic human purposes as stimulating sensory delight or evoking a sense of comfort should not be lightly dismissed.

Secondly, given this emphasis of beauty, it is fitting that Balthasar locate contemplation and adoration at the center of the Christian life.\(^9\) Adoration, enrapt delight in the splendor of God’s love, is a good in itself, and a goal of the Christian life with no ulterior purpose. Of course, this adoration is an integration of all faculties, and therefore elicits an affirmation of the truth of Being’s splendor as well as a decision to make ourselves and the world transparent to that splendor. The apprehension of beauty includes a recognition of truth and a commitment to goodness. But, fears Balthasar, Protestants, by divorcing beauty from goodness, have exhibited a tendency to elevate volition over contemplation. Luther’s concentration on guilt and forgiveness emphasized moral struggle and the anguished “inwardness” of faith, and established a trajectory that circuitously led to the identification of the Christian life with Kantian practical reason and later to Kierkegaard’s faith-as-decision and Bultmann’s existential authenticity.\(^10\) The Reformed tradition’s singular focus on being a good and faithful servant of the Lord, and its correlative emphasis of sanctification and the third use of the law (the law as gift to guide the saints) are quintessential expressions of this heteronymous ethic. Here Balthasar rightly detects an over-investment in agency in much of Protestantism, a myopia that often prevents it from being able to answer the question of why anyone should desire to be righteous in the first place. Balthasar’s emphasis of beauty, particularly the beauty of self-giving love, could help redress the Protestant tendency to foster a heteronymous ethic of duty and an understanding of faith as a criterionless choice.

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\(^9\) GL1, pp. 131–301.

\(^10\) GL1, pp. 45–52.
However, the relationship between contemplation and volition may be more complex and irregular than Balthasar intimates. For some Christians in some contexts, the duty to do the will of God may present itself as a self-evident imperative, whose fulfillment brings with it a sense of satisfaction with an obligation discharged or a task well-accomplished, something that could only with difficulty be identified with Balthasar’s delight in God’s beautiful self-emptying graciousness. The discharge of duty itself may bring with it certain intrinsic joys. Alternatively, the experience of failing to do God’s will and the consequent moral dissatisfaction with one’s own self and the yearning for forgiveness may legitimately ground an entire type of piety. As with Luther, the experience of moral failure may precede, not just chronologically but also logically, any apprehension of the beauty of love. Consequently prophetic art, art that incites individuals to action and drives them to self-criticism and repentance, may play a role in the Christian life quite apart from the delight in Christ’s beauty. The exposure of the horrors of war by Callot, Goya, and Picasso, or the social critique of Otto Dix and Francis Bacon may serve a legitimate role in the Christian life rather independent of their capacity to open up Being’s luminescence.

Thirdly, Balthasar’s perception of the splendor of Being behind all specific manifestations of beauty enables him to affirm the particularity and carnality of the created order. For Balthasar, Being is not an abstract absolute that destroys all individual forms. Consequently, the via negativa cannot be the final word in spirituality, for all reality, no matter how limited and transient, participates in beauty. Only through form, only through the integrating principle of unity and proportion, can beauty shine forth. For Balthasar, the form of a phenomenon manifests the real presence of the depth of being in it and also points beyond itself to that depth. Accordingly, Balthasar develops a sacramental attitude toward all of reality; sensory phenomena and our history of embodied, material interactions are mediators of an apprehension of God. But, laments Balthasar, Protestants often fail to discern this sacramental potential, either by divorcing an inscrutably transcendent God from the created order (as does the Reformed tradition), thereby generating an unbridgeable metaphysical dualism, or by identifying practical reason or some mode of religious experience with the absolute, thereby generating a monism (as does Protestant liberalism from Kant through Hegel and Schleiermacher to Ritschl). Balthasar is right that such non-sacramental proclivities have often plagued Protestantism (although many notable exceptions exist, including preeminently Jonathan Edwards), and have sometimes spawned an unfortunate total desacralization of the entire created order, or, conversely, an idolatrous deification of human capacities. Balthasar’s sense of the luminescence of Being shining through particular beings could function as a corrective to any propensity to regard the created order as utterly devoid of God’s spirit.

However, in certain contexts these Protestant tendencies may serve salutary purposes. At times it may be entirely appropriate to emphasize the radical distinction

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11 GL1, pp. 20–21, 435–525.
13 GL1, pp. 45–52.
of the Creator and the creature and to encourage the sense of finitude and creatureliness, as do John Calvin and Rudolf Otto in their different ways, in order to draw attention to the lack of self-sufficiency that humans so often try to disguise. On the other hand, at other times it may be wise to stress more unitive experiences, as do the Romantics, in order to counteract proclivities toward gnostic cosmic alienation. Perhaps the relation of God’s transcendence and God’s immanence cannot be conclusively conceptualized, not even by a panentheistic metaphysics or a sacramental schema. Therefore, perhaps each of the rhythms in the God/world relationship, the rhythm of divine presence and the rhythm of divine absence, requires its own form of art. In addition to a sacramentally informed aesthetic sensibility, Christianity may also need a form of art that celebrates the sheer facticity of earthly objects as well as a form of art that expresses the union of opposites.

Fourth, Balthasar’s sacramental ontology supports his view of the relation of nature and supernature/grace. On the one hand, Balthasar attempts to overcome any sharp diremption of nature and grace, while on the other hand he struggles to avoid any collapse of the one into the other. Grace is neither reducible to nature, nor is it totally extrinsic to it. As Alejandro García-Rivera has argued, Balthasar avoided both the view that “human nature appears neutral and indifferent to grace” and the Rahner-like theory that “human and divine realities meet in the subjective reality of the human spirit.”

Because grace cannot be conceived merely as the restoration of the integrity of nature, there is sufficient differentiation of nature and grace to make the distinction of the beauty of the world and theological beauty possible. However, because an analogy does exist between Absolute Being and finite being, a relationship between the beauty of the world and theological beauty, the beauty of God’s gracious love, can be discerned. A religious a priori in human nature, the ability to grasp the being of all creatures in the light of Being, provides the formal anthropological ground for this perception of the relationship between these two types of beauty. But because grace draws nature beyond its natural potential, the religious a priori in human nature is not enough by itself to enable the perception of the analogy between the beauty of the world and theological beauty. A theological a priori, the light that only comes from God’s self-revelation, provides the formal epistemological ground for this drive toward the perception of the analogy of worldly and theological beauty.

The reality of the incarnation entails that there be some such continuity between God and God’s creatures, creation and redemption, and nature and grace. Given the continuity but also the distinction of nature and grace, worldly standards of beauty should not be used as standards of divine beauty; the point of reference for beauty should not be the purely immanent laws of nature’s own development. But, given the perspective of grace, the revelation of absolute Being in all particular beings can be seen as analogous to the revelation of the absolute love of God at the core

\[\text{14} \quad \text{Alejandro García-Rivera,} \quad \text{The Community of the Beautiful} \quad \text{(Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), pp. 77–8.} \]

\[\text{15} \quad \text{GLI, pp. 142–71.} \]

\[\text{16} \quad \text{See John Webster, ‘Balthasar and Karl Barth’ in} \quad \text{The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar, eds Edward T. Oakes, SJ and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 250.} \]
of the universe. Unfortunately, according to Balthasar, Protestants have displayed a tendency, evident in Karl Barth, to discern little epistemic connection between earthly beauty and divine beauty. The roots may lie in the thought of John Calvin, for whom the transcendent hiddenness of God prevents creaturely beauty from being anything more than a product of God’s wisdom, bounty, and power. In Calvin’s scheme, the order and fecundity of the creation are only indirect pointers to God’s metaphysical perfections. Balthasar’s pattern of grace leading nature beyond itself can serve as a corrective to any Reformed temptation to thoroughly “secularize” natural beauty and detach it from the beauty of God’s self-giving love.

However, a consistently analogous view of earthly and divine beauty, unchecked by countervailing themes, could inhibit the ability to welcome individual creatures as gifts from God that have value in themselves, quite apart from their function as analogues or vehicles of divine love. Moreover, the cosmos may reveal not only the beauty of love, but also the beauty of power, order, fecundity, and creativity. In fact, at times the apprehension of God’s beautiful power may exist in dialectical tension with the apprehension of God’s love. Reducing all of these divine qualities to modes of love, thereby subsuming creation under reconciliation, may overly formalize the multifarious ways in which God’s awesome majesty and gracious embrace can be related.

Fifth, Balthasar’s distinctive way of relating nature and grace is ultimately rooted in his Christocentrism. For Balthasar, the drama of the incarnation is the fundamental form of revelation. The narrative unity of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the visible manifestation of the beauty of the invisible God. In Jesus Christ God uses created being, a temporal life, as a language to express divine Being. Consequently, the quintessential aesthetic experience is to be enraptured by the splendor of the form of Christ. This same Christ-like form of beautiful self-giving is to be replicated in the lives of Christ’s followers, giving their own life narratives a derivatively splendid form. But, laments Balthasar, some Protestants, including Luther himself, have minimized the beauty of Christ by construing his life as the expression of a dialectical tension between mercy and justice, or power and powerlessness, within God. Because such a stark contradiction is incompatible with the perception of harmonious form, the divine beauty of Christ dissolves in Lutheran theology into the murkiness of the hidden God. Rather than seeing the cross as the inevitable form that love must take, the epigones of Luther discerned nothing but paradox, scandal, and offense. Here Balthasar aptly exposes the failure of many Protestants to grasp the glorious and attractive fittingness of the work of Christ and the reflection of that work in the lives of Christ’s followers. His attention to the beauty of the passion of Christ as an expression of self-giving love can counterbalance the Protestant tendency to obscure the relation between the atonement and the essential nature of God.

However, there may well be occasions in the Christian life when the call to surrender one’s own opportunities for creaturely happiness in Christ-like love of God and service to the neighbor seems to be in tension with the celebration of the

17  GL1, pp. 463–525.
18  GL1, pp. 45–8.
goodness of the created order. Often the pain of the friction between Christ-like self-oblation and creaturely self-fulfillment may be more evident than the joy of the harmony of Christ-like love. Perhaps Søren Kierkegaard was at least partially right when throughout his writings he maintained that the pattern of Christ’s life is potentially absolutely attractive and absolutely repellant, even to the same individual at the same time, depending on how that pattern is viewed. The call to imitate Christ by loving God and neighbor with self-giving abandon can clash with our desire to preserve our own earthly existence and well-being and to celebrate them as gifts from the bounteous Creator. Any effort to minimize the tension between receiving one’s life as a wondrous gift from God and surrendering one’s own life back to that same God, two dynamics in Christianity that are not easily coordinated, may fail to do justice to either pole. Because of Christ’s potential to inspire either rapture or offense (or both simultaneously), Christianity may have room for an art that accentuates fissures, disruptions, and unresolved oppositions.

Sixth, in regard to the beauty of the work of Christ, Balthasar emphasizes the themes of *kenosis* and humiliation as the fundamental narrative structure. For him, the discrete parts of the story of Christ are organized around the motif of Christ’s identification with the God-forsaken.\(^{19}\) Out of filial obedience, Christ stands in solidarity with the abandoned ones, soaks up their sin, and embraces their loneliness and isolation. This self-emptying, this solidarity with the lowly, is most truly beautiful, and reveals the recklessness of the divine love that animates the universe. Once this beauty has been perceived, the same glory of *kenosis* is evident in God the Creator’s creation of the cosmos from sheer nothingness and even in the self-surrender of the persons of the Trinity to one another.\(^{20}\) Balthasar complains that Protestants, however, have often been blind to the beauty of this *kenosis*, and have degraded it to the status of an unfortunate instrumental good necessary to achieve the goal of redemption. For Protestants, *kenosis* often becomes associated only with the second person of the Trinity and only as a passing phase in the drama of redemption. Balthasar’s identification of the *kenosis* of Christ with the revelation of the glory of God can serve as a corrective to the Protestant tendency to separate Christ’s state of humiliation and Christ’s state of exaltation and the consequent failure to integrate thoroughly God’s glory (and metaphysical perfections) with the self-emptying love revealed in Jesus Christ.

Although this tendency to treat the self-giving love of Christ only as a response to human sinfulness and therefore only as contingently related to God’s essential nature does often typify Protestant theology, Balthasar’s corrective may be excessively one-dimensional. By concentrating on the beauty of Christ’s self-abnegation Balthasar may undercut the perception of the horror of the cross, and therefore of sin, in spite of his protestations to the contrary. Moreover, by treating the *kenosis* evident in the pattern of Christ’s life as the paradigmatic (and almost necessary) manifestation of God’s nature, Balthasar may unwittingly encourage a lack of appreciation for the sheer gratuity of God’s redemptive act. Inadvertently, the one-dimensional focus on the beauty of *kenosis*, a beauty that must be manifested almost necessarily, could

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\(^{19}\) *GL1*, pp. 459–62.

\(^{20}\) *GL1*, 611–16.
undermine gratitude for the surprising miracle of God’s redemptive act. This, in turn, could foster a failure to appreciate the shock and despair of art that exposes the dark, angst-ridden dimensions of human life apart from grace, from Bosch through German expressionism, and the irreducibly tragic and horrid aspects of the cross.

Seventh, all of these theological themes jointly support Balthasar’s christomorphic soteriology. According to Balthasar, having truly and ardently beheld the splendor of God’s self-sacrificial love, we humans cannot help but mirror it in joyous response. (Of course, Balthasar adds that the apprehension of the beauty of Christ involves our own agency; we are not compelled by any external necessity to behold the splendor of the Lord.) Having encountered the beauty of Christ, we respond to this display of extravagant love with a deepening willingness to surrender our entire selves. Grasped by Christ’s beauty and taken out of ourselves, our expropriation begins to exhibit the pattern of Christ’s own self-emptying. Protestant soteriology, observes Balthasar, has often ignored the motivation for metanoia in this attractiveness of self-sacrifice, and developed instead an account of transformation that is either too volitional or too mechanical. The Protestant focus on individual decision that emerged in the seventeenth century either suggests an Arminian heroic exertion of willpower, or, alternatively, a hyper-Calvinist invasion of controlling grace. Once again, Balthasar has exposed a genuine liability in much of Protestant thought and piety. His emphasis on the eliciting power of Christ’s beauty can serve as a counterweight to Protestant voluntarism or theories of mechanically irresistible grace.

However, the persistent emphasis of the eliciting power of Christ’s beauty makes it difficult to understand growth in the Christian life as continuous struggle. Sometimes the daunting ideals of Christianity are more prone to intimidate than to attract, and sometimes their approximation requires much spiritual sweat and tears, or even a cry of dereliction and confession of failure. Consequently, Balthasar may insufficiently appreciate the aesthetic dimensions of anguished moral and spiritual struggle, and therefore of art that dramatizes conflict, dualities, and exertion.

To conclude, the lacunae that Balthasar detects in historic forms of Protestantism are indeed serious lacks. However, by one-sidedly emphasizing the beauty of Christ’s self-sacrificial love as the clue to all beauty, Balthasar may be promoting a form of theological reductionism that could restrict aesthetic vision. By being excessively architectonic, he may fail to do justice to the complex, dialectical, and ultimately unsystematizable nature of the Christian life. As he himself warns us concerning Luther’s excessive concentration on guilt/forgiveness, we should not isolate one experience (even if it is the experience of the beauty of Christ) and make it bear the whole weight of Christianity. Moreover, he exhibits an essentialist tendency to assume that concepts like “beauty” and “art” have a core meaning, and that therefore there is a unified, essential role for aesthetics in the Christian life. However, within Christianity and in our wider cultures, these concepts are deployed in a rich variety of ways, exhibiting no common denominator but a loose network of family resemblances. These recalcitrant particular uses resist being synthesized in a grand meta-theory. Any integration must be achieved not on paper, but in the hurly-burly of the living of the Christian life in particular contexts.

In the past 20 or 30 years there has been what might, crudely, be called a ‘boom’ in theological engagement with the arts and with the theoretical issues arising out of such engagement. The field has grown at an astonishing rate, with journals that started as little more than newsletters now being published by major international publishing houses, and serious institutionalization of the topic in prominent organs of teaching and research. At the same time, apparently secular institutions, such as public galleries, art colleges, and the arts sections of the media, have shown a welcome, if unexpected, interest in what the theologians and students of religion are saying. Sometimes creative artists themselves join the conversation, whether in terms of reflecting with the theologians on the religious questions that might be at play in their work or by that work itself becoming a theological (or, it may be, anti-theological) gesture or statement. Moreover, the range of topics under consideration is now spreading well beyond the ‘classical’ domains of literature, fine art, and classical music into still controversial areas of popular culture, film, and—who knows?

To try to impose any simple pattern onto all of this would be foolish. Although one line of interpretation suggests that much of this is merely the contemporary articulation of a discussion that has been around since the age of romanticism, this particular wave of interest incorporates too many distinctive elements to be easily pigeonholed in that way. But, equally, it is not enough merely to invoke some rather vague concept of the postmodern, and we do well not to forget the achievements of such giants of the romantic era as Coleridge, Kierkegaard, Ruskin, and Soloviev. Least of all is it possible to offer authoritative predictions as to future outcomes—not least because the world of the arts is itself so pluralistic and dynamic. As is the case with all important issues in theology, what can or should be said by the theologian is something that has to be worked out in fear and trembling. For now, and probably for a long time to come, we have no consensual method, nor even an agreed definition of the field. We must therefore be grateful to those who have offered some strategies for making inroads into the creative jungle in which we find ourselves, even if these end up by taking us further and further into the most tangled thickets, rather than guiding us to the high-point from which a genuine survey of the whole would first be possible.

In this spirit Hans Urs von Balthasar is clearly to be credited for having given the world of the arts a significance it has rarely enjoyed in theological enquiry, and
for expanding the theological canon beyond Scripture, the Fathers, the Scholastics and great moderns such as Barth, to include Hölderlin, Hopkins, Dostoevsky, and Bernanos. He does so as a thinker marked, in his origins, by the crisis of classical German culture in the first quarter of the twentieth century and, especially, in the decade following the First World War. In this connection, it is telling that the first quotation found in The Glory of the Lord is from Goethe’s Faust, a text called by Pushkin ‘the Iliad of the modern world’, its author the sometimes eponymous fountainhead of the culture that, in the decade of The Downfall of the West and the cult of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, seemed to be tumbling headlong into the abyss. Sometimes, indeed, one is tempted to see von Balthasar’s project as motivated by the desire to rescue the heritage of Goethe and Schiller, and concluding that, in reality, only theology can do the job.¹ In which case, of course (and despite every well-placed disclaimer), it would once again be a case of theology being put into strange service.

That would be an interesting question to pursue, but it is not the question I wish to address here, although my argument may have some implications for how it would be approached. My question is, rather, this: in setting his sights on a ‘theological aesthetics’ has von Balthasar made a move that will, in fact, obscure and frustrate a theological engagement with art, as we make, experience, and receive art in our time?

An immediate response to this question might, of course, be that I am fundamentally misrepresenting von Balthasar’s aim in The Glory of the Lord. The growing field of theological engagement with the arts, to which I alluded at the start of this chapter, whatever its ultimate significance for theology and, indeed, for contemporary cultural self-consciousness, is precisely (or, at least, for the most part) what von Balthasar calls ‘aesthetic theology’—rather than his carefully distinguished notion of ‘theological aesthetics’. In other words, it is a form of theology that takes its agenda, its concepts, and its style from ‘worldly aesthetics’. For it is clear that although von Balthasar’s conception of theology leads him to open up the theological canon to poets and novelists, this is, as it were, a by-product of his main task. And this, as he states plainly in the Introduction to The Glory of the Lord, is not ‘art’, art criticism, or aesthetics (in any purely philosophical sense), but Beauty, Beauty that ‘dances as an uncontained splendour around the double constellation of the true and the good and their inseparable relation to one another’.² Art—and the Schillerian and Goethean culture of the nineteenth century—is readily recognizable as a privileged site with regard to the human encounter with such Beauty, but art neither monopolizes nor constantly holds to Beauty as an ideal (as is evident not merely with reference to such recent phenomena as the art of abjection, but already in such works as Dostoevsky’s Idiot, or the presence of the ugly and the grotesque in genre painting, or in Rabelais, and so on). Conversely, the aesthetic can, and often, it seems, has detached itself from the actual manifestation of Beauty in embodied being and focussed on an abstract idea of form that, in von Balthasar’s view, is

¹ Contrast Paul Tillich’s almost enthusiastic acceptance of the abyss revealed in expressionist art and in post-war social unrest as an occasion for a new theology.
² Balthasar, GL1, p. 18.
probably as far from a genuinely theological aesthetic as the degradation imaged in Cindy Sherman’s photographs. Such aestheticism betrays, if it has ever known the truth that (as von Balthasar sees it) ‘God’s incarnation perfects the whole ontology and aesthetics of created Being’.3

For despite the analogy between, on the one hand, aesthetics and those objects, including art, that are the special concern of aesthetics, and, on the other hand, a properly theological aesthetics, there is a moment of differentiation that cannot be overlooked: ‘It is only when such a this-worldly aesthetics does not fit revelation’s transcendent form that we suddenly come to an astonished halt and conscientiously decline to continue on that path.’4 Such a halting of this-worldly aesthetics is, then, a necessary preliminary to or (to avoid assuming that some kind of psychological or biographical experience is intended here) an integral moment of theological aesthetics. Yet, at the same time, von Balthasar, in classic Thomist style, insists that the necessity of such a halt does not negate the reality of analogy. The opening pages of the Introduction start, as he puts it ‘from below’, from human experiences of Beauty that are, in some sense, pre-theological, and have more to do with human beings’ self-formation than being ‘indwelt by a higher spirit’5—yet he maintains the possibility of an analogy between these two types of inspiration and, indeed, the whole thrust of his argument hinges on just such an analogy.

The point invites reflection on the key issue of the analogy of Being itself, its possibility, its scope and—if one is asking the question from within a Protestant (or, for that matter, purely philosophical) horizon—its viability. But perhaps we do not even need to embrace the Protestant, Heideggerian or deconstructive critique of the analogy of Being to see a fundamental problem already opening up in these early pages of von Balthasar’s chef d’oeuvre. Or, rather, not opening up—for the problem is, I suggest, precisely in what von Balthasar does not say, what he glosses over and rushes past.

What is this unsaid something? Let me put it like this: in a general sense, one may allow the possibility of an analogy of Being, without that analogy resulting in the legitimation of each and every presumed relation between non-theological and theological domains of experience and discourse. Even within the framework of a Thomist view of life, there are many areas where few would want to be too specific as to just what the divine analogue of a given domain of human experience might be, and the doctrine itself builds such caution into its own formulation, resisting the temptation to deny a continuing element of equivocation even in what analogously unites the divine and human levels of discourse. This imprecision will surely be all the more marked the more complex the matter under consideration, where it is not just a matter of applying the kind of single terms that Thomas uses as examples (such as God being a rock or a lion) but a set of relationships that is already internally multi-levelled. For what von Balthasar asks us to accept is not simply that our (humanly) inspired experiences of Beauty resonate analogously with the divine Beauty (or, more precisely, that they are always already shaped by the resonance

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3 Ibid., p. 28.
4 Ibid., p. 37.
5 Ibid., p. 35.
within them of the divine Beauty of the Incarnation), but that there is a further analogy between our critical and scholarly reflections on these human experiences and the way in which we should be reflecting theologically on the divine Beauty. The analogy, in other words, is not just between created and uncreated Beauty, but is stretched to embrace the ways in which we discourse upon these analogously unified Beauties (that are, of course, finally one Beauty). Yet the relations between domains of experience (for example, the experience of Beauty) and those scholarly disciplines especially dedicated to them (such as aesthetics) are, even within human discourse, often fragile, provisional, and contestable. Even if we are confident regarding the analogy of Beauty (that is, that in beholding the beauty of the dawn or of Fra Angelico’s Annunciation we see something of what the divine glory is like), can we be—why should we be—confident concerning the analogy of aesthetics (that the history of human reflection on beauty helpfully models how we might think of the divine glory)? Why should it be the case that a distinct theological discipline is required to deal with the dimension of Beauty in—or dancing around—the divine Being? And even if we are alerted, as we are, to the difference between worldly aesthetics and theological aesthetics, does not the term aesthetics itself leave a scattering of dust—of pre- and mis-conceptions—over the very reality upon which we are supposedly focussing our contemplation? Not least, the promotion of such a new theological discipline would seem precisely to undermine the fundamental unity of theological enquiry, above all if we believe this unity to be determined by the theological ‘object’ itself—Jesus Christ as the contemplated figure of God-for-us. In terms of von Balthasar’s own theological programme, should we not be saying that, in the end, theological aesthetics is simply another name for theology or, if one prefers, for the theo-theoria that is the telos of all theological enquiry? And if it is then said that there is nothing here with which von Balthasar would, at a fundamental level, disagree, why, nevertheless, give such presentational prominence to aesthetics?

I shall return to the theological issue at a later point in this chapter, but first it might be helpful to look at another example as to how the rush to understand a given phenomenon in terms of aesthetics might serve precisely to obscure what is humanly important—and perhaps what is humanly beautiful—in it. The example comes from

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6 We might, however, note that there would already be much more to be said by way of critique (in the narrow, Kantian sense) regarding the ‘simple’ analogy between ‘worldly’ and ‘divine’ Beauty. This will be touched on later, but there seems no a priori reason why the language of ‘the beautiful’ is obviously privileged with regard to, for example, the glorious aspect of the divine. At the very least (as Kant was already aware, and von Balthasar must also have been), it will be refracted through another ‘aesthetic’ concept – the sublime. Here, in the sublime, we already have a ‘break’ within the world of Beauty that precedes the strictly theological ‘break’. The point is so much the clearer if it is emphasized that the analogy at issue is the analogy of attribution, and that what unites worldly and divine beauty is that both are rooted in the creative power of God. God is said to be beautiful because God is the source of Beauty. Yet, to use an old idealist argument, we do not imagine that sight sees or that colour is coloured: should we then presume that absolute Beauty, divine Beauty is beautiful in the manner of ‘all things lovely’ (least of all perhaps, if, as so many poets have emphasized, that loveliness is inextricable from the transience of its object)?
‘A Conversation on Language between a Japanese and a Questioner’ recorded in Heidegger’s collection of essays *On the way to language*.

The issue is flagged in the very opening passage of the dialogue, as the conversation turns to Count Kuki’s attempts to interpret the Japanese term *Iki*.

Japanese: Later, after his return from Europe, Count Kuki lectured in Kyoto on the aesthetics of Japanese art and poetry. These appeared as a book. In them he attempted to look at the essence of Japanese art with the help of European Aesthetics.

Questioner: But are we allowed to turn to aesthetics with regard to such an undertaking?

Japanese: Why not?

Questioner: The name [i.e., aesthetics], and what it names, is rooted in European thought, in philosophy. Therefore the aesthetic way of looking will be necessarily alien to East Asian thought.7

The point recurs later in the dialogue, when it turns once more to Count Kuki’s ‘aesthetic’ interpretation of *Iki*.

Japanese: … Our thought, if I may call it that, knows something similar to the metaphysical difference; nevertheless the differentiation itself and what is differentiated cannot be grasped in Western metaphysical concepts. We say *Iro*, which means colour, and say *Ku*, which means what is empty, what is open, the heavens. We say: without *Iro*, no *Ku*.

Questioner: This seems to correspond precisely to what the European doctrine of art says, when it represents art aesthetically. The αισθητον, the sensuously perceivable, permits the νοητον, the non-sensuous, to appear through it.

Japanese: Now you understand why it was so tempting to Kuki to define the *Iki* with the help of European aesthetics, that is, as you have suggested, metaphysically.

Questioner: My fear was—and remains—even greater, that by approaching the matter in this way the genuine essence of East Asian art will be concealed and relocated into a domain that is inappropriate to it.

Japanese: I entirely share your fear; for *Iro* does indeed name colour and yet essentially means more than the kinds of entities that are sensuously perceivable. *Ku* does indeed name what is empty and open and yet means something other than the merely supersensuous.8

What is the relevance of these exchanges to von Balthasar’s project of a ‘theological aesthetics’? I suggest that the contrast drawn in the dialogue between Western and East Asian approaches to art shows that even within the domain of human experiences of ‘Beauty’ and of cultural forms understood as mediating ‘Beauty’, it is far from clear that the basic framework of Western aesthetics, governed as it is by even more fundamental metaphysical and linguistic assumptions, is capable of giving an adequate account to all such experiences and forms. I have, pointedly, placed quotation marks here around the word Beauty, since it would, obviously, be too much to assume that the matter of Japanese art and poetry is ‘Beauty’. Yet both Western responses to this art and poetry and the responses of Japanese themselves

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when speaking in Western languages9 are permeated with references to Beauty. And if we say that, in the end, the Japanese experience is not beautiful, then this would be a very different kind of ‘not-beautiful’ from the aggressive and violent ‘not-beautiful’ forms of contemporary Western nihilistic art. Japanese painting is clearly not governed by the aims or criteria of either the religious or the humanistic art of the West, yet the eye readily discerns an analogy, a good rendering of profound form—and if the word ‘form’ already says too much, how much more questionable would the application of a fully-developed Western aesthetic doctrine be? Yet if such limitations apply even in the case of inter-human experiences that are nevertheless also worthy of being considered ‘analogous’, how much greater must the limitations be in the case of a transferral of focus from worldly to divine Beauty? To sum up: if aesthetics, as we understand it, is not adequate to the task of understanding and interpreting all human analogues of Beauty, how confident can we be that it is adequate as a basis of theological understanding and interpretation?

The question folds back once more into the relationship between experiences of Beauty in a general sense, and the rendering or interpreting of those experiences in art; between, for example, the beauty of a sunset or waterfall, and the painting or poem in which that beauty is evoked, appealed to, or otherwise made the matter of the work. This relationship, it should be said, seems, at first glance, to be equally relevant to Japanese experiences and reflections on art as it is to Western aesthetics. When we consider this relationship further, it is far from clear that aesthetics—least of all the aesthetics of the Goethean culture that is so central to von Balthasar’s world-view—has (as yet) given anything like an adequate interpretation. Least of all is it clear that the distinction of matter and form is the most appropriate tool with which to approach the matter. It was, for example, just such reservations that led Heidegger, in his essay On the Origin of the Work of Art to emphasize the way in which the work of art opens up a complexly articulated world, rather than simply expressing a content (whether that content be understood objectively or subjectively, as the ‘beauty’ of what is represented or the ‘idea’ of the artist). For Heidegger, as for the Japanese, however, this reservation vis-à-vis the application of the matter/form distinction is not being developed in favour of artistic nihilism. To be sure, ‘nothingness’ plays a significant role at many points in Heidegger’s thought, as it does in East Asian philosophy, but this is something different from the nothingness of nihilism. As the Japanese comments in the dialogue on language: “‘Still today, we [Japanese] wonder how it could have occurred to the Europeans to understand the Nothing that you discuss in the aforementioned lecture [‘What is Metaphysics’] in a nihilistic sense. For us, emptiness is the highest name for that which you wish to express in the word ‘Being’ .’”

In other words, the claim that the vocabulary of Being, Form, and Beauty exhausts all that is at play in analogous human experiences and renderings of what, for want of a better word, we continue to call ‘Beauty’—not perhaps ‘under erasure’ but, at least, in quotation marks—is far from self-evident.

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9 See, for example, the discussion of Yanagi Soetsu in George Pattison, Art, Modernity and Faith (London: SCM Press, 1998), pp. 172–6.
10 Martin Heidegger, Unterwegs zur Sprache, p. 109. Translation my own.
Once this is recognized, we can see that there are a range of significant human experiences with the world and with art that neither fall under the auspices of classical (Goethean!) conceptions of art and the beautiful, nor fall away into mere nihilism. One aspect of this can be indicated by reference to the movement known as Arte Povera, in which the artist’s resources were extended to materials and contexts that were far from what had been classically (or, for that matter, romantically) experienced as beautiful or artistic. Yet a kind of alchemical transformation is nevertheless worked in many of the examples of this ‘poverty-stricken art’ that, if not resulting in works that are conventionally ‘beautiful’, opens up new worlds of breathtaking power, world-opening in something, perhaps, akin to Heidegger’s sense. This might especially be seen in the work of such artists as Janis Kounellis, Antonio Tapiés, and, by extension, Joseph Beuys11 and even elements in the film art of Tarkovsky (look for example at what Tarkovsky does with the rubbish filled stream that appears towards the end of Nostalghia). Such transformations cannot immediately or easily be interpreted in terms of Beauty or Form, yet, in their world-opening work they can, theologically, be said to challenge us into engaging with the world in such a way as to show that amidst all the distortions and degradations of the contemporary West it is, or through our transformative experience can become a good place to be, a place to dwell in, a promised land.

The point here is not merely to oppose one canon of art—that of Arte Povera, for example—to another—that of Goethean culture—but to suggest that the canons and discourses of Beauty, Form and culture do not themselves adequately address all of that towards which they point. Beauty—the experience of Beauty and its representation in art—is only a preliminary sign of what is neither itself beautiful, nor even super-essentially beautiful, but that nevertheless makes possible the opening up a world within which beauty might be experienced. The abandonment of Apollonian Beauty by the larger part of modern art is, in some of its manifestations, certainly motivated by a negative or defiant rejection of the possibility of ever finding or realizing Beauty in a humanly recognizable form. Here, von Balthasar would say, the modern artist needs to be told to ‘Look up!’, to turn to that higher Spirit who, in inspiring us from a height infinitely higher than the heights of any human Parnassus, will also restore Parnassus as a human possibility. But is it correct to interpret the entirety of modernity’s dissatisfaction with the ideal of Beauty in terms of negativity and rebellion? Is there not—in at least some exponents of modern art—more the attempt to find a way to something more elemental than Beauty, an appearing that is not itself beautiful, or not yet beautiful, but is the raw, rough material of any future renewal of humanity’s experience of Beauty, the ashes from which future diamonds will emerge? And is it even correct simply to dismiss the ‘nihilism’ of a Beckett or a Francis Bacon as if it is a merely negative phenomenon?

All such reflections, as the author of The Apocalypse of the German Soul would surely acknowledge, are rooted in very particular historical moments. This is not 11 See George Pattison, ‘Joseph Beuys: A Leaf from the Book of Jeremiah’ in Blunt Edge 5 (http://www.artspacegallery.co.uk/OtherWWW/FULLER_BE/articles/GeorgePattison_05.html). The talk on which this article is based was originally given at the Tate Modern gallery in London, in the context of a major retrospective of Beuys’s work.
a matter of pitting timeless truths or abstract definitions against each other, but of searching for the most adequate words and symbols in which to communicate the concrete form of truth in our time. Von Balthasar’s moment, we may say, was marked by the traumatism of the collapse of Goethean culture in the wake of World War I. As the twentieth century unfolded, however, this would come to be seen as only one chapter in a larger and yet more catastrophic history, for which the Holocaust and the atom bomb would become the most powerful emblems. Adorno’s famous ban on poetry after Auschwitz may have had something histrionic about it, but the cumulative trauma of global historical experience from 1914 onwards, remains an existential and theoretical challenge to any putative experience of the world as a good or beautiful place to be—and that despite the advent of new utopias, whether of a unified global market or of a new, genetically-engineered post-humanity free from all the ills and evils of *homo sapiens*.

This does not mean a simple acceptance of nihilism, whatever we may take that to be. It does mean that we should not run before we can walk, and therefore I have to ask whether the time is yet right for a theological aesthetics. Is there not more to be found, more (perhaps) to be revealed, and more to be said about the elemental experiences out of which any future donations of Beauty will be formed—*before* we rush on to claiming for ourselves a *gnosis* concerning divine Beauty? And may it not be precisely such anticipatory enthusiasm that, no less than nihilistic despair, most inhibits the occurrence of such elemental experiences, beyond beauty and ugliness because prior to all distinctions of beauty and ugliness, world-revealing in their sheer being-there—being-there for us, by us, as us. Von Balthasar, in other words, offers us too much too soon. Instead of the grand anticipation of a ‘theological aesthetics’ (or of theology as aesthetics), theology (I suggest) would do better to linger, to spend time, to risk wasting time, with the world, with artists’ (*and scientists’*) efforts—fumbling and inadequate as they no doubt often are—to open up that world in material, verbal, and noetic transformations as the space-time of human dwelling.

On the fly-leaf of Volume III of *The Glory of the Lord*, Henri de Lubac is quoted as saying of von Balthasar that he was ‘probably the most cultured man in Europe’. The problem is that whilst this may well have been true, it is precisely the problematic nature of culture in our time that obstructs a genuinely fundamental reckoning with the possibility of renewing our experiences of Beauty and our practice of beautiful art. For all the ferment of the last generation of theological scholars, it is perhaps not yet time for a theological aesthetics. The place of our theological reflection is still—even in the midst of the affluence manifested in our ‘culture industry’—more truly describable as poverty-stricken, and we will have to spend more time among the ashes if we are, once more, to give birth to diamonds.

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PART III
Outside von Balthasar:
The Spectrum of Theological Aesthetics
Section A
General Perspectives
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In the first part of this essay I will develop the thesis that a powerful hindrance to an accurate and adequate understanding of the interaction between art and religion is the fact that for the past two centuries, almost all writers on the arts have embraced what I shall call the Grand Modern Narrative of the Arts. Then, after arguing that this narrative must be rejected, I will sketch an alternative narrative that enables rather than obstructs an understanding of the deep and broad interaction between art and religion.

The narrative I have in mind emerged as an account of certain developments that took place in the arts during the eighteenth century in Western Europe. It is with those developments, then, that we must begin. A rather large number of writers have described one or another aspect of those developments. Among my personal favorites are Paul Oskar Kristeller and M.H. Abrams. In his essay, “The Modern System of the Arts,” Kristeller traces the slow emergence of our modern concept of the fine arts. And in two essays, “Art-as-Such: The Sociology of Modern Aesthetics” and “From Addison to Kant: Modern Aesthetics and the Exemplary Art,” M.H. Abrams traces some of the crucial shifts that took place from earlier ways of engaging and thinking about what we now call the arts to the new way.

I judge the most fundamental development that occurred in the eighteenth century to have been the emergence, among the middle class of the Western European countries, of perceptual contemplation as their most valued mode of engagement with the arts, and the corresponding emergence into dominance among writers on the arts of what Abrams calls the contemplation model. Writing about the arts in the
West goes all the way back to Greek antiquity. But, as Abrams observes, before the eighteenth century such writing was for the most part focused on the making of art. Writers offered advice to poets, musicians, painters, architects, and so forth on how to practice their craft. Aristotle’s *Poetics* is a case in point. After some preliminary comments about the nature of drama, Aristotle offers the poet guidelines for the construction of a good drama. But then, early in the eighteenth century the emphasis in writings on the arts began to shift from artist to public.

This shift, from the artist who makes the art to the public who engage it, was not sufficient to make the contemplation model dominant; for there are other ways in which the public engages works of art than contemplation. The altarpieces of the medieval Western church were not so much contemplated as caught up into the practices of Catholic piety; the pious knelt before them, lit candles in front of them, prayed facing them, and so forth. The eighteenth century theorists could not have been ignorant of this devotional way of using painting and sculpture. But they paid it no attention. Art, they assumed and said, was for contemplation. Art belongs not to the active life but to the contemplative life—not to the *vita activa* but to the *vita contemplativa*. Abrams argues persuasively that this change in writing about art reflected changes in the actual use of art.

By using the phrase, “*vita contemplativa,*” I mean to suggest that the mode of engagement with art that came into prominence in eighteenth-century practice and theory amounted not just to an episode in the history of art but also to an episode in the history of that way of life that has periodically been praised and practiced ever since Plato—viz., the contemplative life. It was an episode in the history of the contemplative life that was of startling originality, however. Plato had urged his readers to turn away from the sensory world and, by means of Reason, to contemplate the Forms. By contrast, it was perceptual contemplation that the eighteenth-century theorists called for—the very thing Plato militated against.

But back to the other way of looking at what happened, namely, as an episode in the history of the arts: the eighteenth-century theorists, by making the contemplation model dominant in their thinking about the arts, were elevating the worth of perceptual contemplation—“contemplative engrossment,” to borrow a phrase from Theodor Adorno—above all other uses of art. That such “elevation” is what they were about becomes clear when we add one more ingredient to the mix. The eighteenth-century theorists urged a specific form of contemplation, not contemplation in general but what they called disinterested contemplation.

The attempt to explain the disinterestedness of aesthetic contemplation occupied theorists for the entire eighteenth century. Not until the end of the century, in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, was it finally given a satisfactory explanation—though in the interests of full disclosure I should add that not everybody agrees that even Kant succeeded in explaining the idea. The nature of disinterestedness has remained a topic of discussion in aesthetics of the twentieth century.

Kristeller, in the essay cited above, argues that it was the emergence into prominence of disinterested contemplation as a way of engaging art that made

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possible the birth of our modern concept of fine art, according to which music, poetry, painting, sculpture, and fiction are paradigmatic examples of fine art. The medievals associated painting with such activities as goldsmithing, not with music; music they associated, in Pythagorean fashion, with mathematics. This makes sense if one's focus is on the making of music and paintings; these are profoundly different activities. But if one's focus is on disinterested perceptual contemplation, then it seems plausible to group music and painting together, along with literature and sculpture.

In his recent book, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*, Larry Shiner describes the “system,” as he calls it, of fine art that emerged in the eighteenth century, and contrasts it with the system that preceded it—meaning by “system” a complex of institutions, practices, concepts, and evaluations. He schematizes the difference between the two systems in terms of three contrasts that emerged.

The first contrast that emerged is that between fine art and craft, it being assumed that art is superior to craft. Rather often it is said that before the eighteenth century there was only a concept of craft, no concept of fine art. Shiner insists, correctly in my judgment, that this is to misdescribe the situation. An important aspect of our concept of *craft* is that it is a member of the duality, *art/craft*. Before the duality emerged, not only was there nothing quite like our concept of *fine art* but also nothing quite like our concept of *craft*. The situation was, rather, that before the eighteenth century the language used to describe such practices as painting, goldsmithing, poetry, cabinetry, and the like, blended together elements from the language that we use to describe artworks with language that we use to describe craftworks. By the eighteenth century, our now-familiar distinction between art and craft had settled in: music, poetry, painting, and sculpture are fine arts, cabinet-making, glass-blowing, goldsmithing, and the like, are ‘mere’ crafts.

A second contrast emerged at this time between artist and artisan, with “artist” being the honorific title: an artist is one who works in the fine arts, an artisan is one who works in a craft. Here too the situation was not that, before the eighteenth century, poets and painters were thought of, along with goldsmiths and cabinet makers, as artisans rather than artists. Since the conceptual contrast *artist/artisan* did not yet exist, there was nothing quite like either our concept of *artist* or our concept of *artisan*.

Finally, third, there slowly emerged, across the course of the eighteenth century, our now-familiar contrast between the aesthetic value of a work of art and its other values, along with the assignment of higher status to aesthetic value than to any other. I myself, were I tracing the emergence of this contrast, would devote more attention than Shiner does to the discussions of beauty that took place in late antiquity and the Middle Ages; though I would add that their concept of beauty, while an antecedent of our modern concept of the aesthetic, is not to be identified with it.

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The foregoing is, to be sure, an all-too-brief statement of the changes that occurred in the practices of the arts among the middle class in eighteenth-century Western Europe, and of the corresponding changes in how writers about the arts conceptualized those changes in the practices of the time. However, sketching this outline is necessary if only to situate the Grand Modern Narrative of the Arts that slowly emerged in order to explain and legitimate those changes in the practices.

The Grand Modern Narrative of the Arts is, first and foremost, a narrative of progress. The story of the eighteenth-century revolution in the arts might have been told as the story of yet one more alteration in the ancient and enduring social practices of music, painting, poetry, and the like. That, in my view, is how the story should be told; we will be getting to that later. But the story of the revolution, as the Grand Narrative tells it, is the story of art finally being liberated and coming into its own in the eighteenth century after millennia of servitude.

The story goes like this: previously art was always in the service of something outside itself, especially religious and governmental officials and institutions. Now, in serving as object of disinterested perceptual contemplation, art at long last is coming into its own. That is to say, now at last people are moving away from engaging art for the sake of its utility for one and another extra-artistic purpose, and moving toward engaging it for its own sake. To create and engage a work of art as an object of disinterested perceptual contemplation is to create and engage it as a work of art rather than as an instrument for one and another extrinsic purpose. In being so created and engaged, artistic practice is both freed from extrinsic influences and freed for following its own intrinsic dynamics. To be so engaged is the historical destiny of art. Henceforth the intrusion of political, economic, and religious considerations constitutes systemic distortion. On this matter of systemic distortion, consider, for example, the following passage from the eminent analytic philosopher of art of the latter part of the twentieth century, Monroe Beardsley:

> The fundamental task of the philosophy of art in our time … is to mark out the special sphere of artistic activity, duly recognizing the peculiar and precious character of its contribution to the goodness and significance of life … This theoretical task has as its practical analogue that of finding ways of preserving and enlarging the capacity of the arts to play their distinctive and needed roles in promoting the quality of social life, protecting them against the enormous political and economic forces that constantly threaten to control, distort, repress, or trivialize them.6

Some have explained the idea of treating the work of art as a work of art by saying that art qua art is useless. In previous writings of mine I charged those who speak thus with an astounding lack of self-awareness. What they have to mean, I argued, is not that art is literally useless, but that its defining utility lies in its capacity for giving us delight upon disinterested perceptual contemplation. The use of works of art for

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the purpose of gaining delight in disinterested perceptual contemplation is, after all, a use! The debate, I said, has to be understood not as a debate over use versus non-use but as a debate over which use of works of art is to be preferred.

I now think I was wrong—wrong, at least, for a good many writers. What many of those writers meant who proclaimed “art for art’s sake” and who said that “art is useless” is that works of art have objective intrinsic excellence—just as Kant thought that persons have objective intrinsic excellence, and just as theists believe that God has objective intrinsic excellence. If that is one’s thought, then disinterested perceptual contemplation will be seen as our way of becoming aware of, and acknowledging, the objective intrinsic excellence of the work of art. The alternative view that I was trying to impose is that it is the subjective experience of aesthetic delight that has intrinsic excellence, with works of art then having the derivative worth of being the objects of that intrinsically excellent subjective experience.7

Part of what led me to revise my opinion was an observation that M.H. Abrams makes in an essay mentioned above, “Art-as-Such: The Sociology of Modern Aesthetics.” There Abrams notes the quite astonishing way in which writers about the arts in the eighteenth century took the language about God that one finds in the neo-Platonic and Augustinian contemplative traditions, and applied it to works of art. Karl Philipp Moritz, writing in 1785, provides him with some of his most vivid examples. Here is one passage that Abrams quotes from Moritz:

In the contemplation of the beautiful object … I contemplate it as something which is completed, not in me, but in its own self, which therefore constitutes a whole in itself, and affords me pleasure for its own sake. (Abrams, 156)

Here is an even more revealing passage from Moritz:

While the beautiful draws our attention exclusively to itself … we seem to lose ourselves in the beautiful object; and precisely this loss, this forgetfulness of self, is the highest degree of pure and disinterested pleasure that beauty grants us. In that moment we sacrifice our individual confined being to a kind of higher being … Beauty in a work of art is not pure … until I contemplate it as something that has been brought forth entirely for its own sake, in order that it should be something complete in itself. (Abrams, 156)

Wilhelm Wackenroder, writing about the museum experience, provides a final example:

Art galleries … ought to be temples where, in still and silent humility and in heart-lifting solitude, we may admire great artists as the highest among mortals … with long, steadfast contemplation of their works … I compare the enjoyment of nobler works of art to prayer … Works of art, in their way, no more fit into the common flow of life than does the thought of God … That day is for me a sacred holiday which … I devote to the contemplation of noble works of art. (Abrams, 157)

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7 This latter clearly is the view of some writers – for example, Monroe Beardsley, in the essays collected in Part I of The Aesthetic Point of View.
The unmistakable thought coming through in all three of these passages (and one could quote numerous other such passages) is that works of art, at least those that serve well as objects of disinterested contemplation, are transcendent entities of intrinsic worth. They are godlike, and should be treated as such.

Let me close this part of my discussion by observing that whenever I present, as I have just now, the opening chapter in The Grand Modern Narrative of the Arts, I have Max Weber’s theory of modernization ringing in my ears. It is commonly said that Weber got his notion of value-spheres from the neo-Kantianism of the mid-nineteenth century; and no doubt he did. But all the essential ideas were there already in the writings of the eighteenth-century art theorists. In art there is a distinct value; so as not to commit oneself on the nature of this value, call it simply the artistic value. Up until the eighteenth century this value was seldom recognized and pursued in its own right. Now finally it is; and a distinct sphere of life is being organized around the recognition and pursuit of this value. Thereby the pursuit of this value is both liberated from its subservience to the pursuit of other values and liberated for shaping the social sphere of the arts. For the pursuit of this value to be successful in shaping the sphere of the arts, life in the art world must be protected from systemic distortion by the intrusion of other and alien values—political, economic, religious, academic. That is Weber. And that is also the basic outlook of eighteenth-century art theorists. The eighteenth-century theorists were proto-Weberians.

III

In his book Natural Supernaturalism, M.H. Abrams tells the story of how this grand progressivist narrative became yet more grand by appropriating the social analysis of the Romantics. The early Romantics were the first great secular analysts and critics of modernity—that is, the first to believe that eighteenth century social developments represented not just more of the same but something distinctly different, and then to give a secular analysis and critique of those developments. Their analysis was that the coming of modernity represents the loss of all the old social and psychological unities. Modernity is fragmentation—fragmentation of the old economic relationships, fragmentation of the old political arrangements, fragmentation of the church, fragmentation in the relation of knowers to nature. In that wonderful line from John Keats’ long poem Lamia, cold philosophy (that is, natural science) will “unweave a rainbow.” The subtext of Romanticism is disappointment: disappointment with the new science, with the new capitalist economy, with rational politics, with the institutional church.

But pervading the Romantic mentality is the additional conviction that when art is liberated from subservience to extrinsic purposes and allowed to come into its own, then art and our disinterested engagement therewith constitute an exception to the social dynamic of fragmentation. Such art and such engagement are socially other, socially transcendent. Essential to the very being of the work of art is that it be unified; in the very nature of the case the artist unifies where modern society fragments. And intrinsic to that unity is a different form of rationality from the
instrumental rationality that pervades society—“purposeless rationality,” Kant called it. We the beholders come under the sway of that otherness.

Many accounts have been offered of the social significance of this purported otherness of art. But ever since the days of early Romanticism, one account of its significance has been that in composing and presenting his work of unity and purposeless rationality, the artist both launches a critique against the fragmentation, rationalization, and oppression present in social reality as we know it, and sets before us an image of an alternative reality. In that way, the work harbors the potential of being an agent of social reform. Art is salvific, redemptive, not by transporting us from this fallen world into a better world, as Moritz thought, but by harboring the prophetic/messianic potential of reforming this fallen world. It is this complex of conviction that lies behind, for example, these words of Herbert Marcuse in his *The Aesthetic Dimension*:

> The radical qualities of art, that is to say, its indictment of the established reality and its invocation of the beautiful image of liberation are grounded precisely in the dimensions where art transcends its social determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and behavior while preserving its overwhelming presence … The inner logic of the work of art terminates in the emergence of another reason, another sensibility, which defy the rationality and sensibility incorporated in the dominant social institutions.\(^8\)

My presentation of what I have been calling The Grand Modern Narrative of the Arts has expanded beyond the narrative as such to include two religious or quasi-religious accounts of the significance of the purported social otherness of art for contemplation, the Moritz account, which holds that the work of art is of transcendent intrinsic worth, and the Marcuse account, which holds that the work of art functions redemptively by setting before us a prophetic critique of our fallen world and the messianic alternative thereto. By no means everybody who embraces the Grand Narrative would be willing to give either of these or any other quasi-religious account of the significance of art’s purported social otherness. Schiller, for example, would not; in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* he argues instead that contemplative engagement with art makes an indispensable contribution to a person’s Bildung. Nor, to mention just one other, would R.G. Collingwood; in his *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* he argues that the most important function of such engagement with art is that it is a way of coping with one’s emotions. Nonetheless, one never has to look far to find religious and quasi-religious accounts. And they go beyond the two sorts I have mentioned. Let me set before you an example of a third sort. On this account, rather than being itself a transcendent object worthy of religious veneration or a transcendent redemptive presence among us, the work of art makes the Transcendent present to us when we engage it disinterestedly.

A fair number of artists of the modern and contemporary period have thought of their own work this way: Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, perhaps Mark

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Rothko, perhaps Piet Mondrian. Among theorists, it was Clive Bell who stated the view most forcefully.

That this is Bell’s view will come as a surprise to most students of aesthetics, since those who compose our standard anthologies of aesthetics seldom include those passages from Bell in which he gives his religious interpretation of art. Every student of aesthetics knows the passage from Bell in which he says that “Art transports us from the world of man’s activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation. For a moment we are shut off from human interests, our anticipations and memories are arrested; we are lifted above the stream of life.” And every student knows the passage in which Bell says that in aesthetic contemplation we “inhabit a world with an intense and peculiar significance of its own; that significance is unrelated to the significance of life” (28). These are just unusually eloquent statements of the Grand Narrative. What few students know about is Bell’s religious account of art.

Why does pure form move us, Bell asks. “Because it expresses the emotion of its creator,” he says (43). What sort of emotion is that? It is the emotion the artist feels upon seeing things in the world about him as pure forms. That is to say, just as we feel the aesthetic emotion when we view works of art aesthetically, so the artist feels the aesthetic emotion when he views things in the world around him aesthetically. But to regard something as pure form is to see it as an end in itself, says Bell (45). And now let me quote what he says about the import of seeing something as an end in itself, whether that be a work of art or a thing in the world:

when we consider anything as an end in itself we become aware of that in it which is of greater moment than any qualities it may have acquired from keeping company with human beings. Instead of recognising its accidental and conditioned importance, we become aware of its essential reality, of the God in everything, of the universal in the particular, of the all-pervading rhythm. Call it by what name you will, the thing that I am talking about is that which lies behind the appearance of all things—that which gives to all things their individual significance, the thing in itself, the ultimate reality (54).

IV

By now some of you will be asking yourself what I meant when I said, at the beginning of my talk, that “a powerful hindrance to an accurate and adequate understanding of the interaction between art and religion is the fact that for the past two centuries, almost all writers on the arts have embraced what I shall call the Grand Modern Narrative of the Arts.” My discussion up to this point seems to lead to the opposite conclusion, namely, that rather than hindering such an understanding, the narrative is wide open to exploring and employing a number of different ways of understanding the interaction.

I intend to address this question head on. But before I do so, let me call attention to yet a fourth approach to the relation of art and religion taken by those who embrace the Grand Narrative. This fourth approach, unlike the preceding three, has

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been articulated mainly if not exclusively by those who approach the topic more from the side of religion and theology than from the side of the arts.

Clive Bell, like Karl Philipp Moritz before him, dismisses with a wave of the hand any consideration of the connection between art and the actual religions of humankind. To focus on actual religions would be “to confuse the religious spirit with the channels in which it has been made to flow” (69). To be sure, “many descriptive paintings are manifestos and expositions of religious dogmas:” there is nothing per se wrong with that. “But in so far as a picture is a work of art, it has no more to do with dogmas or doctrines, facts or theories, than with the interests and emotions of daily life” (69). Art is related rather to “that universal emotion that has found a corrupt and stuttering expression in a thousand different creeds” (69). The religious mystic and the lover of art represent “twin manifestations of the spirit” (63).

And now let me introduce Gerardus van der Leeuw, the extraordinary Dutch polymath from the first half of the twentieth century who spent the first third of his career as an anthropologist of religion, the next third as a theologian and theorist of the arts, and the last third as a theorist of liturgy. The great, endlessly fascinating, book from his middle career in which he probes the relation between art and religion—or as he puts it, between the beautiful and the holy—is Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art.10

Van der Leeuw acknowledges all sorts of “external connections,” as he calls them, between the beautiful and the holy. But like Bell, none of these is of any interest to him. He is after what he calls “the essential continuity.” To get at that we must, he says, “protect ourselves against the external continuity which forces itself upon us. Nine-tenths of the ‘religious works of art’ which we know evidence no inner, essential continuity between holiness and beauty, having only a purely external connection, which admittedly can be very refined, violating neither art nor religion, but not proclaiming their unity” (230). What draws Van der Leeuw’s interest is those cases in which the character of the work of art is intrinsically expressive of the holy. Expressiveness, intrinsic expressiveness, is his fundamental category.

It was likewise the fundamental category of Paul Tillich. Tillich employed the category differently, however; instead of asking which works of art are intrinsically expressive of the holy, Tillich asked which sort of religion a given work of art was expressive of.

Tillich was as dismissive as were Bell and Van der Leeuw of the connection between art and any actual religion. Religion, he says, can be understood as “activities within a group of human beings who have a set of symbols and rites, related to divine powers.”11 And the arts have historically employed “the symbolic material” provided by religion thus understood: “the story of the Christ, the legends of the saints, the mythical symbols of creation, salvation, and consummation,” and so forth. But a result of the decline of religion thus understood is that, in the twentieth century, it “has provided an astonishingly small amount of content for the visual arts” (172).

But now suppose we understand religion instead as “the state of ultimate concern about something ultimate” (172). Then the emergence of secularism has not meant the disappearance of religion. For secularism “does not deny the question of the ultimate meaning of life” (173).

So when looking at art of the twentieth century—and indeed of any century—it is with the religious dimension thus understood that we should be concerned, says Tillich. And the thesis guiding our inquiry should be that all creative art, including then the art that emerged from the secular culture of the twentieth century, “is an expression of an encounter … with ‘ultimate reality.’ [All art] contains an answer to the question of meaning” (173).

It is style, not content in the usual sense, that is determinative of the subject matter of art; and what is inherent to style, in turn, is expressiveness. “The religious dimension is manifested” through the expressiveness of style. Hence the question Tillich posed to any work of art was always, of what religion is the style of this work expressive?

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I could cite a good many representatives of each of the four understandings of the relation of religion and the arts that I have outlined. Holding any one of them is compatible with embracing the Grand Modern Narrative of the Arts. And all of them, with the exception of the Moritz understanding, have something to be said for them. The Moritz understanding smacks to me of idolatry. Works of art may be of intrinsic worth; I rather think they are. But they are not of such elevated intrinsic worth as to be worthy of worship.

I share the view of Van der Leeuw and Tillich, however, that works of art are intrinsically expressive; and I agree with Van der Leeuw that some are expressive of the holy and with Tillich that some are expressive of one and another religion. I likewise agree that works of art have sometimes played a redemptive social function; Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* seems to have played such a role in nineteenth century America. And I am willing to concede that works of art sometimes play the sacramental function of revealing or manifesting God—though I myself have never known how to articulate this view well enough to be able to appraise it.

You will have noticed how qualified are the statements I have just made. No claims about the essence of art; no claims about the relation of art always and everywhere to religion. Just the claim that some works of art are expressive of the holy, that some have functioned redemptively, that perhaps some reveal the Transcendent.

Now for the question: if the Grand Modern Narrative of the Arts is open to these four common ways of understanding the relation of art and religion, and perhaps to others as well, and if two and perhaps three of these are acceptable in duly qualified form, why do I nonetheless say that the Grand Narrative is a “powerful hindrance to an accurate and adequate understanding of the interaction between art and religion”? 
Well, consider the way in which icons function in the religious practices of Eastern Orthodoxy, the way in which altarpieces function in the religious practices of Catholicism, the way in which congregational hymns function in the religious practices of Protestantism, and the way in which chant functions in the religious practices of Judaism. To the persons who participate in these practices, such engagement with works of visual and musical art represent an enormously important interaction between religion and art. But all such modes of engagement fall outside the theorizing of those who embrace the Grand Narrative. For the Grand Narrative, in all its variations with respect to the social and personal significance of disinterested contemplation of works of art, is a narrative designed to legitimate and articulate the view that contemplative engagement represents art finally come into its own. Usually the person who embraces the Grand Narrative simply ignores alternative modes of engagement with art; those who do not ignore it consign such alternative modes of engagement to examples of art not come into its own and let it go at that. So if he happens to be interested in the relation of art to religion, the focus of his attention will be entirely on what the disinterested contemplative engagement with art has to do with religion, and on what works that reward such engagement have to do with religion.

And should some icons and altarpieces find their way into our museums, and some hymns and chants into our concert halls, he will regard the religious content of these works as irrelevant to his concerns. Such content is of interest only to those who have not set aside the concerns of daily life. What he is after is the intrinsic connection between art and religion; and to get at the intrinsic connection, we must ignore content and focus on the expressiveness of form. Though I did not make the point when presenting Marcuse, this is also Marcuse’s view; the social redemptive function of art is to be located in its form. Now contrast this attitude with that of those who participate in the religious practices I cited. The representational content of the icon and the altarpiece, the words of the hymn and the chant, these are indispensable for the worshipper. Ignore the saint represented and focus on the form is an injunction that would make no sense to the Orthodox worshipper.

Let me move on to call your attention to a second way in which religious people engage the arts, that is, a way in addition to that of contemplative engrossment. Consider any people of a religion—the Jewish people, the Christian people, the Muslim people, the Buddhist people, and so forth. What accounts for the fact that such peoples as these are extended through time is of course that they have a tradition. That is to say, characteristic features of the life of the people get handed on from one generation to another. Now in principle what is handed on could consist entirely of such abstract things as doctrines and behavioral styles. But in fact what is handed on, by each of the peoples I mentioned, includes a narrative concerning the origins and subsequent history of the people. The people finds it important to hand on from one generation to the next the memory of important persons and events from its past.

How does a people do this? In many different ways. But what is striking about the way in which the Christian and Buddhist peoples do it, in contrast to the Jewish and Muslim peoples, is that they do so by means of visual memorial art, that
is, visual art that is meant to keep alive and enhance the memory of significant persons and episodes from the past. In the case of the Christian people, such art overlaps with the liturgical art to which I pointed earlier; in fact, participants in the iconoclast controversy which wracked the Eastern church from 725 to 850 quite regularly referred to the icons as memorials. But not all liturgical art is memorial art; and conversely, Christian memorial art extends vastly beyond what plays a role in the liturgy.

It is obvious that the Christian people has thought it important to have memorial art; why else would it have produced such art in such astonishing abundance? But the Grand Narrative provides no categories for understanding the memorial function of art—other, of course, than the category of art not come into its own. As we have seen, this is no accident. The Grand Narrative was meant to legitimate and articulate the disinterested contemplative engagement with art; it was never meant to articulate, let alone legitimate, any other mode of engagement. All other modes of engagement represent for it art not come into its own. A sculpture can be used as a doorstop. But it would be absurd to develop a theory concerning the doorstop function of sculpture.

VI

A choice now confronts us. We can follow in the footsteps of the philosophers and theologians of art in the modern period by embracing the Grand Narrative; then, with our attention focused on art for disinterested contemplation, we can pursue one or other of the suggestions offered over the past two centuries concerning the religious significance of such art, all the while either simply ignoring the liturgical and memorial functions of art, or thinking and talking about them with the category of non-liberated art. Or we can allow our sense of the importance to religious communities of liturgical and memorial art to lead us to ask whether there might not be good reasons to reject the Grand Narrative.

I submit that there are not just good reasons, but decisive reasons, for rejecting the Grand Narrative. The narrative flies in the face of the evidence. A multitude of studies over the past quarter century have shown that the artist who produces art for contemplation does not transcend our social condition, nor does the art she produces transcend it. Art is racist, not always but often, and sexist, colonialist, elitist, nationalist, fascist—you name it. Not only is it all these things in its content. It functions socially as an instrument of oppression and exploitation. It always has. And works of art are often not unified; they are full of gaps, contradictions, aporia.

That speaks to one component of the Grand Narrative—the Romantic-analysis component. What about the Weber-like components? Are those acceptable?

One of the Weber-like theses is that the art-world comprises a distinct differentiated sphere of life that is properly determined by its own distinct artistic value; when things are going properly, life in the art-world is shaped exclusively by this artistic value and not by political, economic, and religious values. Is this
true? Is it true that insofar as life in the art-world is shaped by these latter values, life in the art-world is systemically distorted?

I find this Weber-like thesis no more plausible than the Romantic analysis. It’s true that the art-world constitutes an identifiable formation in our society; and it’s true that there is such a social formation because a considerable number of us find value in the engrossed contemplation of works of art. That is the value around which this sphere of life is oriented, difficult and controversial though it has proved to be to explain just what that value is. But that said, what must then at once be added is that the practices and institutions that go to make up this art-world are shaped by political developments, economic developments, religious developments, intellectual developments, technological developments—on and on. How could it be otherwise? High art music requires concert halls and orchestras; the construction and maintenance of concert halls, and the support of symphony orchestras, requires money; and money is always allocated among competing recipients. Economics and politics are internal to the arts, as are religion, technology, and so forth. It is profoundly misguided to hold out the hope of autonomous, self-normed development of art.

So what, lastly, about the other Weber-like thesis, the progressivist, Whiggish claim that the disinterested perceptual contemplation of art represents art finally come into its own? This is the bottom strand of the entire narrative; if this goes, all goes.

Well, when does an artifact come into its own? Take a chair, for example; when does a chair come into its own? Presumably when it is used as it was meant to be used by maker or distributor, namely, when somebody sits on it. There are lots of chairs on display in the art museums of the world. But when a chair is merely looked at, the chair is not coming into its own. Not coming into its own as a chair.

Now consider works of art—by which I mean, products of one or another of those social practices of making that you and I call “the fine arts”—works of music, of fiction, of two-dimensional visual design, and the like. From this whole array, let us single out liturgical art; and from liturgical art, let us single out, say, hymns. When does a hymn come into its own? Does it come into its own when it serves as an object of engrossed contemplation in the concert hall? Obviously not. A hymn comes into its own when the members of a religious community all together sing it so as to express their praise, their confession, their thanksgiving. You see the point. Some art comes into its own when it becomes the object of perceptual contemplation; much art, perhaps most, does not come into its own that way.

I see only one last line of defense for the person who wants to hang onto something at least of the second Weber-like thesis. Let it be granted that the arts are, and always have been, multi-functional; they come into their own in a multiplicity of ways. But could it be that the worth of engaging works of art as objects of engrossed contemplation, whatever that worth may be, is superior to the worth of any other way of engaging the arts? Could it be that there is greater worth in listening to a performance of Stravinsky’s Mass in the concert hall than in participating in a religious service in which his Mass serves as the music of the liturgy?
We are now at rock bottom in the argument, where there is little else to do than declare one’s own convictions. As for me, I see no reason to believe that listening to Stravinsky’s Mass in the concert hall is of more worth than participating in a religious service for which it is the liturgical music.

VII

Let me sketch for you the outline—on this occasion it can be no more than that—of an alternative to the Grand Narrative. The first move to make is to give pride of place, when thinking about the arts, to the social practices of art rather than to works of art. The works emerge from the practices and are engaged within the practices. The practices are of three interlocking types: practices of composition, practices of performance and display, and practices of public engagement. And each of these types comes in the form of many distinct sorts. In my argument I highlighted three sorts of engagement practices: the practice of engaging works of art as objects of disinterested contemplation, the practice of engaging works of art in the liturgy and its environment, and the practice of engaging works of art as memorials. But these are no more than three examples from a multitude.

These social practices of art are handed down from one generation to another in such a way that newcomers are inducted into them; they are shaped both by goals and standards more or less internal to the practice, and by forces more or less external to the practice; and the goals and standards of these practices undergo vast alterations in the history of a given society, they differ considerably from society to society, and they are often the subjects of controversy within a society.

Once we have adopted this social practice approach to the arts, then the second move to make in arriving at an alternative to the Grand Narrative is to give up the progressivist narrative of art as finally coming into its own in the eighteenth century, when disinterested contemplation of works of art became prominent among the middle class. The eighteenth century revolution represented a radical development in the age-old practices of the arts, particularly within the public-engagement practice. But it represented no more than that. The arts have always undergone changes, sometimes wrenching, sometimes gentle, sometimes in response to developments more or less internal to the arts, sometimes in response to developments more or less external. The eighteenth century revolution has claim to being one of the more radical alterations in those social practices which are the arts. But it is a mistake to think of developments prior to the eighteenth century as all leading up to this climax of liberation.

Once we have made these two moves, then we will be in a position to explore in depth the many different ways in which religion and art interact. We will be in a position to explore the Byzantine iconoclast controversy, which most emphatically was not a controversy over the religious significance of art for disinterested contemplation. We will be in a position to explore the function of memorial art in religious communities. We will be in a position to explore the role of poetry in the devotional life; what, for example, is going on when people take onto their own
lips the poetry of the Psalms so as thereby to express their own hopes and fears, sorrows and thanksgivings?

But let me not go on in this catalogish fashion. I trust I have said enough for you yourself to have caught a glimpse of the rich and fascinating terrain that opens up before us when we liberate ourselves from the grip of the Grand Modern Narrative of the Arts so as to be able to consider, without prejudice, the many ways in which art and religion interact in the life of humankind here on earth.
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Chapter 11
The Beauty of the Cross
Richard Viladesau

For many Christians, the idea that gives the title to this article—the beauty of the cross—is a given, a nearly self-evident truth of faith. But the notion poses serious questions for theology as well as for aesthetics. How can the cross be beautiful? Obviously, the cross is a symbol of salvation. But it represents salvation through human suffering. Can suffering be beautiful? Can a representation of suffering be beautiful?

Such questions bring us to a central issue of “theological aesthetics.” What do we mean by “beauty”? How is it related to the good, to God, to ultimacy? How is art—especially representational art—related to beauty, to faith, to narrative, to history?

The Beauty and the Scandal of the Cross

Clearly, when we speak of the “beauty” of the cross we are speaking in a purposively paradoxical way. The paradox is already enunciated in the New Testament. Not surprisingly, we find different—and sometimes contrasting—theologies of the passion at work both in the gospels themselves and in the other writings of the New Testament. A dramatic example of such a contrast is found in the liturgical readings for the fifth Sunday of Lent (year B in the Roman liturgical calendar). In the gospel reading, taken from John (12:20–33), we hear that Jesus feels “troubled” in spirit; yet he will not pray to be saved from his “hour.” The passion for John is the hour of Jesus’ “glory:” it is seen already from the perspective of the resurrection, the new life that comes from death, and Jesus enters into it knowingly and willingly. Significantly, there is no account of an “agony in the garden” in John’s gospel. On the contrary, the Johannine Jesus asserts that he himself freely gives up his life, and no one takes it from him (John 10:18).

But in the second reading, from the Letter to the Hebrews (5:7–9), we are told that Jesus “offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to God” (bringing to mind the Synoptic accounts of the “agony in the garden”); and that, “son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered ...” Perhaps most surprisingly, the letter continues: “when perfected (τελειωθείς), he became the source of eternal salvation.” Hebrews not only emphasizes the negative, fearful aspect of Christ’s passion, but also apparently sees it as part of a necessary process that Jesus had to undergo in order to attain perfection.

We might say that these two texts correspond to two images of Jesus—one stressing his divinity, the other his real humanity (although in their totality, both John and Hebrews contain both perspectives). They also correspond to two complementary
but different theological perspectives on the cross that are found already in the New Testament. In John’s gospel, as in the theology of Paul, the cross is seen above all as the expression of the salvific will of God, which Jesus freely accepts and accomplishes (as the Roman Catholic liturgy says in the second eucharistic prayer: “before he was put to death, a death he freely accepted ...”). On the other hand, the passage from Hebrews, although written late, evokes what is probably a more primitive theology of the cross. While recognizing its salvific import, this theology emphasizes that the cross has a negative character, which was felt by Jesus as suffering. This early theology is preserved also in the speeches of Peter in the Acts of the Apostles: “He was delivered up by the set purpose and plan of God; you even made use of pagans to crucify and kill him. But God freed him from death’s bitter pangs, and raised him up ...” (Acts 2:23–24); “You put to death the Author of life. But God raised him from the dead ...” (Acts 3:15). Here the cross is indeed a part of God’s plan of salvation; yet there is a contrast. Jesus’ death on the cross is the work of sinful humanity, opposing God’s will; but God nevertheless triumphs, by raising Jesus. The cross is the evil work of humanity; the resurrection is God’s triumphant response of victory over evil. The whole is the realization of God’s “plan”; but its elements are different in their relation to God.

We have here contrasting but not contradictory theologies: different perspectives on the same reality. The cross and the suffering of Christ are evil, the expression and result of sin; they are not to be glorified in themselves; they are not God’s will. Yet they fit into God’s plan of salvation: God saves not by miraculously taking evil out of the world, or by sparing his beloved from it, but by using it. God makes good come from evil, life from death. In this sense, we may see God as the author of the event of the cross; and in this sense (and only in this sense) the cross can be willingly accepted, and can be the symbol of salvation—even while being rejected as the symbol of sin and alienation.

St. Paul summarizes and expands on the paradox of the cross in the celebrated verse from 1 Corinthians: “But we preach Christ crucified: to the Jews, a stumbling block, and to the Gentiles, foolishness; but to those called, Jews and Greeks, Christ God’s power (δύναμιν) and God’s wisdom (σοφίαν); for God’s foolishness (τὸ μωρόν) is wiser than humans, and God’s weakness (τὸ ἀσθενές) is stronger than

1 The Byzantine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom emphasizes even more dramatically that the passion was willed by God and voluntarily accepted by Jesus. Immediately before the words of institution, it thanks the Father for Jesus ‘who, having come and having fulfilled the whole divine plan concerning us, on the night when He was betrayed, or rather, when He surrendered Himself for the life of the world ...’

2 Odo of Cluny in his exegesis of Isaiah 28:21 distinguishes between God’s own work (opus ejus) and the work of others (opus alienum). Luther, among others, would exploit this distinction in his discussion of redemption through the cross. God’s own work is justification and salvation; but God uses the work of others (opus alienum = das fremde Werk Gottes), including the crucifixion of Christ, which was the work of the devil and of evil people, to serve the divine purpose. See Martin Luther, Werke, I, 112, 94–5.
humans” (1 Cor. 1:23). And, by extension, may we presume that God’s ugliness is more beautiful than human beauty?

To refer to the “beauty” of the cross is to speak in terms of a “converted” sense of beauty. The cross challenges us to re-think and to expand our notion of what is beautiful, and indeed of the “beauty” of God itself. Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar both insist strongly on this point. The Christian notion of beauty—and specifically of the divine beauty—must be able to include even the cross, “and everything else which a worldly aesthetics ... discards as no longer bearable.” The cross gives a new sense to Rilke’s phrase in the first Duino elegy, “beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror.”

From its earliest era, the church has applied to Christ in his passion the words of the fourth “Song of the Suffering Servant” from the book of Isaiah (Isa. 52:13–53:12)—thinking of them, indeed, as a direct prophecy of the passion. Here we read that “there was no beauty in him to make us look at him, nor appearance that would attract us to him” (Isa. 53:2–3). As Barth says, “Jesus Christ does present this aspect of Himself, and He always presents this aspect first. It is not self-evident that even—and precisely—under this aspect he has form and comeliness, that the beauty of God shines especially under this aspect ... We cannot know this of ourselves. It can only be given to us.”

Yet to Christian faith, it is given that Christ is—precisely in the event of the cross—the supreme revelation of God’s being, God’s “form,” “glory,” and “beauty.” The transcendent “beauty” and “light” of God, then, must embrace also “the abysmal darkness into which the Crucified plunges.” This implies that the meaning of God’s “beauty” is only finally known by God’s self-revelation. For Balthasar, it would be a misunderstanding of the “analogy” of beauty to make it the simple projection onto

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3 The same theme recurs elsewhere in Paul’s theology: in Christ crucified God’s power and wisdom are revealed to those who are called, although the cross is a stumbling block and a folly to those headed for perdition (1 Cor. 1:18, 23). The cross of Christ seems absurd in the light of the world’s ‘wisdom’; but it is where God’s mysterious wisdom is revealed (1 Cor. 1:17; 2:6–7). Those whose way of life is oriented to ‘the things of this world’ show themselves to be enemies of the cross of Christ (Phil. 2:18–19). The celebrated hymn of Philippians proclaims (in terms relevant to our concern for revelation) that Christ did not appear in divine form, but in the form of a slave, obedient even to death on the cross (Phil. 2:6–8). Paul explicitly counsels the Philippians that this attitude should be a model for their own (Phil. 2:5).

4 Balthasar, GL1, p. 124.

5 ‘... das Schöne ist nichts/ als des Schrecklichen Anfang ...’ Cf. GL1, p. 65.

6 It seems clear that this passage, which is still used liturgically as the first reading of the Good Friday service, already colored the passion narratives in the gospels, and was considered in the early church to be a prophetic foretelling. It is possible that the figure of the Isaian ‘servant’ also formed part of Jesus’ own self-consciousness as he approached the end of his life. For discussion of these points, see Raymond Brown, SS, The Death of the Messiah (New York: Doubleday, 1994), especially pp. 234, 1457–9, 1471–3, 1480f., 1485–7.


8 GL1, p. 117.
God of our “worldly” experience of the beautiful and desirable. In speaking of God’s being,

we must be careful not to start from any preconceived ideas, especially in this case a preconceived idea of the beautiful. Augustine was quite right when he said of the beautiful: *Non ideo pulchra sunt, quia delectant, sed ideo delectant, quia pulchra sunt* [“things are not beautiful because they please us, but rather they please us because they are beautiful”] (*De vera rel.* 32, 59). What is beautiful produces pleasure. *Pulchra sunt, quae visa placent* [“The beautiful is what is pleasant to perceive”] (Thomas Aquinas, S. Th. I, q. 5, art. 4, ad 1). Yet it is not beautiful because it arouses pleasure. Because it is beautiful, it arouses pleasure. In our context Augustine’s statement is to be expanded into: *Non ideo Deus Deus, quia pulcher est, sed ideo pulcher, quia Deus est* [“God is not God because God is beautiful, but God is beautiful because God is God”]. God is not beautiful in the sense that He shares in an idea of beauty superior to Him, so that to know it is to know Him as God. On the contrary, it is as He is God that He is also beautiful, so that He is the basis and standard of everything that is beautiful and all ideas of the beautiful ... [The Divine being] as such is beautiful. We have to learn from it what beauty is. Our creaturely conceptions of the beautiful, formed from what has been created, may rediscover or fail to rediscover themselves in it. If they do rediscover themselves in it, it will be with an absolutely unique application, to the extent that now, subsequently as it were, they have also to describe His being.9

It is in exactly this “converted” sense that the Fathers—especially Augustine—speak of the beauty of the cross, in full consciousness of its ugliness. They frequently contrast quotations from the Old Testament that they took to be direct prophecies of Christ: on the one hand the passage from Isaiah referred to above—*“non erat ei species neque decor”* [“in him there was neither beauty nor comeliness”] (Isa. 53:2)—and on the other the verse from Psalm 44, in which David refers to Christ (as they thought) as *“speciosus pre filiis hominum,”* [“beautiful beyond all the children of men”] sometimes in conjunction with the verse from the *Song of Songs,* *“ecce tu pulcher es dilecte mi”* [“behold, you are beautiful, my beloved”] (Cant. 1).10

Augustine, for example, comments, according to Aquinas: “to us who perceive, *nobis cernentibus* he is everywhere beautiful: beautiful in the hands of his parents, beautiful in his miracles, beautiful in the scourging, beautiful in giving up his spirit, beautiful in carrying his cross, beautiful in the crucifixion, beautiful in heaven.”11

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10 Aquinas, typically, gives a nuanced and many-sided approach to the ‘beauty’ of Christ. He explains four senses of the word ‘Speciosus’ that can be applied to Christ: 1) divinity: plenitude of grace 2) beauty of justice and truth (Jer. 31: *benedicat tibi Dominus pulchritudo justitiae*) 3) beauty of acts: *pulchritudo conversationis honestae* 4) beauty of body (Cant. 1: *ecce tu pulcher es dilecte mi*). To the Scriptural objection that can be raised (Isa. 53: *vidimus et non erat in eo species neque decor*; Proverbs: *fallax gratia et vana est pulchritudo*), he answers that beauty is relative to the condition of the person, like health. Christ was always beautiful in accord with his dignity. But he was deformed physically in the passion. See Thomas Aquinas, *In Psalmos Davidis Expositio, Super Psalmo 44*, n. 2.
11 *In Psalmum XLIV*, c. 3 (CCSL 38, p. 496). This passage is quoted according to Aquinas’ version in his Commentary on the Psalms mentioned above. CCSL (here and below) stands for *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*. All translations from the Latin are mine.
Crucial, of course is the phrase “to us who perceive” (nobis cernentibus). Christ’s beauty is not apparent except to those who know how to discern spiritual beauty.\textsuperscript{12} That beauty consists above all in goodness or justice, which we are called to imitate, and which thus become similarly beautiful. Augustine is very explicit in his commentary on 1 John:

Our soul, my brethren, is ugly because of sin: by loving God, it becomes beautiful. What kind of love is it that makes the lover beautiful? Now God is always beautiful, never deformed, never changeable. God, who is always beautiful, has loved us first; and whom has God loved, but the ugly and the deformed? God does not reject us as being ugly, but wished to change us, make us from something deformed into something beautiful. How shall we become beautiful? By loving the One who is always beautiful. The more love grows in you, the more beauty grows; because charity itself is the soul of love. \textit{Let us love one another, because God has first loved us.} Listen to the Apostle Paul: \textit{For God showed God’s love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us} (Rom. 5:8–9), the just for the unjust, the beautiful for the ugly. In what way do we find Jesus to be beautiful? \textit{Beautiful in form beyond the children of men, grace has been poured out on your lips} (Ps. 44:3). Whence is he beautiful? Once again, see how he is beautiful: \textit{Beautiful in form beyond the children of men; because in the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the word was God} (Jn. 1:1). Because he took on flesh, he took on, as it were, your ugliness—that is, your mortality—so that he might adapt himself to and become similar to you, and incite you to a deeper love of beauty. In what way, therefore, do we find that Jesus is ugly and deformed, since we find that he is beautiful and comely beyond the children of men? How do we find that he was also deformed? Ask Isaiah: \textit{And we beheld him, and he had no beauty or comeliness} (Is. 53:2). These sayings seem like two flutes playing different tunes; but it is one Spirit who blows both of them. One says, \textit{Beautiful in form beyond the children of men}; the other says, in Isaiah, \textit{We saw him, and he had no beauty or comeliness}. One Spirit plays both flutes, and they are not disharmonious. Do not close your ears; use your mind. Let us ask Paul the apostle, and he shall explain to us the harmony of the two flutes. We hear, \textit{Beautiful in form beyond the children of men}”: “\textit{Who, being in the form of God, did not think it robbery to be equal to God.”} Behold “\textit{beautiful in form beyond the children of men.”} We also hear, “\textit{We saw him, and he had no beauty or comeliness}”: “\textit{He emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, being made in the likeness of men, and appearing in conduct like a man}” (Phil. 2:6–7). “\textit{He had no beauty or comeliness}” in order that he might give you beauty and comeliness. What beauty? What comeliness? The love of charity: so that loving, you might hasten, and hastening you might love. You are already beautiful: but do not wait, least you lose what you have received; direct yourself toward him by whom you are made beautiful. Be beautiful, so that he may love you. And direct yourself totally to him, hasten to him, ask for his embrace, fear to be separated from him; so that there may be in you a pure fear, remaining forever. \textit{Let us love one another, because he first loved us.}\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} A more expansive discussion is found in \textit{In Ps. XLIV} (CCSL 38, pp. 495–6).

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{S. Aurelii Augustini Hipponensis Episcopi In Epistolam Joannis Ad Parthos Tractatus Decem}, tr. 9, c. 4, 5.17–21 (PL 35, 2051–2). PL here and below stands for J.P. Migne, \textit{Patrologiae cursus completus. Series Latina}. 

unless otherwise noted. Augustine speaks similarly in numerous places, e.g., \textit{In Ps. XLIII}, c. 16 (CCSL 38, p. 488); \textit{In Ps. CXXVII}, c. 8 (CCSL 40. p. 1872).
We may note that there are two possible dimensions to this beauty of Christ in the midst of the ugliness of the passion. The first is what we might call “moral beauty.” Saint Jerome puts it succinctly, referring to the same texts as Augustine: “If we call him beautiful, it is in reference to what is said in the psalm: ‘Beautiful in form beyond the children of men.’ For what could be more beautiful than that the form of a slave becomes the form of God, and is seated with him and reigns with Christ in heaven?”

The beauty is that of the divine love abasing itself to raise up humanity, and the cross is its ultimate (but not unique) expression.

This allows us to make a distinction and a contrast: the crucifixion as a judicial murder was ugly; as martyrdom it was beautiful. Physically it was ugly; morally—in its meaning of self-sacrifice for others—it was beautiful. What happened to Christ was ugly and horrid; his willingness to undergo it was beautiful. The emphasis here is on the divine compassion, and on Jesus’ free acceptance of his death. The Church Fathers never tired of repeating the words from John’s gospel: “the Father loves me because I lay down my life, that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I give it up myself” (John 10:18). John Damascene’s words of commentary are a good example of the lesson the Fathers saw in this: “One never sees anything compulsory in him; rather, all is voluntary. It was by willing it that he became hungry, willing it that he knew fear, and willing it that he died.”

It is such ideas that led to medieval pictures in which it is the personified Virtues who carry out the crucifixion of Jesus.

But there is also a second possible dimension to the beauty of the cross. There are theologies of the cross that appeal to something beyond the “moral” beauty of Jesus’ self-sacrifice. Not only Jesus’ willingness to suffer was beautiful, but the event itself was beautiful, because necessary. Even the evil of the crucifixion is in some way taken up into the beauty of the divine plan, and that plan is in itself beautiful because it is just. This idea is found preeminently in St. Anselm. It has frequently been noted that Anselm’s juridical notion of satisfaction is clearly related to political, legal, and social ideas of his times. It is less frequently remarked that he makes an appeal to an aesthetic principle as the ultimate reason for the need for satisfaction at all.

Anselm is quite explicit about this. God’s “honor” is intrinsic to God. It is not subject to injury or change. But the creature injures itself in not honoring God. The sinner “disturbs the order and beauty of the universe, insofar as he or she is a part of it, although the sinner cannot in any way injure or tarnish the power and majesty (dignitas) of God” (Cur Deus Homo, I, xv). It is impossible for God to lose honor; for either it is rendered, or God takes it by punishment of those who offend against it (I, xiv). Even sin must serve the order and beauty of the universe, in God’s infinite wisdom: either by reconciliation, or by punishment. “For when it is understood that God brings good out of many forms of evil, then the satisfaction for sin freely given, or if this be not given, the exaction of punishment, hold their own place and orderly beauty in the same universe” (I, xv). “For the free satisfaction for sin, or the exaction of punishment from the one who does not satisfy (given that God brings good out of many-faceted evil), have their place in the universe and their own beauty of order.”

14 S. Eusebii Hieronymi Stridonensis Presbyteri Commentariorum In Isaiam Prophetam Libri Duodeviginti 14, c. 52, n. 7–8 (CCSL 73A, p. 582).
Otherwise, there would be deformity in the ordered beauty of the universe, and God would be deficient in ordering: which is unthinkable.

Of course Anselm’s satisfaction theory has for some time been questioned and rejected, not only from the perspective of “Enlightenment rationalism,” but from the perspective of Christian theology itself. Does the same critique apply also to the theological aesthetics that implicitly underlies the theory? If so, the critique would seem to reach beyond Anselm, back to the New Testament theology of the cross that he implicitly presupposes. Is there not after all a danger in the Pauline language of paradox that exalts the cross as a higher wisdom, power, and beauty? If murder is ugly, can God’s willing—or even “permitting”—this murder, as necessary part of a plan of salvation—be beautiful? Could the death of an innocent be needed for the beauty of God’s justice, as Anselm says? What implications does this have for human justice?16 And how far can this act be taken as a model for others, as it traditionally has been? What are the social consequences of such a model? On the personal level, does this train of thought run the risk of producing a spirituality of passivity, acceptance of injustice, identifying love with acceptance of victimization, instead of striving for social justice?

One of the characters from George Eliot’s novel Daniel Deronda poses the question in aesthetic terms. A member of a group in conversation has just been admiring the spirit of Buddha’s self-sacrifice in the story from the Jakata tales: seeing a starving tigress, he throws his body to her to be eaten, so that she may feed her young. One of the young women objects: “But was it beautiful for Bouddha to let the tiger eat him?” ... ‘It would be a bad pattern.’” Her sister agrees: “The world would get full of fat tigers.” Has the world in fact gotten full of fat tigers because of a misplaced sense of self-sacrifice on the part of good people who should instead be resisting evil?

On another but related level: how does one distinguish between “aesthetic conversion” and masochism or sadism? In the words of Ewert Cousins, we find in the passion piety of the late Middle Ages a “morbid fascination with pain and humiliation.” “From a psychological point of view,” he continues, “this late medieval devotion to the passion of Christ is one of the most problematic phenomena in the history of Christian spirituality.”17 Granted that there is suffering love: does it follow, as some have contended,18 that there is no love without suffering—that suffering and pain somehow become ultimate realities, even in God? Or does such a contention deny the reality of God’s eternal blessedness, and hence devalue the resurrection and eschatology?

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It seems to me that the only way to overcome such problems—as Balthasar saw—is to recognize an analogy of beauty. If conversion heals and expands on our human sense of beauty, it does not contradict it. There must exist an Anknüpfungspunkt for God’s revelation and the conversion it calls for, however much it goes beyond our “nature,” and a fortiori beyond our sinful egotism. And the same applies to our human sense of ugliness and evil. That God brings good out of evil does not mean that evil has become good; if God brings beauty even out of suffering, it does not mean that suffering is beautiful. As Augustine says, Jesus was beautiful, even in the bearing of the cross. This does not mean the cross was beautiful in itself … the tension remains. Hence the “contrast theology” of the early church remains valid and necessary, even once we have adopted the Johannine perspective on God’s glory.

Such a contrast theology is frequently manifest in the lived tension between theological idea and feeling. Art is an apt medium for expressing this. One example is the genre of the “planctus” or “lament” of Mary at the foot of the cross. According to Byzantine tradition, adopted in the West, Jesus instructs his grieving mother in the meaning of the crucifixion. In a remarkable English example, Jesus says to Mary:

“Stond wel, moder, under roodë,
bihold þi child wiþ gladë moodë,
blîþë moder miztu be.”

“Stand well, mother, under the cross; behold thy child with glad spirit; joyous, mother, mayest thou be.” Jesus goes on to tell Mary that her tears afflict him worse than his own death, which he undergoes for the salvation of all humanity, including her: “Moder, if i dar þe telle, if i ne dey, þu gost to hellë” (“Mother, if I dare tell thee, if I die not, you will go to hell”). Throughout the dialogue, Christ speaks in terms of theology; Mary repeatedly replies in terms of her motherly feelings. It is precisely by appealing to these—pointing out that she now shares the sufferings of so many mothers, which she was spared in her Son’s miraculous birth—that Christ finally brings Mary to understand the compassion of God for humanity. From this she becomes a source of compassion herself.

The need for this “contrast theology” becomes even more apparent when we consider the dynamism of conversion to the really beautiful. The cross is not an end in itself; similarly, the meaning of Christian “death to self” is intimately connected with the agapic love of neighbor that is the sign of the new “resurrected” life in Christ’s spirit. The idea of the cross is linked with Jesus’ teaching that the supreme occasion for the love of God, to which our lives must be ordered, is to be found in our needy neighbor (Luke 10:25f.; John 13:34; 15:12–13; 1 John 4:7–8, 20–21, etc.). The cross tells us that “love” itself is not to be defined simply in terms of a Platonic

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19 A lovely recording of this sequence is available sung by the group ‘Anonymous Four’ on the CD ‘The Lily and the Lamb. Chant and Polyphony from medieval England’ (HMY 907125).

20 Among the many Pauline texts bearing on this theme, see e.g., Rom. 5:24f., 6:1–10; Col. 3:1–17. Perhaps the most explicit succinct statements of this theme are found in 1 John: ‘That we have passed from death to life we know because we love the brothers’ (3:14); ‘... we too must lay down our lives for our brothers’ (3:16).
“eros” toward the beautiful and good that fulfill us as we currently are. For the Christian, love is above all the “agapé” that is motivated not by the other’s beauty, but by his or her need—as God first loved us in Christ (Rom. 5:6–8; 1 John 4:10). We are attracted and moved by a potential beauty, a beauty that we are called to bring into being by action.

Moreover, this love demands the sacrifice of self: that is, an absolute “claim” on us is made by the other, and by precisely that in him/her which is lacking in proper relation or proportion or attractiveness. The cross challenges us to see the “surd” of suffering and poverty in our neighbor as a word of God’s self-revelation and an invitation to the response of love.

Likewise, and for that reason, the cross of Christ must be seen always in the light of the resurrection. Barth has said, “If the beauty of Christ is sought in a glorious Christ who is not the crucified, the search will always be in vain.” But by the same token, the beauty of the crucified cannot be separated from his victory over death as the sign of God’s victorious life in human history. The cross is not beautiful or good in itself: it is beautiful only insofar as it represents Christ’s ultimate faithfulness and self-gift to God, even to the point of death, and insofar as this act is given eternal validity by God’s overcoming of death itself. That is, the cross only has beauty as the expression of an act of love; and love is “beautiful,” theologically speaking, precisely because it is finally not defeated, but victorious. Love is godly and therefore in itself the participation in and anticipation of the divine form of life. The fulfillment of that anticipation by God is revealed historically and in definitive form in Christ’s resurrection as the sign that confirms the validity and shows the final victorious nature of all human self-giving in love.

The cross, then, is not a beautiful thing; it is the symbol of a beautiful act—on Jesus’ part, as self-giving, and (inseparably) on the part of the Father, in raising Jesus from death. When the Christian speaks of the beauty of the cross, it is seen not as a self-contained object or event (such as might be represented in a naturalistic picture), but as moment in God’s poiesis, an element in the theo-drama of salvation, whose significance is therefore incomplete except in the dénouement of the narrative.

This is the reason why through the ages most Christian pictorial art, with certain rare exceptions, has not attempted to represent the crucifixion with “photographic” realism, but has treated the cross symbolically, making it already the manifestation of glory. Even when Christ’s suffering is portrayed realistically, or even sur-realistically, it is generally in a context that allows us to understand the ugliness of that suffering as part of a larger “beauty:” namely, as the “satisfaction” for sin and the manifestation of the depth of divine love. In pictorial art, in contrast to narrative, movement is fixed and representation is “complete” and unchanging over time. Hence it can only show the true meaning of the cross by visually combining two “moments,” representing

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the cross in the aura of the resurrection. The representation of the crucifixion by itself is “abstract,” from a theological point of view, unless it is seen in this light. In this sense, the representation of the cross in most Christian art is already a kind of “theodicy:” it shows evil overcome, transformed into good. The danger of this, as of any theodicy, explicit or implicit, is that it may be used as a “short-cut” through the problem of evil, in which the negative moment is simply overlooked or is not felt with its full power.

**The Art of Preaching the Cross. The portrayal of the beauty of the cross in non-verbal theology**

Thus far, my discussion has exemplified one area of theological aesthetics: study of beauty in relation to God and conversion. But theological aesthetics also concerns art, aesthetics as another way of thinking. How does one show what I have been speaking of? Augustine and others have given us a verbal theology of the cross and of the beauty of the cross. But how does one portray it? How does one convey the beauty of something ugly? Augustine referred to God as “the beauty of all things beautiful.” But what of the beauty of what is apparently ugly and horrid? Can visual art portray and even evoke the conversion of feeling demanded by the cross? How is visual message connected with theoretical theological message?

Art and concept are parallel languages: they sometimes intersect and influence and translate each other: but the relation is complex, both historically and theoretically. It would be convenient for scholars if things fit neatly and systematically: if St. Anselm “invented” the satisfaction theory, and people then started portraying the suffering Christ on the cross. But in fact it was not so simple: the humanistic and suffering portrayal of the crucifixion predates Anselm—whose theory was in any case not universally accepted for quite a long time, and even then with many modifications. Similarly with the influence of St. Francis and Franciscans: here there was a definite influence on art; but it was not exclusive or inventive: there was an inheritance from Byzantium that was partially absorbed and partially transformed.

Instead of merely adverting to the problem of portrayal of the paradox of beauty in ugliness, let us look at how Christian art in fact attempted it. This will raise points not only about the cross, but about theological aesthetics itself.

One thing that is immediately apparent is the pluralism of visual languages, styles, emphases, and understandings. This in itself is significant in thinking about the notion of a “form” or beauty of revelation or of Christ. Some theologies seem to presume that Christians are or should be monolinguistic; but the history of art, if we genuinely take it as a mode of cognition, and if we furthermore grant validity to its pluralism as an expression of faith, seems to undermine any such understanding.

Despite the plurality and the lack of any single clear aesthetic “form,” however, it seems to me that we may gather the attempts to convey the paradox of the beauty of the cross into a small number of basic styles or methods:

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24 This perspective is already present in the gospel narrative itself, although the following resurrection accounts are its explanation.
1) pure symbolism: ideographic writing. The early centuries portray the crucifixion not at all—for the first 500 years, with few exceptions. The jeweled cross is used as a symbol. This is a kind of ideographic use of art: the use of a picture to directly represent an idea, without other mediation. (See for example the many inscriptions of the “crux gemmata” on sarcophagi in the catacombs through the fifth-century.)

2) “numinous” or Platonic realism. “Realism” here designates the opposite of “naturalism.” The real is not what is seen, but what is known. Religious art is the portrayal of ideas, rather than of physical vision: a direct visual statement of a message about supernatural reality. This style corresponds to “idealist” religion, frequently of a Platonic cast. Art is not the imitation of nature, as Leonardo would have it, but is rather a symbolic mediation of presence and the communication of a message: a text, but in visual form. Art is narrative, but it is a narrative about the “real” world, not about the world of appearances; and art even as narrative is iconic, a mediation of presence. (Most crucifixes from the pre-Gothic era exemplify this style. Some classic examples, among many others, can be seen in the heroic Christ on the ivory crucifixion plaque from the British Museum, ca. 500; in the glorified apocalyptic Christ on the cross of Fernand and Sancha, ca. 1063; in the modern period, in Dalí’s “Hypercubic body,” painted in 1954.)

3) “religious expressionism”: art represents physical vision, but in the light of a transcendent reality. This is the expression of what Tillich calls “ecstatic/spiritual” and humanistic religion. Here the suffering of Christ on the cross is seen in light of its purpose, and is sublimated into glory. (The “humanistic” crucifix developed in Byzantium and developed in the West during the Gothic period shows this tendency at perhaps its most expressive moment. The panel cross of Giunta Pisano, still in imitation of the Byzantine crucifix, and the more “Latin” crucifixion by Giotto in the Arena chapel are among the masterworks of the style that became nearly universal in the Middle Ages.)

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26 For an interesting example of the image as a mediation of presence, see for example Gregory of Tours, ‘De crucifixo apud Narbonam’ (595 AD); Sancti Georgii Florentii Gregorii episcopi Turonensis Libri Miraculorum I, c. 23 (PL 71, 724–5).
Figure 1  Anonymous Umbrian painter, *San Damiano Cross* (12th c.), Assisi, S. Chiara.
4) “naturalistic realism:” things are represented as they appear to the eye. In religious art, the connection of naturalistic realism with faith is implicit, but often dialectical. As Tillich notes, this kind of art can serve prophetic and protesting religion. But it may also represent a “satisfaction” atonement theory. With regard to the crucifixion, we may note two types:

a) the historical Christ portrayed as suffering, without any explicit reference to divinity or triumph. (Different examples of the genre may be found in the Pestkreuz of the late Middle Ages; in the crucifixions by Grünewald (1523) and Eakins (1880); and in the Christ of the passion play, including Mel Gibson’s film The Passion of the Christ.)

b) Christ portrayed in modern dress or context, or in the figure of another person of the extended “body of Christ.” (See Ercole Rossai: “L’uomo crocifisso” of 1940; “The Crucifixion of Dountes” by Dickinson, 1980; “Yellow Christ” by Paul Gauguin, 1889.)

5) abstraction. Once again the cross becomes an abstract symbol, either of glory or of absurd suffering, or of both. The abstract representation of the cross and/or of the crucifixion may also approach the subject at a further level of removal, so that they serve as a comment not so much on the event as on the genre, that is, on the history of previous portrayals, as in the case of Picasso’s paintings. (Picasso, “Crucifixion after Grünewald,” 1934; “Three Studies for a Crucifixion” by Francis Bacon, 1963.)
Figure 2  Matthias Grünewald, *The Small Crucifixion* (c. 1511/1520), National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Figure 3  Paul Gauguin, *Yellow Christ* (1889), Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York.
Figure 4  Pablo Picasso, *The Crucifixion* (Sept. 19, 1932), Musée Picasso, Paris, France.
Lessons and Questions for Theological Aesthetics

I conceive of “Theological Aesthetics” as a discipline that is concerned with the connection between God and revelation, on the one hand, and, on the other, 1) perception, feeling, and imagination in general, and the specific mode of cognition that is aesthetic, as opposed to conceptual; 2) beauty and the beautiful; 3) art in general and the specific arts. In each of these connections, there are historical, philosophical, and systematic considerations. In each of these areas, the different modes of portraying the beauty and the ugliness of the cross intensify many questions that belong already to systematics: for example, what is the relation between the divinity and humanity of Christ? How is the passion salvific? But the history of art also raises questions proper to theological aesthetics, of which I give only a few examples.

Within the study of imagination and feeling, and their relation to conceptual thought: is pictorial and imaginative thinking genuinely a way of thinking? Is it a lower level of expression that is to be overcome in concept (as in a Hegelian schema of Vorstellung being aufgehoben in Begriff)? Is the relationship more complex? Is it perhaps the other way around? Is art a legitimate way of theological expression at all? Related to these questions is another: is there only one clear and discernible intelligible “form” or Gestalt of God’s revelation in Christ, one that is more or less self-evident, or is there a genuine plurality? How does one explain, in the first case, the factual plurality of images? In the second case, how does one approach the unity of revelation and the historical uniqueness of Jesus as revelation?

Within the theological study of beauty: in what way can the cross or the crucifixion legitimately be portrayed as beautiful? What does such beauty mean? How is the notion of beauty corrected by Christian conversion—so that even the cross can be beautiful?

Within the theological study of art: how does art function with a converted sense of beauty in relation to a message and, on the other hand, as an independent activity? How is the message of the cross preachable in an aesthetic theology: that is, how is self-sacrifice convincingly portrayed as beautiful and fulfilling? How does art—on either the “high” or the “popular” level—serve the ecclesial functions of kerygma, koinonia, and diakonia? Of particular relevance today is the last. The question posed to theology in general by the theologies of liberation takes on a particular acuteness when applied to aesthetics: how can religious art—and especially the portrayal of the cross—be liberative, rather than being a source of a privatized spirituality of suffering and submission, as it has so frequently been in the past?
Chapter 12

Is Good Art Good for Religion?

Frank Burch Brown

1. When Art is Vital to Religion—Or Not

A few years ago, the Princeton sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow published a book-length study entitled *All in Sync: How Music and Art are Revitalizing American Religion.* Basing his observations on interviews with approximately 400 “ordinary people,” Wuthnow argues in this book that the arts figure importantly in the “spiritual journeys” of most Americans—not only in their personal spirituality but also in American religious congregations. Although Wuthnow notes the relative superficiality of the spirituality fed by mass media, he contrasts such massively mediated and commercially propagated arts not only with the kinds of art found in museums and galleries but also with the communally based arts prominent in churches and synagogues. Admitting that relatively few people in our time make a conscious link between religion and creativity or artistry, Wuthnow nonetheless argues here, as he did earlier in a study of the spirituality of professional artists, that it is through artistic imagination, broadly conceived, that a great many of those who practice religion are discovering a vital sort of faith today.

Wuthnow takes an admirably non-elitist view of the artistic processes and products that seem to be spiritually renewing; he concludes, for instance, with a chapter entitled “The Artist in Everyone.” But in being so relatively egalitarian—which is the only way he could claim to be describing a broad swath of American religious culture—Wuthnow gives us cause to wonder. Would the kinds of art that Wuthnow says are revitalizing American religion be regarded as creative or exceptionally good by most people trained in the respective arts? When Wuthnow asserts, for instance, that the quality of music in church matters to congregations, he supports that claim by noting how people prefer that the singing in church not be “off key” and he points out that congregations often like “familiar tunes or hymns that are simple enough to remember.” That is certainly not much to ask, when it comes to music. The standards of musical quality that Wuthnow cites here regarding church music are plainly those of the average worshiper, not the criteria of composers, organists,

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3  *Ibid*.
and choir directors, many of whom are known to gravitate toward more complex or subtle forms of worship music.

One could argue that, even at their best, the kinds of art attracting the attention of spiritual seekers and worshipers these days are more frequently on the order of the *Left Behind* novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins or *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown than they are on the level of Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Gilead* or Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Musically speaking, the popular praise chorus “Our God is an Awesome God” seems more representative of the music of the devout than the *St. Mark Passion* by Osvaldo Golijov, popular as that work has been in certain circles. If we are to believe Wuthnow’s evidence, if not his exact words, the works and styles that highly trained artists and critics typically regard as representative of artistry at its best are not generally the ones that are most influential in revitalizing American religion.

The potential religious charisma of low-status art is by no means an exclusively American phenomenon, of course. And it is not a new phenomenon, in many respects. In ancient Athens, it seems, the statue of Athena that remained most popular in religious practice even into the classical period was not the large, beautifully wrought ivory and gold statue from the hand of the famous sculptor Phidias, which was installed within the Parthenon. Rather, the sculpture favored by the people in general was apparently a much smaller, cruder olive wood statue originating in the rituals of antiquity, which was venerated on a different site on the Acropolis.6

There is something about this that might well give us pause. Ever since the Romantic era (and before), thinkers have been struck by analogies, at least, between art and religion, and by the way in which great art can be inspirational. Although the Romantics fostered democratic ideals, too, and admired the craft of humble artisans, Romanticism became associated even more with the cult of Art with a capital “A,” and of the artistic genius. When modern religious thought has attended to the arts, it has often reflected that kind of elevated view of art and artists. What is different about our present beginning point is that we are taking direct account of religious art that is by no means great and that may even lack what the Romantics saw as the integrity of a humble craft.7 We do so, moreover, with the awareness that modern technology has put many crafts out of business even as it has made possible the marketing of a kind of commercial artistic “product” that is in many respects the artistic equivalent of fast food.

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We should keep in mind that popular religious art of the sort scorned by the art world, whether relatively crude and simplistic or outrageously cheap and “cheesy,” is of course rarely felt to be inferior or religiously expendable by those many people whose spirituality relies on such artistic means. And, as we have already noted, not everything scorned by artistic elites is just “fast food,” aesthetically speaking.

In any case, the available evidence suggests that not only can religion survive dubious art; it can also sometimes make good use of such art—art that by the standards of the art world would be judged mediocre or bad: kitsch, for example. It is impossible to find, in general, a direct correspondence between artistic merit and religious value. On the contrary, it seems plain that good religion (sincere prayer and uplifting praise, for instance) thrives at times by means of art that isn’t very good—admitting that there will always be differences of opinion as to which art should count as good.

An essay on the religious role (if any) of good art is not the place to try to imagine all the reasons why inferior art or art with low artistic status might be good for religion, at least under certain circumstances. It may be enough in this context to recall that, in a religious setting, art is seldom used or experienced in isolation from other practices such as scripture reading, preaching, or corporate prayer. In that larger context, art that might seem trivial or weak in some respects can nonetheless make a contribution. And possible artistic deficiencies can turn into relative strengths. Many a congregational song that might sound sentimental to discriminating musical ears can be redeemed, as it were, by the larger purposes of singing together in worship and by the fact that the melody is easily remembered and widely enjoyed, whatever trained musicians might think of it.

The extensive and apparently legitimate religious use of questionable art gives us all the more reason to wonder whether and how good art could ever be good for religion—and whether the features that make something good as art are to some extent also those that make it good, religiously. As we will soon see, in pursuing such questions we need to go beyond our everyday ways of sorting out the good from the bad in both art and religion. In the meantime, painful as the process may be for artists and religious lovers of art, we need to look more closely at some of the more cogent (if not entirely persuasive) reasons that have been given as to how and why good art may not be good for religion.

2. Religious Doubts about Good Art

In his influential book *The Analogical Imagination*, the Catholic theologian David Tracy asks whether the qualities that make something exceptionally good artistically are likely to make it exceptionally good religiously. And he denies that this is so. Admitting that in rare instances an artistic classic can at the same time be a religiously
classic, Tracy insists that this is indeed exceptional—which helps explain why, in Tracy’s long discussion of the idea of the religious classic, he mostly treats classics of art as belonging to a genre that is different from the religious classic, although analogous. His argument, in a nutshell, is that religion has as its core subject and source something too encompassing, boundless, and self-shattering to be expressed or contained in art—the heart of religion being something Tracy describes rather enigmatically as “a manifestation of the whole by the power of that whole, not ourselves” (p. 197). According to Tracy, such a radically disruptive manifestation of “incomprehensible mystery” (p. 200) is inconsistent with what he characterizes as “the sureness of form of the major artistic classics” (p. 197). This is not to deny that sometimes in the very greatest classics of art the “triumph of form” can miraculously occur partly by working in and through what at one level are formal flaws. Most artistic classics are not of that sort, Tracy says.

Tracy acknowledges exceptional cases in which artistic classics are also religious ones. He names, for instance, the Psalms, the prose of Augustine and Kierkegaard, the poetry of Dante and Milton—but no music (as far as I can tell), nor architecture such as Chartres Cathedral or the Ronchamp Chapel of Le Corbusier, and little art on the order of Masaccio’s *Trinity* (1427; Sta. Maria Novella, Florence). Tracy asserts that even the rare artistic religious classics are not, “under the same rules of production, identically both [artistic and religious] at the same time” (p. 201). In other words, the artistic goals are necessarily different in kind from the religious goals. Perhaps Tracy could find a place for a musical art of the sublime, such as one hears in the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* of Olivier Messiaen (1908–92) or, still more recently, in many compositions of the Finnish composer Einojuhani Rautavaara (b. 1928), which create a whirl of sonic mist that draws us toward the infinite. Tracy might also approve of the minimalist techniques of the contemporary Estonian composer Arvo Pärt (b. 1935), which evoke the contemplative, Hesychast tradition of Eastern Christianity. He would presumably grant, as well, the religious value of seventeenth-century Protestant poems that Stanley Fish and others have identified as self-consuming artifacts, devoutly emptying their artistry of any claim to self-sufficiency. But most of the best art—really *classic* art—Tracy says, is too preoccupied with striving for its own aesthetic perfection to serve as a fundamental religious reference point or as a normative religious expression.

Certainly on that point Tracy would have gotten no argument from Søren Kierkegaard. In his book of 1850 entitled *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard writes that, just as it is incomprehensible to him how a murderer can calmly sharpen the knife with which he will commit his crime, so is it incomprehensible to him how an artist can sit “year in and year out occupied in the work of painting Christ—without having it occur to him whether Christ would wish to be painted, would wish to have his portrait … depicted by [the artist’s] master brush.”10 Kierkegaard believes that the artist should give up, and not because the artist has been painting so badly but

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because the artist has been painting so well. Inviting us to imagine the situation of a superb artist who has painted a Crucifixion, Kierkegaard finds it entirely plausible that what people will admire is the artistic expertise for its own sake. Like the maker of the art, they will look for “whether the play of colors is right, and the shadows, whether blood looks like that, whether the suffering expression is artistically true.” Kierkegaard declares: What was once the “actual suffering of the Holy One, the artist has somehow turned into money and admiration.” Attracted by an art of such polish and accomplishment, lovers of art miss the religious point. They fail to realize that “Christ has required only imitators”—that is, people who would actually follow him and pattern their lives on his.11

One could fairly but prematurely conclude from all this that the primary practical theological question about art should not be how to make art that is good enough to serve religious ends—since (on this view) the better the art, qua art, the worse its religious effect is likely to be. Rather, the question should seemingly be whether, from a religious perspective, it would be better to have overtly unassuming and imperfect art or no art at all. Some Christians have opted for a healthy tolerance of bad art, cheap art—even kitsch—so that grace may abound. Tracy, albeit without giving thanks for kitsch, evidently welcomes art that falls short of classic status, aesthetically, so that it might just possibly give rise to a kind of non-aesthetic truth-event that could disclose a reality infinitely greater than the art or self of the maker. Kierkegaard, for his part, knows that a truly good artist, when painting a Crucifixion scene, will not settle for painting it badly. But he thinks that painting it well is likely to be a religious distraction, sidetracking the artist from true devotion and distracting the viewer into purely aesthetic appreciation. Hence, his advice in the writing quoted earlier is that the artist should give up the attempt to serve religion artistically. Even in terms of literary art, Kierkegaard is never quite able to conceive of how his being what he terms “a kind of poet” could actually make a vital contribution to discipleship itself.

Now, it is rare for religious leaders and thinkers to go to quite such extremes in questioning the religious value of good art. And it is hard to imagine what some of this advice would look like in practice. While most of us can enjoy religious art that falls far short of greatness, would we really want to object that John Donne’s metaphysical poetry aims too high, both artistically and religiously? Would Michael Crosbie want to abandon the range of aesthetic and religious ideals evident in his two books on Architecture for the Gods12 and urge us, instead, to gaze upon Samuel Butcher’s Precious Moments Chapel in Carthage, Missouri, which is certainly kitsch, whatever else it may be?

As for music, didn’t Luther want to make sure the devil did not get to have all the good, beautiful melodies? Did he not have harsh words for those who could not appreciate the “amazing” art of polyphony shown in works of high musical artistry that would allow one “to taste with wonder (yet not to comprehend) God’s absolute

11 For more on Kierkegaard’s point and the opposition to that point, see Brown, Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste, pp. 30–32.

and perfect wisdom”?

Isn’t there a point to the long tradition of calling J.S. Bach the “Fifth Evangelist”? Again, didn’t John Wesley have good reason to argue that the hymns of his brother Charles were an artistically worthy exercise in practical divinity, with genuinely poetic merit? And wasn’t the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” from *Vatican II*, right to praise the beauty of human arts as glorifying God—and to insist, also, that the treasury of sacred music is to be preserved and cultivated with great care?

The questions mount. How can we square the intuitions most of us still have about the religious value of good art with the doubts we’ve seen expressed regarding the role of good art in serving God and the church? What explains the dissonance between the desire to extol the religious value of good art and the unabated, indeed zealous, religious use of artistically inferior works, together with a recurrent theological impulse to deprecate genuinely artistic goodness as inappropriate or beside the point, religiously?

I have set forth various religious objections to good art not because I think they are trivial but because I think they are significant, even if one-sided. If we want to advocate the religious vocation of various kinds of good art, whether in its classic forms or in some other guise, then it is imperative to take into account the doubters. Accordingly, as I prepare to frame something of a theological apologia for good art, I want to rephrase the objections already considered, contextualizing them in terms of concepts and themes commonly encountered at a more popular level.

3. Toward a Religious Defense of Good Art

Today religious suspicions regarding rigorously disciplined and cultivated arts—whether in North America, Europe, India, or elsewhere—surface in variants of the arguments we have already considered. These variants come down to three common, related criteria for religiously worthy art: first, simplicity; second, expressive and emotional power; and third, popular appeal. Satisfying the first two criteria, which tend to be linked, results in relatively simple and emotive art that is likely to be popular (thus meeting the third criterion). The criterion of popularity, however, often functions in near isolation. In fact, the perception that a given style of music is likeable or appealing (popular) is increasingly regarded as sufficient to consider the art in question “good enough” for church use, and appropriate for worship, at least

13 Martin Luther, Foreword to Georg Rhau’s *Symphoniae jucundae* of 1538, quoted in Friedrich Blume et al., *Protestant Church Music* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1975), p. 9. The ever-outspoken Luther went so far as to say that people unaffected by such wondrous music ‘deserve to hear a certain filthy poet or the music of the pigs’.


as long as religious words are attached and a religious purpose is clearly intended. Thus many songs originally performed by pop soloists or small bands, using a syncopated style that is hard for most North American congregations to sing, are nonetheless accepted by many congregations because of the music’s contemporary feel and popular appeal.

Yet even the criterion of popularity can quickly be watered down or seemingly abandoned, as we can see in Rick Warren’s approach in his best-selling book *The Purpose-Driven Life*. In that book Warren writes, in the spirit of outreach: “Worship has nothing to do with the style or volume or speed of a song. God loves all kinds of music because he invented it all—fast and slow, loud and soft, old and new. You probably don’t like it all, but God does! If it is offered to God in spirit and truth, it is an act of worship.” While hospitable and inviting, such an approach provides no criteria for discerning quality or appropriateness, beyond the spirit in which the music is offered—something only God can really know for sure. The direct implication is that it would be unchristian not to accept every kind of music in worship, just as God accepts every kind of person who responds to the gospel. Even so, many such calls to be musically all-inclusive have the hidden agenda (or not so hidden) of promoting popular music that traditional proponents of so-called good church music have normally resisted as unworthy. The criterion of popularity thus sneaks in by the back door.

On top of the negative judgments of David Tracy and Søren Kierkegaard concerning the religious liabilities of exceptionally good art, therefore, we need to add the populist Christian objection that it is wrong to introduce questions of artistic quality into a Christian setting, when those questions lead to rejecting many people’s favorite styles of music and art. This often ends up ruling out many classic forms of “good art.” As some have put it: ostensibly good art and music that fails to connect with the majority of everyday worshipers is out of sync with the times (“culturally irrelevant”), probably elitist, and in many instances representative of class privilege and power. It is thus bad for evangelism, useless for church growth, and probably downright unchristian.

By now we have assembled a long list of reasons for taking what most musicians and educators in the arts have traditionally seen as the best art and removing it from the list of what is religiously desirable. Without denying that there is considerable validity to some of the charges we have gleaned and laid out, I will be arguing from this point on that the resulting composite image of the religious hazards of good art is distorted from both an aesthetic and a theological point of view.

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Let us consider first the suspicions voiced by David Tracy in his discussion of religious classics. When Tracy denies that artistic classics are well suited to functioning, at the same time, as religious classics, his argument seems most plausible when we recall that—as others have pointed out repeatedly—the standards of the Western institutions of high art, with their emphasis on individual expression, originality, and autonomy, do not coincide with customary religious expectations for art. Until recently, those modern institutions of high art have in fact tended to marginalize what is religious. They have done so in their very conception of art as essentially autonomous, requiring a narrowly aesthetic attention to formal traits and to intrinsically expressive qualities. And they have done so in practice, since it has been common, until recently, to treat the specifically religious features of art and music as artistically and aesthetically irrelevant when performing or displaying works that originally served religious functions.

It has gradually dawned on many of us, however, that much of the potential artistic interest of those works (altarpieces, devotional paintings, or works of religious music, for example) dissipates when the larger religious and cultural connections are treated as irrelevant, since the art forms themselves are shaped to a purpose beyond merely aesthetic contemplation in the narrow sense. And the narrowly aesthetic notion of art is inadequate even when dealing with much modern artistry. If one listens to Benjamin Britten’s *War Requiem* for the “music alone,” ignoring the way the work as music attempts to reckon morally and religiously with the effects of war, one misses most of what has made this musical work a modern classic.

The question we need to pose to Tracy, then, is whether we should allow those Western “high art” traditions to control our idea of what should count as an artistic classic, or indeed as genuinely and intrinsically artistic. If we are attentive in our theories to the kinds of engagement much art invites, whether that artistry be great or merely good, I believe we have reason to understand art and aesthetics rather differently.

According to the aesthetic theory I am putting forward (here and elsewhere), art and religion are at times integrally related even while retaining considerable autonomy. There are different genres of art with their own sets of criteria, some of which are shaped by religious purposes that must be taken into account in judging the art to be a good work of its kind. Such adjustments in criteria, from genre to genre, are nothing strange to art. Many a song text that seems lame or else inflated, when read on its own as poetry, makes for a beautiful libretto or lyric when set to music. To judge an artwork’s quality in relation to its genre and purpose is not to abandon artistic criteria but to adjust them. This assumes that, in the process of evaluating the excellence of something as art, one could be concerned, finally, not only with what is unique to art simply as art but also with what allows artistry to play a unique and integral role in religion or morality, and vice versa. What is unique and artistically engaging about the plays of Shakespeare and Aeschylus, or the architecture of the Parthenon or the Pantheon, or indeed the art of the greatest filmmakers, may have less to do with what of life they exclude than with how they incorporate and transform life commitments, values, and beliefs in the process of pursuing their artistic goals.
But if that is the case, it follows that the goals and goods of art may coincide in some works and in some ways with the goals and goods of religion.¹⁹

To suppose, as Tracy appears to do, that the goals and principles intrinsic to the best art are almost inevitably distinct from the goals of religion may also imply something misleading about religion itself—namely, that it is somehow incidental that religion in its peak moments so often seeks out the poetic, the musical, the dramatic. But isn’t that notion highly improbable, whatever Kierkegaard sometimes said? As Kierkegaard would have insisted, religion at its highest is concerned not merely with dogmas held fixedly or with ritual actions performed routinely but with the transformation of one’s whole being and commitment in relation to God, others, and world. If something like this can be said of the higher goals of religious life, it seems clear that those goals might at times not only accommodate but also positively require some sort of artistry. For artistry is distinctive in being able to engage one’s whole being. It can provide sensory and imaginative embodiment of larger visions and commitments, and in that way move the will, the mind, the emotions, and the spirit.

It is true that much religion that takes an ascetic or prophetic course curbs the sensory and the aesthetic. But scriptural prophecy itself often requires a kind of imagination and poetic rhetoric, whether that is conceived of as divine or as human in origin. And even ascetic rituals have their own aesthetic, as in the beautifully spare interiors of medieval Cistercian monasteries and the austere beauties of chant.

We can concede Kierkegaard’s point that, when a religious artwork is also an artistic classic, it can be appreciated to a large extent without giving assent to its religious symbols and without taking much interest in its religious aims as such. Many listeners enjoy the musical artistry of Bach’s *Mass in B Minor* and his *Passion According to St. Matthew* by listening to them simply as concert works and perhaps without having any sense of the words. But that is not the same as saying that the primary artistic goals at the core of this music by Bach do not fundamentally coincide with his evident religious aim of interpreting musically the main themes, affirmations, and stories of Christian faith. The strengths of such music are at once religious and aesthetic: imaginative depth, emotional engagement, a sense of transcendence beyond the merely mundane, and the transformation of a sense of sin, loss, and death into an exalted vision of inner and outer joy and peace. Religious listeners may be the ones most likely to hear all this as integral to the music. But it is always the case that some members of an audience are better positioned than others to grasp certain relevant features of a work of art.

But how might engagement with such artistry become a part of discipleship: a religious discipline? Not all religious listeners will, themselves, be prepared to grasp the salient features of the *Mass in B Minor*—and in some cases that could be because those listeners are accustomed to turning to art only for light entertainment, or to religion only for simple assurance and comfort. Such music asks something


different. Thus, when Bach, in his setting of the Creed, first comes to the text “et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum,” he does not move immediately to an outright affirmation of the expectation of the resurrection of the dead, as though that were an indubitable and perfectly straightforward matter. Instead, he draws the listener through mystifying harmonic shifts filled with dissonance and tension, which very much deepen the sense of mystery involved in the affirmation of resurrection. This is no glib faith being affirmed musically, but a faith led to confront the unspeakable and imponderable, which issues ultimately in “inexpressible” joy, an astonishing dance of resurrection, exulting to the pulse of divine delight in and through all things. Perhaps Bach had in mind 1 Corinthians 15:51–52, which Handel sets to music in Messiah: “Behold I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep; but we shall all be changed … at the last trumpet.”

At some point, of course, art alone is insufficient, even at its highest. So is theology, however, or preaching or ritual. Speaking in terms familiar to many religions, nothing we know as humans is completely fulfilling or beatific, apart from grace and the primordial source and goal that is more than anything we ourselves can create. Even the highest art cannot coerce a fitting response; it can only invite.

That said, I would nonetheless reaffirm that much art at its highest (whether or not its subject is explicitly religious) joins religion at its highest, and becomes integral to it. That can happen in two contrasting ways. There is a kind of self-emptying of art and religious culture in which the medium is reduced to nothing, as it were, and silence prevails. Even in that “negative” tradition, however, the process of paring away often has an integral shape and rhythm that is at least minimally aesthetic and requires artful attention. As for when religion takes the opposite direction by expressing faith and truth at their fullest and most persuasive, that can rarely happen through a medium utterly devoid of aesthetic shape and imagination.

Iris Murdoch writes memorably and believably when, in her original dialogue Acastos, she has her fictive Socrates declare (somewhat atypically):

We are mixed beings … mixed of darkness and light, sense and intellect, flesh and spirit—the language of art is the highest native natural language of that condition … We are all artists, we are all story-tellers. We all have to live by art, it’s our daily bread … And we should thank the gods for great artists who draw away the veil of anxiety and selfishness and show us, even for a moment, another world … and tell us a little bit of truth.20

Perhaps, despite acknowledging the inevitable imperfections of everything human, this passage retains a little too much of the Romantic idealization of art. Murdoch likewise goes too far when she has her Socrates embrace the idea that “good art tells us more truth about our lives and our world than any other kind of thinking or speculation.”21 That encomium to art is insufficiently dialectical—as though art could function in isolation. But Murdoch is rightly referring to specific kinds of truth: the truths that matter to our “mixed” creaturely existence as spiritually embodied beings. If this high understanding of the potential of art is even remotely

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21 Ibid., p. 63.
plausible, it suggests how inadequate the use of art must be when religion is tempted simply to employ artistic effects in order to create a popular appeal, or to provide spiritual warm-up exercises. To reduce art to a utilitarian role dictated solely in terms of doctrine or pre-fabricated ritual is, as Pope Benedict XVI has argued, to do an injustice both to art and worship.22

These are theoretical claims, or theological ones abstractly stated. But their historical justification can be hinted at not only by the music of Bach cited earlier but also by several examples from architecture, both Christian and non-Christian. Chartres Cathedral and the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul are surely classics of both art and religion. And the reasons they are religious classics are integrally related to the reasons they are deemed classic in artistic and aesthetic terms. It is not as though the architectural combination of mystery with a rational formal order and beautiful symbolism is irrelevant to either the religious goals or the aesthetic aims of these works.23 Something similar can be said of many Hindu temples of South India, whether in Chennai or Kanchipurum or Mudrai or Chidambaram. Their outer and inner forms reflect harmonious mathematical proportions that generate a religious sense of joy and peace, while their exterior niches accommodate thousands of sculptures exuding infinite abundance, playfulness, and awe-inspiring grandeur. Within their gates, they incorporate multiple corridors for clockwise pilgrimage toward their central shrines, all the while providing a proliferation of foci fitting to Hindu spirituality.24 Everything about the architectural plan is ordered to purposes that are at once aesthetically involving and religiously transformative. Their artistry has become a primary expression of a way of being religious, and visa versa.

That fact in itself provides an answer to Kierkegaard’s protest that highly developed artistry necessarily distracts from the religious by attracting us to the immediate delights of the aesthetic. That can happen, to be sure. But, as we have seen, there are many works that convey religious insight and a sense of grace by means of their artistry, not in spite of it.25 But to say even that is not to say enough. We need to acknowledge that there is a central role for aesthetic and artistic imagination within the religious life, because religion at its highest calls for a kind of total conversion in which aesthetic imagination and faithful assent interact, combine, and are changed together.

4. Concluding Considerations

There are some issues that remain for consideration and clarification. For one thing, someone might still want to object that many works of art cannot be classic for religion simply because of their limited audience. One could make that same argument, however, against a number of acknowledged theological classics that are seldom read by anyone but a highly educated and theologically devoted minority. As for a possible residual suspicion that classic or great art is bound to be too self-assured in form to serve religious purposes, we can admit that a pursuit of formal excellence is not necessarily religious. But it is by no means obvious why an artwork’s formal achievement would necessarily undermine or distract from its religious aspirations, any more than a well-wrought form would necessarily undermine a book of theology or a sermon. We should not confuse formal discipline or a pursuit of well-wrought and rewarding design with pride and spiritual complacency, either in theology or in art.

None of this simply conflates art and religion, or reinstates certain Romantic notions of high art as, effectively, a substitute for religion. Nor does it imply that the work of art must be great in itself in order to be good both artistically and religiously. Many religious rituals, major and minor, are rich in dramatic qualities without needing to be considered “dramas” in the fullest sense, let alone great art. And, as we had reason to note earlier, there are many rewarding artistic products that, without being major achievements as individual works of art, are indeed major forces in the sphere of religion. The Virgin of Guadalupe as seen in popular images is surely a religious classic among Hispanic Christians in the New World, and possibly beyond, even if few specific renditions of the image are likely to be considered remarkable as works of art per se. Alejandro García-Rivera, among others, has demonstrated their importance quite convincingly.

This observation, while perhaps easy to accept in principle, has far-reaching implications. It means, for instance, that any adequate study of Hispanic spirituality in the New World would probably need to take that image into account. (The same could be said of the need for studies of Protestantism to take hymnody seriously.) The fact that many theologies and histories of Christianity ignore such images does not mean they are mere “illustrations” of some fact of faith easily represented in other ways. It just indicates that most scholars have not been trained to recognize the classic status of those kinds of works and to give an account of the difference they make in religious practice.

This leads us naturally to the significant question of whose artworks one is regarding as good, religiously, and whether there aren’t many good works of local or regional religious artistry that make no claim to having a universal appeal. This is part of a larger question that is familiar in cultural criticism by now—the question of whose perceptions count in evaluating what is good, whether in art or in religion.

Ironically, it is perhaps the failure to recognize the power and artistry of many forms of popular religious art that has contributed most to the still widespread theological neglect of the arts. As long as art of high quality is presumed to be the special province of the privileged, and as long as popular art is seen, at the same time,
as inevitably derivative and illustrative, or as merely entertainment, theologians and religious historians are likely to leave art of both kinds to the specialists.

Thus, to the earlier charge that the religious advocacy of good art is invariably linked with some kind of elitism, we can now reply that nothing combats elitism better than the recognition of good art in multiple kinds and in many spheres. The elitist typically believes that the standards of good art are in the possession of a special group attuned to the best art (typically identified with interests of the socially influential and/or highly educated). That assumption is untenable, however, because taste is culturally conditioned, even if not culturally confined; and no one group, regardless of training and aesthetic capacity, is positioned to detect and judge the qualities of all forms of artistic goodness regardless of the style or medium.

Here, however, we must emphasize that to attend to the contextual factors involved in good art is by no means to surrender or totally relativize all standards of artistic quality, in the name of religious hospitality and inclusiveness. Those who treat religious kitsch as spiritually harmless, for example, may be right in some contexts; sometimes kitsch may even be religiously good, as a quick and easy way of freeing up appropriate emotions that might otherwise remain inaccessible or frozen. But kitsch—because it plays on easy emotions and reflexive responses—is forever immature. Religious expression is eventually cheapened when it is tied extensively to art forms or sub-genres that are widely recognized by those involved in the respective arts as superficial and possibly exploitive.

Once one acknowledges the multiplicity of good kinds of art, one can see that it is crucial not to try to force inappropriate criteria and expectations on a particular kind of art. For one thing, not all art that is good should be seen or promoted as “universal.” Mahler’s symphonies, Wagner’s operas, John Coltrane’s jazz improvisations, and Hindustani classical music from India all elicit negative responses from many astute listeners outside their orbit. And yet it makes little sense to deny, on that account, that such music is of a high order, artistically. Similarly, gospel music, like baroque church cantatas, does not fit every worship setting, nor does it strike all astute listeners as music worth promoting. But that says more about the cultural and contextual factors involved in music perception than it does about whether there is good gospel music and good cantata music.

It is equally important to recognize that not all good art and music needs to be regarded as somehow beautiful. Much art—the genre of the blues, for example—is conceived, rather, in terms of authentic expression, which in the case of the blues may be soulful and earthy in a way that resists being heard as merely beautiful. Much modern and contemporary art of moral and spiritual significance is baffling, grotesque and even shocking, defying ready classification among the world’s beauties. There are those who still may want to expand the use of the words “beauty” and “beautiful” to cover the whole wide array of excellent artistry—from Gregorian chant to grunge rock, and from Renaissance Madonnas to the often intentionally frightening masks used in traditional ritual ceremonies in many parts of the world. But it is not clear what that accomplishes, especially if it risks importing Enlightenment, medieval, or Platonic notions of beauty that might be quite misleading. While the recent recovery of the concept of beauty in theological and critical circles is to be applauded, such a concept must be handled carefully if it is not to obscure more than it enlightens.
The promotion of beauty at all costs could easily lead to the religious neglect of art that needs to be difficult and perhaps in some ways disquieting or disgusting in order to achieve its proper religious ends. The agitated or alarming sounds in Tibetan Buddhist ceremonies and in Christian heavy metal concerts hardly have beauty as an immediate or even proximate goal.

In this connection, it must be said that much harm has been done by attempts (only intermittently successful) to distill one essential Christian ideal for art—most notably in the insistence on the criterion of simplicity, coupled with restraint. Traditionally, many theological and liturgical shapers of Christian music over the centuries have sought to curtail musical excitement and ecstasy, not only because of what has been alleged to be bodily indulgence and emotional excess but also because of the perceived danger that any excessive beauty of the artistry would call attention to itself rather than serve the liturgy and God. No artistic guideline has been more common than “beautiful simplicity” in the sphere of religious aesthetics, whether occidental or oriental. While the rationale is plain, it clearly ignores other valid artistic possibilities. This is evident from the fact that the principle of restraint is transgressed in practice by much of the most resonant religious art and music—Monteverdi’s *Vespers of the Blessed Virgin*, Mahler’s *Resurrection* Symphony, Mexican Baroque churches, giant sculpted buddhas, or shining gilded domes seen on many Russian and Eastern churches.

Musically, religious calls for artistic restraint have often translated into wanting to make sure that the textures and structures of the music do not render the words unintelligible. At the Council of Trent, for example, objections were raised to polyphony because of its tendency to obscure the sacred text with overlapping musical lines and parts. Similarly, Jewish cantors have periodically been cautioned against ostentation and a florid vocal style that might detract from sung prayer. Again, the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer advocates restraint and purity in congregational singing. He writes:

> Because it is bound wholly to the Word, the singing of the congregation … is essentially singing in unison … . The purity of unison singing, unaffected by alien motives of musical techniques, the clarity, unspoiled by the attempt to give musical art an autonomy of its own apart from the words, the simplicity and frugality, the humaneness and warmth of this way of singing: [this] is the essence of all congregational singing.

My point is not that such restraint can’t make for good art. It is that, if applied exclusively (as is often advocated), an emphasis on artistic modesty and beautiful simplicity leaves out a vast amount of Western art and music that might otherwise be considered extremely good for religion. It also would negate the religious value of much of the best indigenous and popular religious music around the world, much of which is rhythmic, lively, effusive, or ecstatic.

There is a final point related to the widely employed criterion of simplicity. Today the emphasis on artistic modesty and simplicity has, in many churches, been

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changed into an emphasis on accessibility, which usually implies easy enjoyment. This has happened in “mainline” Christianity as well as in more evangelical circles. Marcus Borg, in his recent book, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, describes the arts used in worship as providing a sacred context, a so-called “thin place” in the positive sense, in which the boundary between one’s self, God, and the world momentarily disappears.\(^{28}\) Worship, he says, allows the sacred to become present to us; it provides a means or occasion of grace (p. 156). When Borg describes the congregational songs that are best for worship, however, all he can say is that they combine two features: words that move us and music that can be easily sung (p. 157). What he fails to consider is that music that is easily sung can sound trivial, and that one might want to cultivate a congregation’s ability to be moved by (or at least to be receptive to) more complex musical gifts. Borg would not think of insisting, after all, that the only scripture ever worth pondering together in church would be something easily grasped. That would certainly exclude many of the parables of Jesus, which Borg studies intently as a New Testament scholar. In short, some truths are difficult and some religious states are not easily entered. An art that erases all difficulty in the name of providing accessibility can transgress profound religious norms and falsify what religion needs to reveal in its perplexity or complexity.

The contemporary religious reluctance to embrace more challenging forms of good art returns us to our central question: Can especially good art ever be especially good for religion, and in part because of its goodness as art? And the answer I have been proposing is clearly “yes,” but with qualifications. Not all good art (whether “high art” or popular) is good in the same way or for the same communities. Not all good art intends to be beautiful or to be appreciated for its own sake. And not all good art is good in the context of worship. Yet we can say that the wide range of art that is rightly regarded as good does offer remarkable gifts religiously and spiritually—gifts that inferior arts cannot offer in the same degree, and may at times even subvert. Among those good gifts of art (listed abstractly and very selectively) are beautiful and vivid form (possibly illumining life and glorifying God), imaginative depth, expressive vitality (perhaps conveying ineffable joy in life before God), a transformative sense of sublimity and mystery, provocative questioning and exploration (of sin and suffering), evocative surprise (hidden in the everyday), meditative stillness—and ever-new ways of retelling specific religious stories and interpreting core teachings. Beyond that is the fundamental role of aesthetic imagination in opening oneself to other beings, in all their particularity, and to the numinous—the holy that cannot be contained or encompassed by ordinary modes of thought. Artistry and aesthetic imagination can thus become means by which we are addressed and engaged fully, as spiritually embodied creatures.

To think in this vein about the potential religious assets of artistry at its best may bring some sadness to go along with a large measure of gratitude. For it gives us some

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cause to lament the fact that artistry within religious communities in the West over the past couple of hundred years or more has, more often than not, been in decline. That widespread phenomenon is well attested, and has been discouraging to many people aesthetically attuned to religion and to spirituality as mediated artistically. Robert Wuthnow’s first study of artistry and religion, Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist, while generally no less positive in tone than All in Sync, documents the frequent perceptions of disjunction between the church and the creative arts in our own time. For those who perceive themselves as called toward God along a path that is significantly artistic and aesthetic, the church’s common disregard for disciplined and elevated arts—and a corresponding disregard for the church on the part of many artists—is a loss. That it has often been accompanied by an equal loss of probing and nuanced theological reflection has not helped matters.

Gregory the Great commented many centuries ago that the scriptures provide water in which lambs may walk and elephants may swim. Christianity and certain other religions in recent decades seem to have been doing a lot for the lambs, by providing popular and accessible arts. When it comes to artistic depth, perhaps it is also time to do something more for the elephants.

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29 Wuthnow, Creative Spirituality, where he discusses, for example, the views of Richard Rodriguez and Tony Kushner regarding art, spirituality, and the church, pp. 139–200.
Chapter 13

On A New List of Aesthetic Categories

Alejandro García-Rivera

Talking Well of God

I have been asked many times, “What has brought me to seek theology in the arts?” The answer to that question lies within the core of my own questions about my faith and the God that is the subject of that faith. How shall I speak of a good and mighty God when all around me—indeed in my own life—I see and experience overwhelming human tragedy, conflict, and suffering. At these times I realize that I cannot ground such talk on the truth of God’s revelation or on the goodness of God’s intentions. There needs to be a different starting place, a place that addresses the question of suffering in a way that does not take me into the thicket of explaining that God is good and all-powerful, and yet also allows such suffering to happen.

Gustavo Gutiérrez made an important observation about theology in his illuminating study of the book of Job. Gutiérrez points out that at the end of the narrative, God is pleased with Job not because he spoke correctly but because he spoke well of God. Indeed, God rebukes Job’s theologian-friends precisely because they try to explain away Job’s suffering by insisting that God is good and powerful. Job, on the other hand, insists that his suffering is not consistent with such a view of a good and powerful God; therefore, God has been unjust to him. God thus praises Job for not succumbing to easy explanations of God’s intentions. Job’s friends spoke correctly about God’s power and goodness, not well about God in Godself. Gutiérrez’s insight into the book of Job has been of crucial interest to me as a theologian trying to understand human suffering in the light of a belief in a good and powerful God.

Yet Gutiérrez’s insight leaves contemporary theology in something of a quandary. Contemporary theology continues focusing its energy on trying to speak correctly of God—in terms of the truth about God’s nature or the implications of God’s power—rather than concerning itself with speaking well of God. Whether it be fundamentalist Biblical literacy or Catholic dogmatism, Latin American liberationism or postmodern skepticism, contemporary theology has failed to heed God’s whirlwind’s revelation to Job. The result is that genuine talk about Job’s God remains immensely difficult. Authentic talk of God in a suffering world, I contend, is to be found more in how well we speak of God rather than in how truthful or morally correct our talk of God happens to be.

But what is the starting point of a theology that speaks well of God? Where does one begin speaking well of God? Let me suggest that it is neither in the sense of the True nor in the sense of the Good, but in the sense of Beauty.

The Sense of Beauty

Pseudo-Dionysius put it clearly. The closer we come to naming the reality that is God, the more the impotence of our ordinary language is made evident. As our language approaches the mystery of the divine reality, it begins to break up and enter a new mode. Ordinary speech becomes extraordinary poetry, and extraordinary poetry shifts to exquisite music, and music in turn gives way to breathtaking design until a “silent” word becomes the only adequate name for God. This is the sense of Beauty I would like to describe.

Notice the important difference between the word “beauty” and another related word that frequently gets used—so much so that we often mistake it for a synonym. This is the word “beautiful.” Alas, the word “beautiful” has caused much mischief when it comes to speaking well of God. That at least is my thesis. Beauty, in Pseudo-Dionysian theology, refers to a divine reality; yet the beautiful has come to mean, over time, a purely human reality. When Alexander Baumgarten coined the word “aesthetics” in 1735, he had the noble philosophical idea that sensual experience was not some irrational data that had to be given form by the intellect but that it possessed a logic of its own. As noble as the idea was, it had tragic consequences for a theology of Beauty. Under the secular tendencies of Enlightenment thought, divine Beauty became reduced to a consideration of what is beautiful in human thought or human sensibility.

It is important not to misunderstand the character of this reduction. What was being “reduced” under the pressures of secular Enlightenment mentality was not the divine nature of Beauty but human sensibility and thought. For the diminution that has taken place since the Enlightenment occurs not simply in our belief in divine Beauty per se but in our belief in the human capacity to know and experience what is divine. What is secular in our understanding of the beautiful, therefore, lies not in the idea that human thought or sensibility profanes sacred Beauty but, rather that human thought and sensibility are incapable of the sacred—at least a non-human sacred reality. For there have been times in the modern history of the arts where human reality has been equated with the sacred reality behind the beautiful. At such times and on such occasions, belief in divine Beauty has succumbed to a loss of belief in the human capacity to know and experience the divine. The result is an idolatry that replaces the sacred with the human ability to make beautiful works.

Thus, let me propose to speak of the sense of Beauty—or, simply of Beauty itself—rather than the beautiful. For the belief that there is a sense of Beauty is a belief in the human capacity to know and love God. It is the belief that there is a marvelous dimension to human sensibility that allows one to touch the very face of God. Therefore, the sense of Beauty is not Beauty itself; nor does it imply that the beautiful is understood as a judgment or as mere experience. Rather the
sense of Beauty is a marvelous sensibility that brings us into an encounter with that dimension of the divine, which mystics and theologians have known as Beauty.

Let me propose, further, that to speak of the sense of Beauty, rather than the beautiful, is to set up a new possibility of aesthetics and a new agenda. There exists an aesthetics that has an intrinsic religious dimension and, as such, requires a new list of aesthetic categories. Indeed, my contention is that the sense of Beauty reveals something beyond our experience and unites us to that revelation.

The Sense of Beauty is a Gift

Monsieur Jean Clottes was moved deeply when he first set eyes on a 30,000-year-old work of art deep in the Lascaux caves of France. “I remember standing in front of the paintings of the horses facing the rhinos and being profoundly moved by the artistry. Tears were running down my cheeks. I was witnessing one of the world’s great masterpieces.”

Msr. Clottes’ response ought to instill in us a double sense of wonder, not only at the fact that the first humans were capable of such strikingly beautiful works but that, millennia later, we are still capable of being moved by their beauty. I do not know if Msr. Clottes attributed his response to the connection between their beauty and something divine but there is good evidence to believe that whoever painted this did perceive such a connection.

Joseph Campbell, the great scholar of myths and rituals, puts it this way: “That the paintings of the Paleolithic caves cannot have been created to serve an exoteric function is obvious from the fact of their inaccessibility to general view. They are hidden, deeply hidden, to be approached only by way of dangerous, often very difficult passages.” Indeed, as one enters the cave of Lascaux, the heart stops and then races as one finds oneself surrounded by a marvelous profusion of incredibly beautiful images. Bears, horses, rhinoceroses, ibexes— and even imaginary animals—prance, gallop, and stand in awesome majesty before our eyes. There is a sense of wonder, a sense of awe—let me suggest a sense of divine Beauty.

Yet more remains to be said regarding this exquisite work of art; let me propose that what we have here is a kind of first theology. In other words, we can affirm with confidence that whoever painted these beautiful images also spoke well of God. For here the sense of Beauty and the talk of God intersect. Whoever painted these cave paintings must have asked the same questions that you and I ask about our own ultimate existence, or ultimate destiny. Such a painter must have wondered about the beauty of life and the tragedy of existence. Indeed, such a painter must have asked questions not all that different from Job’s. And this reveals a distinguishing feature about the sense of Beauty, one that sets it apart from a human judgment about the beautiful or a mere sensual experience. A different aesthetics is at work here. Let me suggest that what is operative here is a theological aesthetics.


This sense of Beauty, moreover, comes through dramatically in the drawing before us. The first thing we ought to notice is the nature of the feeling the painting manages to bring to us. Such feeling cannot be characterized as merely subjective. It is felt, rather, as gift. It is a gift both in its surprising content and in its unexpected arrival. It comes to us with delightful surprise, residing and lodging within us but not as a fancy of our subjectivity or an invention of the soul. It comes instead as gift from the painting itself. It is a feeling received. It is feeling as _donum_ rather than _datum_.

These observations ought to give us pause for two reasons. First, to speak of receiving a feeling means that the feeling originates from the painting itself. What is felt is felt as gift. We would not have this feeling given to us by the painting. Thus, a major paradigm shift is suggested by this empirical observation. We must change our inherited understanding of feeling. Feeling has an objective dimension about which we have quite forgotten. It can be given and is not merely private or subjective experience. Moreover, precisely because the gift comes as a surprise, feeling has revelatory potential. Feeling can reveal something of the world of feeling beyond our subjective selves. As gift, it is not only potentially revelatory; it is also potentially unitive. In the painting of the buffalo, for example, we feel united to those who painted it and loved it. We feel that we are one with them, even now, 30,000 years later! As gift, however, its unitive and revelatory potential remains a wistful possibility. To reach the sense of Beauty, the awesome actualization of such possibility, feeling received must become feeling felt. And this brings us to a second reason that ought to bring us pause.

Feeling which is received is also feeling which is felt. That is, feeling contains a subjective dimension but it is a special sense of the subjective; it is a subjectivity that can be observed. It is, in other words, a _datum_. The _datum_ of feeling cannot be observed as a scientist observes. It has its special mode of observation. Feeling is observed by being enjoyed. Such enjoyment, however, cannot be mere pleasure. There is pathos here, in the _datum_ of the buffalo before our eyes. It, too, speaks of a shared sense of suffering. The buffalo provides food, comfort, and life. But in order to do this, the buffalo must give up its life. Truly to feel—that is, enjoy—the feeling of this painting, we must also be open (and allow ourselves to be opened) to “enjoy” the pathos of a life taken so that life might be received.

Indeed, there exists a form proper to such kind of observation: the dramatic form. Peter Brook defines dramatic form as fundamentally that which consists of life observing itself as “action exhibiting both meaning and mystery.” In other words, the pleasure we derive from drama arises from its portrayal of wisdom and folly, kindness and cruelty, joy and sorrow in such a way as to reveal something of the nature of the human condition. Moreover, dramatic form does such revealing through the unitive action of the theater. The magic of drama takes place when the audience becomes one with the action on the stage.

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In other words, the *datum* of the feeling that brings us the sense of Beauty is feeling felt in such a way that to observe is to enjoy. Such enjoyment is not the mere sensation of pleasure but the enjoyment that derives from observing a staged drama. By pointing out that the sense of Beauty comes to us as feeling not only felt but also received, as *datum* and *donum*, we are able to tease out an outline of a proposal for theological aesthetics. The aim of such aesthetics is to allow us to go beyond a theology that merely speaks correctly of God to one that enables us also—and this is key—to speak well of God. A genuine theological aesthetics thus requires a new list of aesthetic categories.

A first step towards this goal comes in the observation that the sense of Beauty inheres in two dimensions of feeling. Feeling as *donum* and as *datum*, received and felt, gives rise to a sense of something marvelous and objective, yet not only revealing our very soul to our self but uniting us to a larger world of selves and beings. Feeling such as that felt in works of art (such as this marvelous cave painting at Lascaux) reveals and teaches us about our soul. Moreover, it connects us vicariously—through its dramatic form—to the world in which it lives. In other words, the feeling that carries the sense of Beauty can be said to be a unitive, revelatory experience.

The feeling that the sense of Beauty brings as gift to those who would be open to feeling it truly, to experiencing it as *datum* observable by being enjoyed, is not simply a kind of knowing. It is, rather, a kind of connecting, a kind of unitive knowing experienced as gift. What is this gift-like unitive knowing? What is this unitive, revelatory experience?

### The Signs of a Unitive Revelatory Experience

One way to raise the issue of the need for new aesthetic categories is by asking whether contemporary theories of the beautiful truly grasp all that is sacred and spiritual in the arts. Let me provide some examples.

While there are many varieties and modes of understanding the beautiful, I would like to concentrate on what is currently perhaps the most influential philosophical understanding of the beautiful. It can be characterized in terms of what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls the “Grand Modern Narrative” of the arts and the beautiful.6

The Grand Modern Narrative of the arts emerged as a way of legitimating developments in the eighteenth century. It was fundamentally a narrative of progress. The middle class of the eighteenth-century began to use art for aesthetic contemplation rather than, as in churches, in service of something other than the art itself. If in the churches art was used in service of the liturgical celebration, or in service of the teaching of the public stories of the gospels or doctrines of theology, in the homes of the eighteenth-century European middle class art became, above all other uses, the object of perceptual contemplation.

The Grand Modern Narrative can be summed up in a phrase: Disinterested Perceptual Contemplation. Disinterested Perceptual Contemplation fostered the habit of engaging art for its own sake and not for its many other and varied purposes.

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6 See Nicholas Wolsterstorff’s chapter in this volume.
It became an aesthetics known as “art for art’s sake.” Again, “art for art’s sake” is but *one* of many philosophical approaches to the nature of the beautiful. Wolsterstorff’s account of the Grand Modern Narrative is a useful way of challenging the adequacy of the category “the beautiful” to describe religious works of art. Consider the following examples.

Figure 5 shows the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Look at the memorial not as a purely self-sufficient work in itself and for itself, but consider it in the way it affects people. For example, this photo shows us someone who comports himself to the memorial in a way that is not exactly disinterested. True, his pose suggests an attitude of contemplation, but it is also an attitude that obviously enjoins the emotions.

Take the same example (Figure 5). Many religious works of art inspire the observer towards something more than contemplation. They also demand to be touched. There is an intrinsic sensibility to the aesthetic experience that only touch can satisfy. Moreover, such touch is more than mere sensuality. It is a kind of healing, a unitive experience that makes the soul whole.

Figure 6 makes us ask, “Why is this statue dressed? If a work of art is intended solely to be contemplated, then why are so many religious works dressed or taken out of buildings and paraded outside in the streets? Why are gifts and offerings,
candles and incense placed at their feet?” Herein lies the most obvious challenge to the Grand Modern Narrative: religious works of art are not only meant to be looked-at, they are also meant to be lived-with. In other words, an aesthetics of religious art works must understand that the work of art is not only something to be looked-at, something to be lived-with, but it is also a dramatics.

Consider yet another example where an aesthetics and a dramatics are clearly seen, along with a new feature associated with the sense of Beauty. Figure 7 is a photo of a replica of the famous “Black Christ” of Esquipulí, Guatemala, at its home in the San Fernando Cathedral of San Antonio, Texas. Throughout Latin America this crucifix possesses, as a work of art, amazing power. Millions of people make pilgrimages to see it. The crucifix is beautiful in itself but this is not yet the same as its sense of Beauty. Figure 7, I believe, helps us see clearly the full sense of Beauty that gives this work its power. That sense comes to us not simply by means of the crucifix itself but by the way it gathers and structures the space around it so as to create new aesthetic experiences. Yet all these new experiences are gathered and united in the experience of the crucifix in such a way that they are experienced as one. Take away the crucifix, and the aesthetics of the space suddenly diminishes.
Figure 7  Replica of the “Black Christ” of Esquipulí, Guatemala. San Fernando Cathedral, San Antonio, Texas. Photo courtesy of Alex García-Rivera.
Figure 7, moreover, shows that the aesthetic experience of the Esquípuli crucifix is a “living-with,” a dramatics. Each candle represents the story of someone who has knelt before it and felt the “Big Story” that the sense of Beauty gives us a glimpse into the Eternal. At the feet of the crucifix, people have placed photos, prayers, requests, in short, their “little stories.” These are stories of their lives and their sorrows as they travel in the garden of Good and Evil. These “little stories” become a dramatics under the sense of Beauty. The sense of Beauty offers a horizon, a “Big Story,” that provides a glimpse of a theo-drama, a drama in which our “little stories” can be seen in that strange aesthetics that is peculiar to drama. It is the experience of a vulnerable beauty, the beautiful seen through its fragility and weakness, indeed, even in its tragic dimension.\(^7\)

In its dramatic dimension, the sense of Beauty offers us a kind of divine pathos. The aesthetic/dramatic power of the Esquípuli crucifix lies in its ability to allow the faithful to engage divine pathos in a two-fold way. First, by means of the crucifix the people em-pathize with Christ’s suffering through their own pathos, their own “little story,” their peculiar experiences of suffering. This em-pathos, mediated by their own distinct accounts through the beauty of the crucifix, in turn becomes, second, sym-pathos—a plea for divine sympathy with their own suffering. Thus we discern a new property of the aesthetic/dramatic experience. A mutual catharsis emerges from the dramatic dimension of the sense of Beauty interlacing the sacred “Big Story” with the profane “little story”, sanctifying and healing the latter, even raising it to a new level. Such is the Roman Catholic understanding of grace. In its dramatic dimension, the sense of Beauty is also an experience of grace.

As grace, the dramatic dimension of the religious artwork heals and elevates the soul to a new form of life. This new form is a true community of individuals in a marvelous communion of thousands, even millions of “little stories,” each in communion not only with one another but, even more so, in communion with the Big Story, the Story of a marvelous creativity that overwhelms as well as heals, that brings wonder and enchantment to a Garden watered by the tears of those who are wayfarers on life’s way.

In other words, the sense of Beauty can be seen as aesthetic insight. By aesthetic insight, I mean a special kind of experience—a unitive revelatory experience that touches us in a very personal way. Such a proposal flies in the face of much contemporary philosophical aesthetics. Indeed, it seems to clash with much contemporary hermeneutics. The sense of Beauty as a unitive revelatory experience gives us another way of understanding the medieval notion of the transcendentals: the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.

The transcendentals were understood by the medievals as qualities co-extensive with Being; that is, any being could be said to be true, good, or beautiful. Yet no being could be said to possess any of these qualities absolutely. For the transcendentals belonged at the same time to all beings yet transcended any particular being. Reasonably enough, the ontological status of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful

was hotly debated by theologians and philosophers in the Middle Ages. Were the True, the Good, and the Beautiful mere names describing a particular being or were they a kind of reality that had universal properties? Although the historical debate was never settled, and perhaps the debate is not even resolved in principle, let me nonetheless make my own small contribution

If we take aesthetic insight—that is, the unitive revelatory experience—as truly descriptive of a new aesthetics, then the transcendentals are neither universal abstract realities nor mere names. They are, rather, communities. Hence what the Esquiñólicruxifx reveals to us, for example, is one of the transcendentals, the community of the Beautiful. If it is a community, however, that includes more than the human community, for if it is a genuine transcendental it must apply to all creatures. In short, this community of the beautiful includes the crucifix, the candles, the kneelers—indeed the cathedral space itself—as well as the faces of those human creatures that have for centuries knelt in this cathedral.

A Holy Card

While the Esquiñólic crucifix illustrates well the aesthetic insight which I have dubbed the “unitive revelatory experience,” another art work—the holy card—exemplifies the dramatic dimension of this experience. Pathos is not restricted to the dramatics of the theater; it also applies to the aesthetics of a religious work of art. Furthermore, it reveals what can be considered a proper religious work of art. Consider, for example, the humble work that is the mass-produced holy card of St. Martin de Porres (Figure 8). Few connoisseurs of high culture today would consider a holy card a fine work of art. They are of course correct in the sense that few holy cards can be considered artfully “refined” or sophisticated. On the other hand, it is hard to ignore the power that such a card has precisely as a visual image. It may not be fine but it is powerful. This image of St. Martin de Porres moves millions of Latin Americans to a deep and profound experience of God’s love. If this is not an example of a theological aesthetics, then it is not clear what would count as aesthetics at all. But wherein exactly lies the power of the holy card?

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8 This is the argument in my book, The Community of the Beautiful. It is better to see the transcendentals as metaphysical communities than abstract mentalities. Alejandro García-Rivera, The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).
Figure 8  St. Martin de Porres. Prayer Card.
The very nature of a mass-produced holy card ought to give us a clue. The holy card is a work to be seen (touched, handled, compare with examples above) by an audience. The holy card becomes, in effect, a stage, and those who own the card, the audience. In other words, the aesthetics of the holy card is to be found in its dramatic form. But what sort of a stage is it? What is the action that produces a healing, unitive catharsis? What is the script? Such answers are to be found in history. For not only works of art have form, history does as well. History cannot be recounted solely in terms of dates and events. There is a peculiar form to history too. It is the dramatic form found at the heart of a sensible Mystery. This is what von Balthasar called the Theo-Drama or what I call the theo-dramatics of living form. The humble, holy card of St. Martin de Porres gathers into an audience a community of people who have come to experience a sensible Mystery.

What is this sensible Mystery? Let us consider the “action” that only a visual work like this holy card can give us. First, one notices the dominant verticality of the image. It is clear that the figure of St. Martin dominates the visual space on the holy card (Figure 8). He does so, however, by a verticality balanced by the horizontality that lies at the level of his feet. This is a clue to the action happening on our “stage.” There are in fact two main actions. The first is vertical, the second horizontal. It is clear to see, given his physical size, that St. Martin dominates the vertical. But what dominates the horizontal? The dog looking up at St. Martin offers a clue. The animals at his feet drinking peacefully from a bowl of milk make up the horizontal action. The anonymous artist of this holy card cleverly but profoundly connects these two actions. Note the two crucifixes St. Martin carries. One he carries next to his heart; the other dangles close to the ground at eye level with the animals that make up the horizontal action.

Where is the tension? Is it not in the mouse who drinks peacefully next to the cat? Why is the cat not pouncing on the mouse? Indeed, why is the dog, in turn, not pouncing on the cat? After all, these are “natural” enemies, are they not? Yet there is another source of tension as well. What is the mulatto doing in the garb of a Dominican friar? Moreover, why is the Dominican friar—heir to the great intellects of St. Albert and St. Thomas—portrayed as organically connected to a group of irrational animals? The theo-drama now becomes clearer.

The action begins with the crossing of the vertical with the horizontal, which in this card is centered in the cross. Indeed, heaven and earth collide in the cruciform-like image whose corpus is St. Martin de Porres. Such dramatic, cruciform action suggests a scene filled with conflict; yet what is seen is not conflict but conflict transformed into a peaceful, serene image.

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9 This is von Balthasar’s critique of many philosophies of history. See Balthasar, TH.


The source of such serenity, oddly enough, can be found in the other significant action taking place on our “stage.” It is a conflict of values. One could put it this way: “Which is more valuable, the human soul or the animal creature?” Alternatively, one could phrase it this way: “What makes a human soul valuable, its rationality or its loving care of all creatures?” These ways of putting the question underscore the dramatic tension prevalent during St. Martin’s time. Were African slaves, Indigenous Americans, poor Spaniards fully, truly human in the eyes of their European conquerors? Cultural differences and cultural blindness had led many at this time to conclude that not all cultures were in fact fully human. Such a conviction was based on a theology of the human person that presupposed that what distinguished the human soul from its animal counterpart was its ratio, its capacity for rationality. Such a definition of the human served as the basis for the tragedy that unfolded in St. Martin’s time and continues, alas, into our own.

For if rationality is to be understood as that which makes us uniquely human, then much depends on how one understands such rationality. If rationality is the ability to understand the world and each other in a dispassionate, detached way, then only those who understand the world and the ways of other people in such a way can claim to be rational. Indeed, this is the basis of a particular, historically contingent cultural identity. It is identity whose source is locked in an ancient conflict between “us” and “them.” “We” know who “we” are by distinguishing ourselves from “those” whom we are against. It is an identity that favors the strong against the weak. For identities such as these, identities that forge a self-understanding predicated on the exclusion of the other, not only justify but validate the use of cruel force against another. The only way to understand being human, such an outlook implies, is by making the other less human. Given these assumptions, it is now easy to see what kind of profoundly unsettling effect is produced when, in the holy card of St. Martin de Porres, the irrational creatures are brought into and made an integral part of the action. It is nothing short of a protest against a form of rationality that is detached from emotion and hence isolated from the non-human world.

The widespread belief in the hegemonic power of European rationality presupposed then—as it largely still does now—that we treat emotion as antithetical to and thus a compromise of rationality. Becoming emotional, in short, makes us irrational. It is a belief that dominates the university to this day. Detached, disinterested reason rules. It rules cruelly because it judges what is normative. One of Dickens’s characters says it best (speaking of a law made blind by a very detached, distorted and distorting rationality utterly divorced from emotion): “The law is an ass.” Thus the action on the stage of the holy card reveals a theo-drama, the tragic nature of all that is noble in our humanity. Ironically, a rationality that elevates the human spirit to the level of being the very image of God becomes the very instrument by which humanity is cruelly, intentionally diminished and destroyed. The tragic element, to be sure, is revealed in the action. For what is tragic is not the nature of rationality but the nature of the object of rationality.

If reason’s object is to grasp the underlying order of the universe, then one needs to understand the nature of that order. If such order can only be discerned through the exercise of disinterested, detached reason, then poetry would be neither possible nor desirable. If Pseudo-Dionysius is correct, then talk of God would be impossible
as well. And here, I believe, is a crucial theological point. Reason needs pathos to discover its true object—the underlying order of the universe—because such order is a product of a divine pathos, a divine love that created all creatures. Thus the key to discovering the order of the universe is a sensitivity to the pathos of the universe. In other words, the order of the universe emerges out of a sensible Mystery.

There are two levels of order which reason can grasp in the universe. First, there is the kind of order that relates one thing to another in a mechanical or impassive way and, second, there is a deeper order that relates one thing to another in a participatory or sympathetic way. It is the latter that gives reason its truly remarkable character. For reason guided by right pathos becomes a marvelous sensibility, the sense of Beauty. And, reciprocally, the sense of Beauty takes reason into a new redemptive reality, the personal realm of community and communion with one another and with a sensible Mystery.

The holy card of St. Martin de Porres is a genuine work of art, then, not because it is worthy of displaying on a museum wall but because it engages a sensible Mystery, a Mystery that Isaiah foresaw when he prophesied that one day “The lion and the kid shall lie down together and a little child shall lead them.” (Isaiah 11:6) That little child is the “little story” that is this humble holy card carried by millions in Latin America. It is beautiful not by being a fine work of art but by virtue of its ability to grasp the pathos of a divine drama that draws us into the center of a great but sensible Mystery. By so drawing us toward this great Mystery, this holy card reveals the true nature of all great works of art. Great works of art are not simply beautiful per se. Rather, great works of art are great precisely insofar as they reveal God’s beauty—which is a marvelous community, cosmic and transcendental, enjoying a sensible Mystery that allows us to see kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame, and a dog, a cat and a mouse all drink from the same bowl.

Conclusion

Religious works of art, I have argued, call for new categories in aesthetics. Religious works of art cannot be appreciated merely as beautiful or as objects of sophisticated taste, that is, as fine art. Religious works of art can only be approached through a marvelous sensibility, the sense of Beauty that reveals and unites, and, in so doing, heals and elevates the soul by bringing wonder and enchantment to stories that once seemed fragmented and drab. The sense of Beauty brings a sense of wholeness to the fragments that are our lives by weaving us into transcendental communities. This wholeness is the “Big Story” that provides a horizon toward which and through which our “little stories” can find direction and be judged, not in the sense of taste, but in the sense of judging our meanings and understandings, revealing their inadequacy and urging us to expand them. Such expansion takes place through the unitive force of pathos which, by enabling us to empathize with one another and with God, encourages the roots of a sacred community to take hold in order that

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12 I am referring, of course, to Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem, ‘As Kingfishers Catch Fire’.
sympathy may sprout forth branches that connect us with each other and with God in a sacred communion.

If the foregoing argument about the primacy of the unitive revelatory experience is correct, then it becomes immediately apparent just how inadequate talk of God is which strives merely to be morally correct or truthful. We cannot simply remain content to talk of God thus. We must, in addition, strive to speak well of God—that is, by acquiring a sense of Beauty that complements and balances the sense of the True and the Good. For God roots us and interlaces us; God grounds our very being. The attempt to talk of God already betrays itself, for as soon as one begins to speak of God one finds that such talk must enter a transcendental dimension, transcendental in the sense of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful—and in the sense of a unitive, revelatory experience that creates and sustains a marvelous cosmic community. But to do that requires a sense of Beauty. Indeed, the sense of Beauty is the necessary prerequisite of any authentic talk of God, for it is the sense of Beauty that allows us to speak well of God. In the end, however, the sense of Beauty can only lead to speaking well of God with adequate aesthetic categories. My suggestion has been in this essay that the first aesthetic category we ought to consider is a dramatics: the unitive revelatory experience.
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Section B
Specific Issues
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Chapter 14

‘Alien Beauty’: Parabolic Judgment and the Witness of Faith

James Fodor

Introduction

Fatal mistakes almost always result when theology becomes separated from ethics—or, for that matter, from aesthetics, economics, law, politics, and so on. Yet the dangers of present disciplinary division and isolation are, if not entirely overlooked then certainly often masked and minimized. Note, for example, a representative sample of course titles in the program catalogues of many seminaries, colleges and universities: “Theology and Ethics,” “Theology and Politics,” “Theology and Economics,” “Theology and Law.” A quick perusal of these catalogues will not tell the reader whether such courses are meant to emphasize the primacy of theology or to endorse the practice of juxtaposing disciplines in the name of interdisciplinary studies. Maybe both are intended. Either way, the perceived appropriateness of bringing two disciplines into conversation seems uncontroversial today. The widespread belief is that such dialectical exchanges are not only relevant but positively salutary because understanding is advanced through mutual illumination of one discipline by the other. What is not often acknowledged in these course titles, however, is the rather inconspicuous but vitally important role of the conjunction. While clearly honoring and authorizing connection, “and” at the same time insists finally on strict separation. That is, despite the apparent permissibility of conjoining two areas/disciplines, at the end of the day they are properly to be understood as separate, autonomous domains. The assumption is that on their own descriptors like “Theology,” “Economics,” “Ethics,” “Politics,” “Law,” and so on, are perfectly intelligible concepts.

While I do not wish to contest the relative autonomy of the various faculties or disciplines that comprise the modern university or seminary, and while I do not wish to advocate a facile conflation of all knowledge under the rubric ‘theology,’ I do nonetheless wish to challenge the rather widespread assumption that areas of human understanding and judgment divide neatly along the lines set by these disciplinary demarcations. I contest, in other words, the view that the two conjoined terms—‘theology,’ on the one hand, and ‘ethics,’ ‘politics,’ and ‘law,’ etc., on the other—are best and only understood independently after which they may, or may not, be correlated. This is to posit a neat but unjustified separation of spheres, a distinct cording off of one kind of knowledge or one set of judgments from all others.¹

¹ Refusing to cordon off disciplines into their own separate and insular realms is not the same as failing to note important differences that distinguish one mode of inquiry from another.
That this is neither desirable nor possible—especially as regards matters aesthetic, ethical and theological—is something that has recently been emphasized by (among others) Hans Urs von Balthasar.

At the outset of *The Glory of the Lord*, Balthasar sets forth a rationale for retrieving the unity of the transcendentals (the true, the good and the beautiful). Balthasar believes this retrieval is best accomplished through the third transcendental—the beautiful—rather than the first (the true) or the second (the good). The choice of the beautiful is not to be construed as indicative of a certain hierarchical priority but more as a matter of strategic necessity. For on Balthasar’s diagnosis, the transcendental that has suffered the greatest diminution in recent history is the beautiful—which is but to concede that the other two have also recently experienced distortion and loss, for, as Balthasar notes, beauty “will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance.” If restoring the beautiful to its rightful place among the transcendentals unmasks the general deficiency of thinking, then how much more does it expose the impoverishment of recent Christian thinking in particular—most especially because beauty has, until recently, served as the theology’s life-blood, its “main artery”? 

Differentiating among disciplines is of course perfectly appropriate, and indeed necessary, for various subject matters call for varying methods of inquiry and degrees of precision. Balthasar puts this well: ‘Theology must always be conducted with rigorous precision. But it must also correspond at all points with its object, itself unique among objects of knowledge, and form to its special content and method. This means that, judged by the standard of the purely natural sciences, the methodologies most comfortable to their object will have a kind of amateurish flavor.’ See *ExT1*, p. 207. Recognizing these important methodological differences between theology and human sciences, however, should not obscure analogical connections in understanding and judgment that exist across disciplines. And it is these that I am interested in when I use the term ‘judgment’—as in the phrase ‘parabolic judgment’.

Balthasar contributes his own reflections on how the conjunction ‘and’ has had such a deleterious effect on modern theology, both Catholic and Protestant. ‘The “and” of the title [Revelation and the Beautiful] should startle the reader, or at least give him a feeling of profound unease. It is a word that conjoins two spheres that have generally been held quite disparate ... We recall how Kierkegaard, at an audience with the queen, was congratulated by her on his incomparable work “Either and Or”, an incident that serves to emphasize unwittingly the sad omission of any possible conjunction between the two concepts of the title, concepts which, since Kierkegaard’s eruption into the Protestant and Catholic thought of our century, have dominated Christian ideology. The first thing that a serious student of that time had to observe was the separation of the esthetic and ethical spheres, particularly where a Christian ethic or religion was concerned.’ *ExT1*, p. 95.

Developing a Christian theology ‘in light of the third transcendental’, in other words, is seen as a way of complementing rather than dominating ‘the vision of the true and the good’.

Balthasar registers theology’s recent impoverishment in terms of the dearth of what he calls ‘the complete theologian’—namely the fact that ‘since the great period of Scholasticism, there have been few theologians who were saints’. *ExT1*, p. 181. A.N. Williams likewise notes a distinct difference
To the extent that complementarity and interpenetration are the operative terms in describing the relation among the transcendentals, the restoration and renewal of the beautiful will necessarily have a salutary effect on the true and the good as well. One small way of exemplifying the integral harmony among the transcendentals, and thus what it means to do theology faithfully in our time, is to consider how the literary form of Jesus’ parables offers insight into the interrelations between the good, the true and the beautiful. While I accept Balthasar’s general thesis concerning the pressing need to recover the unity of the transcendentals, what nonetheless calls out for elaboration in his work is a careful working through of Scripture’s various literary forms—in particular, the Gospel parables, albeit in conjunction with other biblical genres—in order to show how the reader/hearer of Jesus’ parables is drawn into an imaginative (but for all that nonetheless actual) participation in the life of the triune God which these parables have as their ultimate referent.  

One way to retrieve and theologically reaffirm the unity of the transcendentals is by regarding the form of the Gospel parables as, in nuce, one especially powerful, existentially and aesthetically engaging manifestation of God’s self-revelation in Christ. The literary form of the Gospel parables is an appropriately useful place to begin because it both discloses to and invites the hearer/reader to participate in that which is eschatologically true, good, and beautiful—the Kingdom of God. For indeed, however we respond to Jesus’ parables, the reality with which we are confronted is, paradoxically, ‘alien’ and wholly other and yet closer and more truly human than we could, on our own, ever conceive. Listening, hearing, reading, and seeing are the primary attitudes or dispositions by means of which Jesus’ parables are appropriated into the life of faith. Those who are able to show themselves faithful to Jesus’ parabolic vision of the Kingdom are precisely those who are, through those

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8 See Balthasar, ‘Seeing, Hearing, and Reading within the Church’ in ExT2, pp. 473–90.
modes of listening, hearing and seeing, most ably trained in the school of parabolic 
judgment.

But parabolic judgment also means analogical imagination. For theology is at 
its most vibrant when it is most ‘catholic’—that is, when it is most analogical and 
thus whole.\(^9\) The ability to make analogical connections is constitutive of agile 
imagination, wise judgment, and keen sight/insight. Following Balthasar’s lead 
of focusing on the third transcendental with a view to rehabilitating the other two, 
in what follows I will concentrate on the aesthetic dimension of Jesus’ parables if 
only to expose how questions of the good and the true concomitantly emerge in our 
response under the term ‘parabolic judgment.’

In explicating parabolic judgment, I take as my central image the metaphor of 
‘light,’ with all its manifold figural implications—particularly that of ‘seeing’ or 
‘perceiving’—and hence its cognate, ‘judgment.’\(^10\) My task is to conceive together 
the theological, the aesthetic and the ethical, and to demonstrate, if only partially, 
how these three are mutually implicated. I will proceed, first, by considering the 
fundamental importance of vision in theology generally and theological ethics 
specifically, availing myself of the work of Stanley Hauerwas and Iris Murdoch. 
Second, I will explore how theological perception or ‘seeing’ is integral to developing 
some central christological and anthropological understandings, primarily through 
Paul Ricoeur’s work on revelation, metaphor and the parables of Jesus. Third, I 
will investigate some of the self-reflexive qualities and participatory dimensions 
which are the hallmarks of parabolic judgment. Here I will avail myself of the work 
of Rowan Williams and Sebastian Moore, with important supplementation from 
Balthasar.

### Vision, Beauty and the Christian Moral Life

In the current intellectual climate of the West, ethics and aesthetics are seen to be 
related—if they are related at all—only externally. No intrinsic, organic connection 
is countenanced between them. Concepts of imagination and morality are likewise 
infrequently, if ever, linked—and in the rare cases that they are the aesthetic 
dimension is relegated to a narrowly-circumscribed, ancillary role of supplying 
either moral motivation or illustration. For example, great poetry and literature are 
often appropriated ethically—but only as a means of bolstering moral intention

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\(^9\) The thesis that the Catholic imagination is analogical by nature is one widely 
advocated by David Tracy and, before him, William Lynch. See David Tracy, *The Analogical 
Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 
1981) and William F. Lynch, *Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination* 
(New York, NY: Sheed and Ward, 1960). I am indebted to Francesca Aran Murphy for drawing 
my attention to Lynch’s work.

\(^10\) ‘The word “aesthetics” derives from the Greek *aisthesis* and literally means 
“perception”. Aesthetics is about the way in which we see, hear and feel things through sense 
perception, primarily through the arts, and the way in which we evaluate and appreciate what 
we experience.’ John de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics 
or, at most, *illustrating* the moral appropriateness or inappropriateness of certain behaviors. Aesthetics, in other words, is not seen as constitutive of ethical judgment. By restricting the contributions of verbal art forms to their psychological or didactic functions, however, what is advanced, if only implicitly, is that as far as theology is concerned there is nothing inherently imaginative or aesthetic about ethics or theology *as such*. This is to embrace a drastically impoverished and distorted understanding. Buoyed by recent attempts to restore the aesthetic to its full and proper place in moral discernment, I begin this study of parabolic form and parabolic judgment with several reflections on the relation between vision and morality Christianly construed.

The radical importance of vision to the moral life cannot be emphasized enough. For “the central aim of the Christian life is not so much a matter of right action … [as it is a matter of] … a truthful vision of God.” Or, to put the issue another way, “we can only act in the world we can see.” But surely, one might object, seeing can’t be all that problematic! How can it be anything less than straightforward? Simply open your eyes and behold the world! At least for those who are sighted, it is hard to resist the idea that seeing comes more or less ‘naturally.’ But upon closer reflection sight is as much an achievement as it is a gift. Clear vision is the result of grace: of having our moral imagination and aesthetic sensibilities infused by the Spirit of God who enables a ‘right seeing’—physically, morally, intellectually, aesthetically. Moral goodness (that is, actual, lived righteous behavior) is, like moral insight, neither automatic nor common to all, but the mature fruit of extended apprenticeship, guidance, discipline and training in holiness. Indeed, it is often only by hard and painful effort that human vision is transformed so to enable us to grasp something of the good, and the beautiful and the true. Left to their own devices, humans are much more likely to remain trapped in a state of illusion and fantasy. All of which is to say, echoing Stanley Hauerwas, that the moral life is better understood on the analogy of the aesthetic mode of seeing and beholding than in terms of discrete actions and decisions. For the right answer [when it comes to moral questions] is mainly a matter of really looking while avoiding the constant temptation to return to the self with the deceitful consolation of self-pity, resentment, fantasy, and despair.

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12 Stanley Hauerwas, with Philip Foubert, ‘On Keeping Theological Ethics Imaginative’ in Stanley Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1985), pp. 51–60, 53. According to Iris Murdoch, whose work will be taken up below, the good person literally sees a different world from that seen by the mediocre or bad person.

Hauerwas’ theological assessments of the human proclivity to self-deception are repeated many times over in philosophical and literary quarters.\textsuperscript{14} Perhaps one of the clearest and most articulate of these voices is that of Iris Murdoch, according to whom the single greatest impediment to the apprehension of the good is “the fat relentless ego.”\textsuperscript{15} The penchant for self-deception is virtually without limit, enticing humans to wallow in the false comforts of their own creation. Thankfully, the good, the beautiful and the true possess the power to break the spell that the ego casts over itself precisely to the extent that these transcendentals exist in such a way that humans find it impossible not to surrender to their authority. Encountering the beautiful brings us into contact with the good and the true, the collective and mutually reinforcing demands of all three of which are felt as unconditional and absolute. Such is the character of what Donald Nicholl aptly calls “the beatitude of truth.”\textsuperscript{16}

Self-divestment—letting go of the egocentric lies to which we so tenaciously cling—is a strenuous venture, requiring time, patience, hope and fortitude. Although never fully achieved within the span of terrestrial life, from time to time we are nonetheless rewarded with clarity of sight. Truthful vision is liberating; it helps free us from our excessive self-concern, from paralyzing self-preoccupation. As Iris Murdoch phrases it, “When we achieve clear vision the self becomes a correspondingly smaller and less interesting object.”\textsuperscript{17} Apprenticeship in the art of seeing, therefore, means being drawn towards the true, the good and the beautiful and away from false and distorting constructions of the self. To be sure, these ‘supersessions of the self’ are often experienced in terms of shock, astonishment, startled surprise mainly because we are so unaccustomed to seeing the world truly but also, perhaps for the first time in these encounters, we begin to get a foretaste of what it means to participate genuinely in the life of God.\textsuperscript{18}

“The profound relationship between beauty, good, and the truth is the fact that each of them provides the occasion for such ‘unselfings.’”\textsuperscript{19} This comes very close to

\textsuperscript{14} Hauerwas is in many ways indebted to Murdoch for these insights, especially her early work, The Sovereignty of Good. However, in acknowledging their source in Murdoch, Hauerwas nonetheless advances his own distinctively Christian account, which is not without significant criticisms and corrections to Murdoch’s – particularly her later work. See Stanley Hauerwas, ‘Murdochian Muddles: Can We Get Through Them If God Does Not Exist?’ in Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), pp. 155–70.


\textsuperscript{16} Donald Nicholl, The Beatitude of Truth: Reflections of a Lifetime (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997). As Nicholl formulates it, ‘If we dare to face the truth, it strips us of the attachment to anything less than itself.’ Ibid., p. 7.


\textsuperscript{18} ‘If there is to be enlightenment, there has to be an awakening – and if the sleeper is in a very deep sleep only a shock will do, especially if one is dreaming that one is already awake and enlightened.’ Nicholl, The Beatitude of Truth, p. 168.

\textsuperscript{19} Hauerwas, ‘The Significance of Vision’, p. 39.
the Christian language of conversion, whereby, paradoxically, it is only in losing one’s soul (for the sake of Christ) that one actually finds it (Matt. 16:25). In relinquishing oneself, giving oneself over to the love of God in Christ, what is received in return, and as gift, is an ever truer and more real self. And it is this disciplined overcoming of the self that allows for the clarification—one might say, purification—of vision.

How, then, does beauty effect this transformation? In both its verbal and non-verbal forms, great art discloses a world that is startlingly new and strange—at least in contrast to the world most humans are accustomed to inhabiting. Many of us pass our days in a state of enchantment, absorbed in a world of illusion, fear, evasion and self-deception. Art interrupts and unsettles these ‘normal’ patterns of seeing. Poetry accomplishes this, for instance, not by describing in noble, elevated language what we already know, but by revealing dimensions of the real in ways that suddenly make what we know seem oddly unfamiliar. Literary works of art enlarge the consciousness and enliven the imagination by calling us out of our obsessive self-absorption. What implication does the beautiful have for the good as it shatters our experience of the everyday? Surely one crucial implication is that what we have come to understand by “the ethical” must be broadened to include vision. In theological terms, this means that the formation of sound moral judgment involves more than the will—the ability to make decisions and act upon them; it also entails an aesthetic sensibility, that is, a way of attending to the world by virtue of participating in the life of God.

Learning “to see” the world under the mode of the divine might be described as the overall aim of Christian existence. If truthful vision or ‘seeing aright’ is the goal, then helping “discover the essential metaphors through which [we] can best see and understand [our] condition” becomes the theologian’s primary task. How to conceive God’s nature, or God’s relationship to the world and to humanity, are hardly matters of indifference. For Christians do not simply “believe” certain propositions about God; they learn to attend to reality through those propositions and by means of the very language constitutive of Christian vision and self-understanding. How we attend to reality cannot therefore be separated from the language internal to these very modes of attending. This is but another way of saying that the “imagination” and “the moral life” are not two separate subjects that must be brought into relation after the fact; on the contrary, they are two aspects of the very apprehension of reality itself. The challenge, then, is not to translate the ethical into the aesthetic, or vice versa. The challenge, rather, is to transform the self to fit the language. As Hauerwas puts it, the Christian moral task is “to become what we see.”

For “our metaphors and stories entice us to find a way to bring into existence the reality that at once should be but will not be except as we act as if it is. Morally the world is always wanting to be created in correspondence to what it is but is not yet.”

The Christian moral life, then, might be described as an apprenticeship in the art of self-divestment—an art in which humans are able to advance only insofar as their aesthetic and imaginative powers are engaged, transfigured and reformed.

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Here the language of conversion coalesces with the language of virtue. For just as ‘imaginative’ persons cannot be imaginative without some virtues, so too ‘moral’ persons cannot be moral without having their imaginations shaped by the beautiful, the good and the true.

If modernity’s first mistake is to have dissolved the unity of the transcendentals—dissociate the ethical from the aesthetic and thereby forget that ethics has more to learn from art than from the more ‘willful’ aspects of human being—then modernity’s second mistake is to assume that ethics has primarily to do with making “hard choices,” resolving life’s major moral dilemmas. The truth is that Christian existence is less a matter of moral heroics than it is a constant struggle “to wrestle the truth out of the everyday.” The good life, the moral life, in other words, is not limited to or even primarily exhibited in moments of acute moral crisis. For when we understand Christian life as a certain form of attention, the quotidian—the mundane, the everyday—comes to the fore. Indeed, the moral character of our lives is exemplified by our determination to work at achieving our humanity through “the manifold particularity of our lives.” The characteristic moral problems that we face do not find their defining register in monumental decisions, in the major moral crises of life, but in how we live through the everyday contingencies of human existence. Moral perception—seeing truly (in both the ethically attuned and aesthetically truthful senses of that phrase)—is therefore not a matter finally of discovering the ultimate truth, but of finding what the truth is in the small questions that confront us day in and day out.

Where better than in the parables of Jesus do we find the confluence of the everyday and the absolutely startling? Parables are emblematic instances of how the ethical and the aesthetic powerfully engage our socially-embedded, bodily-rooted imaginations.

**Beauty, Goodness and the Structure of Parabolic Form**

There are two surprises in Jesus’ parables. The first—already noted—is their ordinary, everyday character. Absent are any mythical figures: there are no gods or demons or angels. There are no miracles. What we find instead are quite ordinary, everyday folk: landlords, stewards, farm workers, and housekeepers, fathers, sons. These are ordinary folk doing ordinary things: selling, buying, cleaning the house, baking bread, planting crops. These are, as one critic put it, “narratives of normalcy.” What is astounding, shocking even, is that the Kingdom of God is said to be like this. Surely the Kingdom of God is made of grander things! Here precisely lies the

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22 The phrase is Hauerwas’, to whom I am indebted not only for this felicitous expression but also for many of the insights in this section of the essay. See Hauerwas, ‘The Significance of Vision’, p. 46.


source of our bafflement, our perplexity: we are asked to see how the extraordinary is like—in some as yet to be fathomed way—the ordinary.

If our first shock comes in the paradoxical recognition that the Kingdom somehow happens in the everyday, yet clearly not in what we have learned to identify as ‘ordinary’ ways, then our second disorienting experience occurs when we awake to the realization that the coming of God’s Kingdom is to be compared not to the characters in the parable—for example, the householder who went out early in the morning … or the woman who lost one of her silver coins …—but what happens to the hearer of the story. What ‘makes sense’ happens by virtue of the plot. As Paul Ricoeur notes, the structure of the parables involves the “language of open drama” into which we, as hearers or readers, are drawn. Integral to the composition, culminations, and denouement of these parabolic plots are, moreover, certain decisive turning points.

Take, for example, one of the most condensed of Jesus’ parables: Matt. 13:44 (RSV) “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys the field.” There are three critical moments in this short drama: (1) finding the treasure, (2) selling everything else, and (3) buying the field. As these three critical moments unfold, they ‘expand’ or ‘swell’—even at times ‘explode’—our imaginations, our feelings, our thoughts. As they do they begin to mean much more than the prosaic, prudential and calculated commercial transactions told by the story. Indeed, the ‘finding’—the moment of ‘discovery’—draws into its orbit all kinds of experiences. Suddenly we recognize, perhaps for the first time, what was there all along but which, for some reason, we simply overlooked, failed to notice, or even if we did notice, refused to ‘see.’

The emplotment of Jesus’ parables, however, does not stop with the ‘finding.’ The hearer/reader is also asked to link dialectically the finding to the two other critical turning points: the selling and the buying. According to the story, the man who found the treasure went and sold everything that he had and bought the field. But notice how the normal order of things is inverted; here we have an action followed by a decision! According to conventional ways of thinking, decisions and choices precede action. But in the parable the decision is not only subsequent to the action, it occurs in fact as the third element in the narrative sequence. The order is ‘discovery,’ ‘reversal,’ and then ‘decision.’ Before the decision comes ‘reversal’—the selling of everything the man owns—which marks not simply a change in direction but an entire shift in outlook, a radical re-orientation, an inversion, if you will, of vision. Christians often speak of this dramatic re-orientation of the imagination in the language of a change of heart—metanoia, repentance, ‘turning around’: it is something that occurs prior to all good intentions, all good decisions and all good actions.

To be sure, not all of Jesus’ parables follow this same pattern of ‘discovery,’ ‘reversal’ and ‘decision.’ For if all the parables were built in the same mechanical way along the same pattern, they would for that very reason lose their power of surprise. However, a good many of Jesus’ parables develop and dramatize one or the other of these three critical turning points.

25 Ricoeur, ‘Listening to the Parables of Jesus’, p. 240.
Take, for instance, the parables of growth in Matthew 13. “The Kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.” (31–32) The unexpected growth of the mustard seed, a growth beyond all proportion, draws the listener/reader’s attention in the direction of ‘finding’ or discovery. Juxtaposing the normal growth of the seed and the unnatural size of the growth speaks to something that happens not to the seed, but to us as hearers/readers. By means of this story our imagination ascends and expands, until it bursts open in abundance. For in listening to Jesus’ parables the word of God invades us, overpowers us, effectively placing us outside ourselves beyond our control, beyond our willing and our planning. We are rendered silent.  

Others of Jesus’ parables—like the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15)—stress the critical moment of reversal: thus the Prodigal Son changes his mind, comes to his senses, turns around and returns home. In yet other parables, like that of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), the focus is on the decision—the third critical moment, on the doing, on the good deed. But it would be a mistake to think that Jesus’ parables are finally reducible to any one of these three moments: the finding, the reversal, or the decision. Collapsing the power and meaning of the parables into one of these crucial turning points would render them little more than moral fables, allegories of charitable action, a mere call to “do the same.” Domesticating Jesus’ parables, transposing them into moral platitudes, clichéd advice, is often the result of a noble desire to “put the parables into practice.” But it can also be equally a strategy of evasion; for we would rather act on what we think we already know than relinquish our ego-centered grip on the world. We would rather proceed by “our own lights” than allow our imaginations to be challenged, reformed, overturned and re-made by Jesus’ parables. How much easier it is to incorporate new teaching into an already determined framework than to allow our lives to be entirely “re-emplotted” by Jesus’ parables.  

26 The silence, of course, is never an empty one. It serves rather as a marker of both movement and excess – silence is to be understood both as a kind of ‘passing over’ from knowledge into action, as Balthasar notes, and as an awed awareness of the infinite surplus of God’s word, surpassing all human comprehension, as Rowan Williams observes. ‘If the word was silent previously it is now, according to revelation, so rich and luxuriant (hyperbole, perisseuein) that further speech and utterance fails, and we are reduced to a knowledge of how greatly love surpasses knowledge. This is truly going beyond thought into act, not our own act but God’s act in us; it means giving up our own knowledge in order to be possessed by God’s knowledge.’ Balthasar, ExT1, p. 146. ‘When we encounter the words of Jesus – and hence the Word itself – we are overwhelmed with the full articulacy of God in Christ. The fullness of the Word, like the fullness of light, is overwhelming. There is too much; the abundance is more than we can contain. The result, then, is not so much a satisfaction in now having “the answer”; but the disorientation and befuddlement of not knowing what to say. Of being reduced to silence.’ Rowan Williams, ‘The Judgement of the World’ in On Christian Theology (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp. 29–43, 37.  

27 As Rowan Williams notes, when speaking of the encounters in the gospels between Jesus and those he calls: ‘... these are events [healings but also the telling of parables] in which
The parables teach, to be sure, but they don’t instruct in any straightforward, didactic manner. Parables do not deliver themselves in a form that can be easily assimilated or brought under the conceptual control of the hearer/reader. They work rather more by way of commanding aesthetic attention than by yielding up to the mind convenient truths that can be readily grasped and theoretically arranged within a predetermined framework. The judgment characteristic of Jesus’ parables—which both comes to and arises in their listeners/readers—proceeds more by engaging the imagination than by moving the will.28

What we have in Jesus’ Kingdom parables is, as Ricoeur reminds us, a language that thinks through the metaphor and not beyond it. Indeed, the power of this language is that it abides to the end within the tension generated by its images. It does not seek to release or collapse that tension, but to live in and through and by it. The fact that Jesus’ parables allow no simple translation into abstract concepts is a sign of their ‘uncapturable’ aesthetic potentialities. What is at issue when dealing with the parables is not “a unique story dramatically expanded into a long discourse, but … a full range of short Parables … gathered together into the Unifying form of the Gospel.”29 Understanding the parables aright, giving one’s ethical judgments and aesthetic sensibilities over to their shaping, means making sense of them together, in one overarching “network of intersignification.”30 Part of what it means to develop sound theological judgment, then, is the capacity to abide within a threefold tension—created (1) not simply by the images of just one parable, but (2) of all Jesus’ parables taken together, and then (3) set in relation to all the other non-parabolic biblical genres as well. For the Christian, to be schooled in the art of the parables is to be trained through the word how to see.

The Dramatic, Salvific Out-working of Parabolic Form

This brief outline of how Jesus’ parables work indicates the sense in which Christian life is as much a matter of re-shaping aesthetic sensibilities as it is of being trained in

people are concretely drawn into a share in the vulnerability of God, into a new kind of life and a new identity. They do not receive an additional item called faith; their ordinary existence is not re-organized, found wanting in specific respects and supplemented: it is transfigured as a whole.’ Rowan Williams, ‘The Judgement of the World’, pp. 29–43, 41.

28 To use Ricoeur’s formulation: ‘the parables are addressed first to our imagination rather than to our will’. Ricoeur, ‘Listening to the Parables of Jesus’, p. 245. This might be taken as a paraphrase of Hauerwas’ remark that ‘we can only act in the world we can see’.

29 Ricoeur, ‘Listening to the Parables of Jesus’, p. 242.

30 It would be erroneous to think that Jesus’ parables are reducible to one of the three moments of emplotment that Ricoeur notes in conjunction with his discussion of the parable of the treasure in the field: the finding, the reversal, the decision. Rather, Jesus’ parables make sense together inasmuch as they constitute a semiotic web, a form of intertextuality. Understanding Jesus’ parables, in other words, requires that they be seen each in the light of them all. Indeed, one could go further and say that it would be premature to limit this network of intersignification even to the parables (understood as a distinct literary form). For the parables signify in relation to other biblical genres. For a more extended discussion of this, see Paul Ricoeur, ‘Naming God’, Union Seminary Quarterly Review, 34/4 (1979): 215–27.
sound ethical judgment and theological understanding. But the issue must be pressed further: “What is it about Jesus’ parables in particular that makes their beauty so deeply disturbing, utterly alien, and yet at the same time so profoundly renewing and life-giving?” What is it about the metaphorical clash, the cognitive dissonance, of Jesus’ parables that gives to the Christian vision its distinctive features? Part of an answer is to be found in Rowan Williams’ observation that one of the central tasks of theology is to equip the Christian to recognize and respond to the parabolic in the world.

The transfiguring of the world in Christ can seem partial or marginal if we have not learned, by speaking and hearing the parables, a willingness to lose the identities and perceptions we make for ourselves: all good stories change us if we hear them attentively; the most serious stories change us radically … If we can accept a very general definition of parable as a narrative both dealing with and requiring ‘conversion’, radical loss and radical novelty, it may not be too far-fetched to say that the task of theology is the exploration of parable.\(^{31}\)

A sense of the radical character of the parable’s plot can be detected if one notes how frequently, within the overarching narrative structure of the Gospel, situations of controversy and conflict frequently serve as the occasions of Jesus’ parables. His interlocutors more often than not are intent on testing Jesus, trying to “catch him out” or trap him, than they are in coming to a deeper, more profound understanding of God, or themselves, or how they might participate in God’s Kingdom.

Jesus typically replies enigmatically, in parabolic form, to these clever ruses. The effect is precisely to overturn his interlocutors’ assumptions; for by means of the parable their initial challenges return to them in a form that suspends them in a tension-filled, dramatic space long enough to unsettle their world, if not shake it entirely apart. The parables in that sense bring the listener/reader to the threshold of judgment by testing, interrogating and exposing as sinful received categories, conventional wisdom and unexamined assumptions. But while Jesus’ parables are clearly a form of judgment—in the sense of condemnation and the exposure of sin—they are at the same time gestures of God’s grace, occasions of repentance, offers of new life.

What prevents the response of God’s judgment from entirely overwhelming the listener/reader is the fact that it is imaginatively mediated through parabolic form. This is gesture at once beautiful and ‘grace-full;’ for its intent is not to annihilate but to restore, renew, correct, repair and ultimately heal human imagination—and hence human judgment. For Jesus’ parables give—exceedingly abundantly—more than what they take away. Indeed, what they do ‘strip away’ are exactly the false façades and inauthentic constructions of the self that thwart redemption. To be sure, the power of Jesus’ parables to unsettle and overturn human expectations is profound, but at the same time they proffer to the listener/reader “definitions, roles to adopt, points of view from which to speak, points on which to stand and speak.”\(^{32}\) Such are


\(^{32}\) Ibid., p. 32.
the resources by which the listener/reader might learn to participate aesthetically, re-creatively, in God’s redemptive drama.

The parables, then, are Christ’s proffering a form of salvation to his interlocutors; they are invitations to let go of the self-condemnation of our sinful judgments and to accept instead his judgment of us—a judgment which releases us into a light that is at once beautiful and true and good. As the Psalmist puts it, “For with thee is the fountain of life; in thy light do we see light” (Ps. 36:9; RSV). Until the advent of Christ, humanity has been living in the dark and has not recognized just how dim, distorted and violent its world is. So when the true light does come, our first response is to turn away, to refuse it. Not only do we refuse the light, we viciously and insanely attempt to extinguish it. That we should prefer darkness to light is exactly correlative to the extent to which human imagination without the grace of God is impotent and self-destructive. Thankfully, however, this is not the last word about humanity; the final, ultimate word about us and to us comes from God, one central aesthetically and ethically powerful form of which is Jesus parables. As Williams puts it, “[the parables] are not religious stories or expositions of a tradition, but crystallizations of how people decide for or against self-destruction, for or against newness of life, acceptance, relatedness.”

Conclusion

Starting from the assumption that the Christian life is above all “a pilgrimage to beatitude, to fulfillment in Christ,” this essay has explored several ways in which Christ’s beauty—as displayed in his parables—might once again be understood and experienced, in all their astonishment and wonder, as, on the one hand, ‘alien’ and ‘alienating,’ and, on the other, as fully life-giving and redemptive. The beauty of God’s judgment becomes a part of the Christian life not only by means of the parables that Jesus tells but by the parable that Jesus is. Jesus not only utters parables, he enacts them. And in that sense the peculiar literary form of the parables gains its intelligibility within the larger parable lived out in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If the trajectory of the Gospel, the series of quasi-legal disputations that frame the individual Gospel parables, finds its culmination in the trial and crucifixion of Christ, then the ‘strange beauty’ of the cross—witnessed in Jesus’ willingness to subject himself, make himself vulnerable to, abase himself before, human judgment—discloses a strange and terrible beauty indeed. It is a beauty that allows itself to be wounded and humiliated so that it might heal, a beauty that blinds in order to restore true sight, that unsettles judgments and disrupts lives so that it might restore to us our true selves, sound and whole.

Vigilant attention to “the pattern of challenge and transformation, the loss and recovery of self that is involved in hearing a parable” is, as Rowan Williams reminds us, necessary for the healing of our imagination, the restoration of our aesthetic

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33 Ibid., p. 41.
judgment. Only then can we discern within the loss and recovery of God himself in cross and resurrection an opening to us of comprehensive change and healing.34

Here, then, we encounter a most ‘alien beauty’—alien not in the sense that it is entirely foreign to who we truly are, who we are meant, to be but in the sense that it exposes just how far removed we yet are, without Christ, from our true selves. This then is the beauty mediated in parabolic form: it is at once a measure of God’s judgment on what he has created—that it is good, indeed very good (Gen. 1)—and a demonstration of the unfathomable depths of God’s fidelity and love in the face of our refusal of that generous offer of a true self. Hearers/readers of Jesus’ parables are presented with the opportunity to recognize their own complicity in the rejection of Jesus, which does not lead, finally, to condemnation, but to “the possibility of a different role offered by the continuing merciful presence of God in the post-Easter Jesus.”35 The form of Jesus’ parables is truly non-coercive, for it impels the hearer/reader by irresistible grace to the source of all goodness and truth: the beauty of God manifested in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This life holds out the prospect of salvation precisely by not evading the pain and the darkness, or the dying, but by passing through them to hope and to wholeness and to new life.36 It is a life into which all are parabolically invited.

To this end, let me conclude with an extensive quotation from Sebastian Moore who, in his book The Crucified Jesus is No Stranger, offers the following meditation on the structure of self-discovery through the image of the crucified Jesus:

I most deeply and accurately discover Jesus as the [person] I never was, only when I realize that my not being wholly [human] is what crucifies him. Jesus on the cross represents an identity which I am crucifying rather than entering. But my crucifying is my way of entry, for it represents my non-personhood forced into its characteristic action, which is the destruction of wholeness. So there I am, out in the open at last. But once out in the open, I lose the fight to keep what I thought was myself but was really my anonymity. Forced to hear myself saying ‘I hate that which makes for life’, I expose myself to sorrow, and sorrow, if I give it free rein, bears me in to the heart of the crucified where I discover myself. Thus I am reborn in the identity that I have sought to fend off by crucifying. The way into this identity is the way of the spear: that is precisely why the crucified is the symbol of our lost and recovered identity. We crucify Jesus rather than be him, and thus, through the healing power of sorrow, we become him.37

34 Ibid.
36 Balthasar puts this last point eloquently, although with reference to the revelation of God’s word generally and not in specific reference to Jesus’ parables: ‘It is true of course that the event with which the scriptural revelation pierces into history impinges so sharply as to come first only as a shock, and that only after it has been received, obeyed and acted upon does it reveal its full breadth and depth. The word is sweet in the mouth but bitter when swallowed.’ Balthasar, ‘Revelation and the Beautiful’ in ExT 1, p. 112.
Theology of Arts in the Context of Colonialism

Are they not human beings? Don’t they have a soul, which has been gifted with reason? Are you not obliged to love them as you love yourself?¹

Fray Antón de Montesinos formulated these provocative questions in his sermon in Advent 1511 in ‘West-India,’ nineteen years after the Europeans had ‘discovered’ Ameri-India. All Dominican brothers at the Mission station endorsed the sermon with their signatures, an act which Bartolomé de Las Casas documented in his notes. These rhetorical questions were addressed to the colonializers who, according to Las Casas, treated the aboriginal peoples² as “animals” by enslaving, torturing and killing them. Las Casas and the Dominicans, on the contrary, regarded the aboriginal peoples as human persons and recognized their full status as juridical subjects by applying to them, following Thomas Aquinas, a kind of pre-modern ‘law of nations.’¹⁴

The Dominicans, as did the early church, considered every human being as created in the image of God, which throughout the Christian history of reception and interpretation of Genesis has been understood ethically as a demand for an equal treatment of everyone.³ Indeed, the beginning of the modern ideology of equality can be traced through the longstanding Jewish-Christian doctrine of the human being as Imago Dei, along with the triple command to love God, love your neighbour and love yourself, all of which can be seen, in some sense, as an elaboration of the simple injunction “show love to the poor.”⁴

¹ According to Gustavo Gutiérrez, Gott oder das Gold: Der befreiende Weg des Bartolomé de Las Casas (Freiburg: Herder, 1990), p. 34.
² This essay does not differentiate between ‘aboriginal’ and ‘indigenous’. Aboriginales (those who have been there from the beginning) is a term first coined by nineteenth-century British colonializers of Australia.
⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, Oratio 14, ‘About the Love of the Poor’.
Also the classical Christian doctrine of ‘the two natures’ of Christ offers a historically necessary condition for Las Casas’ argument and the modern law of nations, because it was the Christology of the early church that made it possible to relate the divine and the human, in the words of Nicaea: “true God from true God.” In our neighbour we recognize God. The idea of human rights largely derives from this classical image of a ‘communication’ of the divine and human. The Eastern churches summarize this in their doctrine of the ‘deification’ of men and women.\(^5\)

Fray Bartolomé’s critique did not end with the *Imago Dei* rooted in a theology of creation, but took a step further. In the aboriginals’ suffering under the violent colonization he recognized and identified the suffering and crucified Christ himself: “Then I saw that they wanted to sell to me the gospel and Christ with it, and that they tortured him, beat him and crucified him.”\(^6\) After 1492, when Europeans began to have more extensive contact with strange countries, peoples and cultures, but also tried to integrate these into their own worldview and society, a basic conflict arose which still influences Western history and its view of the future of humanity.

Colonial and post-colonial encounters between the self and the strange/r\(^7\) represent a crucial but unresolved problem. The challenge of accommodating or adjusting to cultural differences offers some kind of a cross, which Western civilization is asked to carry on its path towards liberation and reconciliation.

The continuing brutality of these colonializing powers is evident in widespread racism, unsustainable immigrant policies, and the economic injustice promoted by the world trade system, all of which one could describe, in allusion to Karl Barth, as “powers without any masters” (*die herrenlosen Gewalten*). Colonialism has by no means come to an end; it has merely changed its clothes. The “colonialisation of the life worlds through the system,” as Jürgen Habermas formulated it, continues unabated. In the same way that the question ‘Gold or God?’ represented a crucial suffering point in the mediaeval West, so too the present declaration ‘Life is more than capital’ (U. Duchrow/F. Hinkelammert) represents a crucial suffering point—a station on the way of the cross, if you will—towards ‘our common future’ (G.H. Brundlandt).

The notion of ‘post-colonialism’ forms the centre of a discourse in cultural studies, which focuses on the question whether and how colonial history still affects the

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5 On communication between the divine and the humans, see Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, second edition (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1995), pp. 43ff., 427–32; and Lars Thunberg, *Man and the Cosmos: The Vision of St Maximus the Confessor* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), Chapter IV.


West’s ongoing history. Recalling Bartolomé de Las Casas’ choice in the sixteenth century might still point a way forward for a theology of arts that would like to interpret the God of the Here and Now against the horizon of the West’s lamentable history of colonialization.

Even if it is more than 500 years old, and even if liberation theology has transformed the church and culture on more than half the globe, many theologians in the rich, northern hemisphere have not begun to fathom the challenge of constructing an interpretation of post-colonial Christian life centred on the reconciliation of the strange and the self, of those who are strangers to as well as neighbours for each other. What can theology learn from arts in this context? More specifically, what can theology learn from aboriginal arts? What might theologians learn by entering the globalized world of late modern art, where, for example, aboriginal artists in the 1990s have developed an intensive exchange among themselves and with others on the themes of local, global and transcultural identity?

In 1520 Albrecht Dürer expressed his astonishment at and unconditioned admiration for Mexican metallic works, which he had managed to see at an exhibition immediately before they were melted down and converted into coins. He was fascinated by what he described as the “wonderful works of art and subtle display of ingenuity of people in far-away lands.” Dürer’s astonished reaction conflicted with mainstream artistic judgements of the time, which regarded these objects as curiosities rather than genuine works of art.

The history of dominant Western Christianity, by analogy with the history of arts, is also characterized by an unreflective European ethnocentrism. At best, the non-European artists adapted themselves to and trained themselves in established European artistic techniques of production and visual programmes. Europeans, at the same time, often did not perceive how the strangers now among them appropriated the very modes of expression in Western visual art in order both to satisfy the demands of their European masters and to create lines of continuity for their own culture with new instruments and modes of technical and ideological expression. At worst, those belonging to the ‘strange cultures’ were completely excluded by Europeans from the realm of the arts, whose content and norms were dominated by Western cultural elites.

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10 This was the case for example in the ‘colonial arts’ in Peru. Cf. Sigurd Bergmann, I begynnelsen är bilden: En befriande bild-konst-kultur-teologi [In the Beginning is the Icon: A Liberative Theology of Images, Arts and Culture (London: Equinox, 2008)], (Stockholm: Proprius, 2003), pp. 175f.
The primitivism of modernity

‘Oh, — if we could be our ancestors!’

This exclamation is also a title of an essay by the German art scholar Eberhard Roters, which explores the search for ‘the primitive’ in German expressionism. In a detailed study of the relationship between primitivism and modernity in German expressionism, the British scholar of art, Jill Lloyd, makes explicit how the emergence of modern visual arts in general avails itself of non-European cultures, which I will term aboriginal or strange cultures. Lloyd argues that sometimes these cultures function as a screen for critical projection of an alternative way of life to the emerging society of industrialism; sometimes they perpetuate an illusion that the return to origins will somehow solve all contemporary problems.

Within Modernism both the simple, familiar countryside and exotic non-European landscapes were placed on a pedestal. For it was believed that by means of such alternative syntheses of life and arts the thoughts and senses could be stimulated. Unfortunately, what these modern artists failed to recognize was that both the European rural regions and the colonialized countries were, during precisely that time, embroiled in radical forms of economic and cultural change as a result of early industrialization.

With a renewed strength, modernist artists became interested in ‘the strange’ and the exotic. The myth of an unbound primitive power of creation opened for them a significant and specific source of empowerment, which became even more dynamic when combined with the myth of the search for a ‘natural’ or ‘original’ state.

A fascination with the exotic and the ethnically strange created, through an odd dialectic, an open cultural space for intellectuals, artists and local reformist movements in the beginning of the twentieth century. On the one hand many modern Western artists thoroughly and carefully dealt with artefacts from other cultural regions of the world, either through long stays at a museum or through travelling abroad. On the other hand these same artists steadily abstracted the technical modes, imagery programmes and visual conventions from their native habitats and contexts. The result was that the arts of ‘the strange’ became uprooted from their native soil, dislocated and dis-embedded from time and place and tradition. They were then recontextualized in modern cultural surroundings, where they appeared as ‘strange’ (literally “out of place”). One cannot understand the history of modern visual art in general without appreciating this transcultural dimension.

In their attempts to discover the creative wellsprings of ‘the natural,’ ‘the original’ and ‘the wild,’ avant-garde modernists embarked on a hunt for a new civilization,
largely as a means of protesting against the emerging industrial age. Unfortunately, their attempt to liberate themselves from the perceived inhibiting constrictions of their own culture came at the cost of projecting themselves onto the screen of ‘the strange.’ One example of how ‘the strange’ became part of the dominant Western gaze can be found in the ‘Die Brücke’ photographs of an aboriginalized carnival. ‘Die Brücke,’ a famous group of artists, gathered in the summer of 1910 in the German city of Moritzburg, the objective of which was, through a regime of intense training and experimenting, to create a place for an alternative life. In February 1911 they celebrated a carnival in the sanatorium, ‘Weißer Hirsch,’ where patients were dressed as Indians. Photographs were taken as a memento of the occasion (Figure 9); a drawing was also produced of group members engaged in a bow-shooting training session. The body gestures, faces and expressions of those in the photograph all indicate that they are posing. Nonetheless, their intention remains unclear; were they interested in documentation, playing games, or self-representation?14

Figure 9  

14 In this context, one cannot of course forget the influence of the advent of photography. Everyone is positioned in straight lines in photographs. They pose, present themselves, choose backgrounds. They focus their eyes entirely on the imagined central point of the picture. The technical lens of the camera thereby produces a monocentric perspective, which frames the scene and engineers the whole event. The newly invented camera shows here its emerging power over human practices, perceptions and representations. The process of modern homogenization enters a new stage, which leads one to ask: ‘What about the heterogeneous, “the strange”, in this development?’
This lopsided perception and appropriation of ‘the strange’ was not restricted to Europe. It took place in North America and Australia as well.\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, the history of the arts in the United States shows clearly how the perception and the visual representation of aboriginal populations all along have been determined by the construct of the ‘imagined Indian.’ Just as the landscape painters of the ‘new’ Europe departed from the aesthetics of sublimity, dominant since Kant, and represented the natural space of ‘wilderness’ as a backdrop for the self-representation of the American nation, so too the portrait of the ‘imagined Indian’ offered an effective strategy for the development of a national identity for a predominantly European-American citizenry.\textsuperscript{16} In Scandinavia we find similar stereotypes—for instance, in the exotic Sápmi landscape colored by national romanticism and the aboriginal Sámi person as ‘the wild’ counterpart to the civilized Scandinavian (Figure 10).\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} The visual method and discourse of appropriation is one of the central themes in Australian contemporary art. Its significance for world arts in general and in the regions of Sápmi, Australia and Peru is discussed in my work in progress. See also Ian McLean, \textit{White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 134ff.

\textsuperscript{16} In a detailed study of North American art encountering aboriginal peoples, Hans-Peter Rodenberg shows how the ‘imagined Indian’ was turned into a tool for assimilation and occupation of the strange through the self. Hans-Peter Rodenberg, \textit{Der imaginierte Indianer: Zur Dynamik von Kulturkonflikt und Vergesellschaftung des Fremden} (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994). The self-understandings and life worlds of the North American Indian were with few exceptions overshadowed and replaced by the ‘construed’ or ‘imagined Indian’. It was the latter, rather than the real person and neighbour, that informed the perception, understanding and practical encounters between European settlers and the indigenous peoples. The stereotypes are still alive today, as, for example, in Kevin Costner’s Hollywood movie, \textit{Dancing with Wolves}.

\textsuperscript{17} This picture is one of the most influential for constructing Sámi exoticism through the ages. It is found in Carl von Linné’s frontispiez to his ‘Flora Lapponica’, the main source of information and images from the (sub) arctic North for the intellectual centres of the enlightened Europe in the eighteenth century. Linné is portrayed as an aboriginal Sámi himself in an imagined geographical and cultural landscape. On the long history of exoticizing the Sámi, see Eli Høydalsnes, \textit{Møte mellom tid og sted: Bilder av Nord-Norge} (Tromsø, 1999), pp. 164–201.
The book of Sophus Tromholt *Under Nordlysets straaler* (Under the Northern Lights) reproduces an 1885 etching of an unknown artist, which poses an interesting question. The parishioners and their priest are standing outside of the church in Kautokeino in the northern Norwegian tundra, 35 years after the revival movement of Læstadius has changed the landscape. Preaching indoors at that time didn’t work so well and the priest often moved the whole service outdoors for a free conversation about the gospel. The picture freezes this, most likely, vital and dynamic event. The smallest are placed at the front. The shoes are forming a single proper line. The feet of the priest are one step in front of the others. The hats merge into a common silhouette, the hat of the priest a bit higher than the so-called hats of the four quarters of the elders. Individual characteristics are wiped out. The trees in their winter attire frame the church building. Culture frames nature. The shape of the clouds repeats the shape of the group of human figures below. The ground seems steady; the figures forming a liturgical body of Christ are safely rooted in their ancestor’s land. Or are they on the way to being uprooted?

![Etching](image)

**Figure 11** Etching, in: Sophus Tromholt, *Under Nordlysets straaler* (1885), repr. in: Odd Mathis Hætta, *Samene: historie, kultur, samfunn* (Oslo, 1994), p. 34.

This brief overview of how the confluence of modernist primitivism and modern technology produced a clear expression of the Eurocentric Western self should serve as a timely reminder to theologians that just as in other areas of theology, theology of the arts must take up the postmodern critique of colonial and Eurocentric ideology. The way to proceed, therefore, is by contextualizing theology of the arts so as to do justice to the heterogeneous, both theologically and aesthetically.
Aesthetic Justice Towards the Heterogeneous

Pictures and photographs like those presented above raise serious questions, with reference to indigenous populations, concerning the autonomy of the human person and cultural rights to self-determination. The challenge today is to widen the vision of autonomy so as to embrace the formerly subordinated and subjugated subjects, and to develop an understanding of autonomy which conceptualizes human self-determination within a web of relations among different strangers rather than as a collection of attributes of an isolated subject. More specifically, a contextual theology of arts faces a challenge of reflecting about the conditions not only for social and ecological but for aesthetic justice towards the heterogeneous. Just as contextual theology reflects on social and ecological justice, the task of a contextual theology of the arts must reflect on the social and ecological conditions that make for aesthetic justice.

While modern primitivism cultivated an odd mixture of authentic interest in the technical skills of the strangers and an exotic escapism, late twentieth-century art is characterized by a new interest for the ethnic. In theology a parallel of sorts might be discerned in the discovery, by Western theologians, of a multitude of ‘local theologies.’ Since 1990 one can observe several attempts to articulate a new paradigm for theology: contextual theology. In modern Western societies, the right to preserve and protect that which is different has not always been awarded to those who differ ethnically, gender-wise and biologically from the hegemonic stereotype of the white European male. The history of the colonialization of aboriginal populations—but also, concomitantly, the domination over women and natural life forms—clearly bespeaks a history where autonomy has been limited and awarded to a certain type of human being. On this view, autonomy, following the Kantian ideal, has been built on the heteronomy of ‘the stranger.’ But my contention is that relationality is intrinsic to, and neither extrinsic to nor antithetical to, autonomy.

Aesthetical justice is a process whereby all parties are perceiving each other in a cultural encounter as at once similar and strange, and where each allows the other to retreat to and maintain their own unique domain of selfhood. The interchange of

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21 The opposite of autonomy is not necessarily heteronomy, namely, others are making decisions about me. The dialectics of the human community always include a reciprocal exchange between persons in both symmetrical and asymmetrical relations. Cf. Cristina Grenholm, ‘Makt under inkarnationens villkor: Teologiska perspektiv på maktbegreppet’, in Sigurd Bergmann and C. Grenholm, editors, MAKT i nordisk teologisk tolkning (Trondheim: Tapir, 2004). ET. ‘Power under the conditions of Incarnation: Theological perspectives on the notion of power’, in POWER in Nordic theological interpretations.
nearness and distance, sameness and difference, ‘the strange’ and the familiar, needs new conditions to develop its own dialectic. We are thus challenged to overcome two stereotypes: the stereotype of inclusion, where the strong elevates a specific type of man, his own mirror reflection, to a universal ideal for all humans, but also the stereotype of exclusion. The stereotype of exclusion is alive and well today. Here ‘the primitive,’ the other and the poor are pushed to the periphery; they are made to reside in the outer margins as defined by the centre. The term ‘ethnic minority,’ for example, shows how those who were there in the beginning, the aboriginals, are now linguistically and socially reduced to a specific minority. The few are marginalized by the many, a pattern all too familiar in the late capitalist societies where products and lifestyles are ceaselessly marketed, including even the marketing of otherness.22

What all these groups have in common is their location outside that which the rich and powerful perceive and define as ‘the centre.’ They live on the underside of history; they squat on the trash heaps of the earth. Economically they are displaced into what has aptly been described as the ‘zones of silence.’23

Aboriginal arts in the spaces of late modern, capitalist societies visually depict the relation between centres and peripheries but they also sharply suggest the possibility of relativizing centres and margins. For aboriginal artists create new circulating territories where the received modern centre-periphery dialectics no longer works. Theologians who are well acquainted with the story of the Son of God who both suffered at the centre and was crucified and buried at the margins so as to bring resurrection and life to all creation, should readily perceive how aboriginal artists effectively destabilize and dislocate the false centres of modernity.

**Monoculture, multiculture or transculturation?**

The patterns of both exclusion and inclusion are predicated on the idea of ethnic purity. Such an ‘ethnic essentialism’ represents—by analogy to the feminist and biologistic essentialism—a new ideology for placing of others in a pluralistic context, aiming at control of different groups by developing privileges based on their identity. An illustration of this can be found in the exchange between Jimmie Durham, the famous Cherokee artist, and philosopher Michael Taussig concerning how the European-dominant West sets up roles for the ‘other’ to fulfil in such a way that ‘we’ can identify exactly the alterity ‘we’ wish to find in the ‘other.’ Taussig analyzes the relation of mimesis and alterity, showing their interconnectedness in the modern history of colonialization.24

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Difference in itself has been erased and turned into a new holistically unified ideology. Everyone now has to be different. The consciousness of differentness, which earlier was intended to protect cultural autonomy, easily becomes an instrument for a new different cultural heteronomy of force.

In ‘visual culture’ this cultural heteronomy expresses itself in different guises, for example in the use of ethnic stereotypes in merchandizing practices. A serious problem with ‘ethnic essentialism’ is that it changes the way a subject belongs to a defined group, rendering it a necessary condition for the autonomy of each individual and indeed the whole group. Only those who belong to ‘clearly profiled identities’ are able to invoke claims to autonomy. What about those who do not belong?

German sociologist Thomas Meyer characterizes this phenomenon as a ‘lunacy of identity’, while others have described it as late modern ‘tribalism.’ Meyer gives evidence for the existence of this in all world religions and ideologies. The longing for pure, non-ambiguous identities needs to be interpreted against the horizon of the homogenizing forces of economic globalization, against what Hardt and Negri have titled ‘Empire.’

In the arts the phenomenon of the Empire, on the one hand, and the emerging ‘multitude’ as a significant counter-power, on the other, can be observed in a kind of global lens. Artists who openly belong to an ethnically constituted territory, history or culture that are identified as non-Western, need to learn some special sensitivity regarding how to relate to the globalization processes. They can choose either to connect to a general universalistic Eurocentric ideology of the arts, which results in assimilation, or develop their own niches established by the so-called postmodern ideology of difference—where ‘ethno-arts,’ ‘third world arts’ or just ‘world arts’ are distinctively identified and separately grouped.

Neither of these choices is satisfying because the artist and his/her works become either assimilated to the globalized ‘arts sphere’ at the cost of losing their cultural identity, or the artist gains access to ‘the arts scene’ principally if not exclusively

26 Sally Price, Primitive Art in Civilized Places (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989) offers a detailed analysis of these practices.
29 The strenuous debates around the two exhibitions, which staged the so-called World arts in the 1980s, clearly revealed this dilemma. See William Stanley Ruben, ‘Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), and Jean Hubert Martin, Magiciens de la terre (Paris: Editions du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1989).
by virtue of their ethnic identity (which in itself reduces, limits and diminishes the complexity of arts as if they were only about ethnic difference).\(^{30}\)

![Figure 12](image-url)


The same dilemma is reflected in culture theory, in particular the discussion whether culture should be regarded as a monistic unity, which has been the normal view in enlightenment and modernity, or if this single-culture ideology should be transformed

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\(^{30}\) Cf. Figure 12, where the Sámi Norwegian artist Geir Tore Holm expresses the critical question to himself and the animal (and to us) ‘Are we still friends?’ in his performance of a slaughtered reindeer’s body hanging upside down.
into a so-called multiculturalism, that is, a pluralistic aggregation of different cultural life forms on a common territory.

Strong and valid reasons can be developed for rejecting both of these theories of culture, because both are inherently reductive and distorting of contemporary culture, which in fact is characterized by hybridization and transculturation. Both mono- and multiculturalism operate further with unacceptable postulates about exclusive and limited cultural identities. A theory of transculturation therefore has to be given priority for the contemporary analysis of culture, arts and religion.

**Divine and human, same and strange**

Artists and theologians alike increase their awareness of the significance of the cultural, historical and ecological context where creative expressions of arts and creative interpretations of the God of the Here and Now are born. Indeed, the relationship between visual arts and theology, and especially the holistic view of both in a common cultural context, offers many fruitful perspectives. My last section will thus consider some of the analogies between visual arts and theology with regard to the theme of the relations of the self and the strange.

Analogies to the above-mentioned stereotypes of exclusion, inclusion and multicultural ‘alterity control’ can also be found in theology. In the interests of space, I treat them only in brief outline.

There are, of course, (1) theologies that centre our understanding of God on the notion of personhood. One of the risks inherent in these approaches is that the tendency is to bind the image of God to a great degree to the contextually derived understandings of the human person. Of course, the Christian faith is always informed by the stories about the encounter with God, who historically and materially became human flesh, and it regards the mystery of incarnation as its everlasting ground. But it should not neglect, in all its focus on the human Christ, the work of the invisible Father and the life-giving Spirit. Similarly, (2) there are theologies that make as their centre the notion of the kingdom of God. A commitment to social and political change forms a strong impetus; however, these theologies run the risk of limiting the

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32 The phrase was coined in correspondence with Mary C. Grey.


34 Jürgen Moltmann has rightly criticized the tendency in some trinitarian theologies and pneumatologies (e.g., Heribert Mühlen and Karl Rahner) to universalize individualistic personalism. Alternatively, Moltmann advocates a relational understanding of the human person, which he regards as a ‘being-in-relation’. See Jürgen Moltmann, Trinität und Reich Gottes: Zur Gotteslehre (München: Kaiser, 1980), pp. 204ff., and Der Geist des Lebens: Eine ganzheitliche Pneumatologie (München: Kaiser, 1991), pp. 26ff.
workings of the divine in ways that suggest that the historical Jesus foreshadowed the presence of Christ as a presently acting power and as a cosmic Christ.\textsuperscript{35} There are, finally, (3) theologies—emergent in the 1990s—that are known as ‘ecological’ theologies because they largely centre on the reconstruction of Trinitarian thinking. These movements emphasize the Creator’s manifold work in the creation and God’s liberating love for the wholeness and holiness of the earth. What has subsequently come to be known as ‘ecotheology’ continues to develop a set of systematic, aesthetic and ethical reflections about the ongoing salvation by the God of the Here and Now and their interests concern how the whole of creation might be set free.\textsuperscript{36}

For present purposes, an analysis of and a comparison between the first and third types of theologies might prove instructive. In particular, I am interested in how conceptions of an individualistic personal God (a risk implicit in type 1) might fare in light of more relational/trinitarian construals of the divine (a promise implicit in type 3) with the view to producing a more aesthetically just theology. Clearly, any christocentrism which subordinates the Holy Spirit under the divine persons of the Father and the Son, is problematic on several counts. To be sure, the debate surrounding the filioque clause (started as a linguistic misunderstanding) has evolved over the centuries. But even today it continually divides Europe, not so much ecclesiastically but because it is often used rhetorically as a powerful political weapon.

One wonders, too, whether this christocentric tendency, evident in the protestant theology of the first part of the twentieth century influenced by Barth has not erected a barrier against the encounters among old and new strangers and among the different world religions. Recall that Barth made a sharp distinction between Christianity and religion, whereas Tillich early on perceived the potentials of a Christian philosophy and ethics of religion. The autonomy of the Western man from cultural and ecological differences has received its legitimation from the idea of an individualistic personal God and his sovereignty and omnipotence. This theology of might and dominance has in itself been developed at the expense of the classical Christian doctrine of the multitude of God’s Trinitarian-differentiated forms of revelation in the natures and cultures of the earth. The United Nations’ declarations and international contracts regarding cultural and biological diversity (1992) so far have been secular expressions that stand in full harmony with this classical Christian theology of creation.

The debate about ethnic essentialism further leads our thoughts to the sometime intense debates about God’s essence and God’s suffering. Many critique the concept of an elevated supernatural God, who in his essence is defined as ontologically


\textsuperscript{36} On the concept of God’s salvation as a ‘Trinitarian movement of the liberation of creation’ see Sigurd Bergmann, \textit{Geist, der Natur befreit} [Creation Set Free], p. 331f.
different from bodily, sentient, and mortal creatures. According to this view, God’s essence is understood not through difference but through God’s sameness with man/woman. Through God’s incarnation suffering has, as it were, been moved into the nature of God.37

My proposal for a way to resolve this unholy debate stems from the Eastern Church Fathers and their apophatic distinction between the essence and the work of God.38 Only human beings can experience God’s work, while knowledge about God’s essence and nature always remains hidden. God’s nature and work are of course related, but the only possibility of encountering God’s nature is by experiencing the acting God in his/her earthly and historical modes of expression. This model cannot lend metaphysical support to essentialism, either in its ethnic, biological or gendered modes. Essentialism attempts to construe and preserve the power of the word over the expressions of the images and other bodily-based experiences. Linguistically and discursively claims about ‘how something really is’ are used to misrepresent complex interactions between humans and reality. The idea of the autonomy of a population, gender or ecosystem could apophatically never be grounded in the idea of God’s sovereign power. Otherwise, this would open up the way for anthropomorphic, socio-morphic or bio-morphic projections of the self upon a God who will always remain strange and hidden for us.39

In contrast to this model of self-projection, theological reflections about God’s liberating work with different life forms can shed light on and interpret the problem of cultural autonomy and relationality. What creates the conditions for a dynamic image of God in convergence with classical Christian tradition, in other words, is not one’s centredness on his/her self marginalizing the other—as seen, for example, in the christonomic subordination of pneumatology and hence other religious forms of faith expressions—but the experiences of how God is participating in the struggle for and evolution of self-determination and the right to survive in the specificity of one’s culture or species.

Apophaticism likewise gains significance for the struggle of visual arts with the relation of the strange and the self. In the encounter with the strange and the stranger we meet God face to face. Bartolomé recognized the suffering Christ in the suffering

37 J.B. Metz objects with good reasons that this position implies that suffering loses its specificity and that it is shifted from the creation to the Creator. Also the ‘command to respect the dignity of the suffering’, formulated in the political theology after Auschwitz, is put aside. Johann Baptist Metz, Zum Begriff der neuen Politischen Theologie: 1967–1997 (Mainz: Grünewald, 1997), pp. 194, 203.
38 S. Bergmann, Geist, der Natur befreit [Creation Set Free], pp. 333–6.
39 The idea of God’s universal power should only be used as an idea of supernatural and superhuman power in order to limit human power claims and to keep them open and negotiable, as John B. Cobb has argued. See Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb Jr, For the Common Good: Redirecting the economy toward community, the environment, and a sustainable future, second edition (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994). Cobb makes three arguments for the ‘strength of theocentrism’, pp. 401–4, which I fully support even if his arguments need not necessarily support theo-centrism, which is rightly under a critical debate in the feminist philosophy of religion, but can be used as arguments for the eco-political need for and strength of ‘concepts and images of God’.
of aboriginal people. The people became God’s people. God in God’s nature always remains strange for us. In the encounter with God’s work—which is both near and distant, strange and same—we meet a God who is at the same time familiar and different. Nearness and distance, strangeness and selfhood do not exclude each other, rather they presuppose each other.

Because God is our stranger (but also the One who is closer to us than we are to ourselves) God cannot and should not be represented in an image. Because God at the same time is the one who is the same—Brother Christ and Sister Spirit, of the same human flesh as we are and of the same nature as creation—God also can and should be cast in visible and tactile images. The capacity of visual arts to ‘visualize the invisible’ makes it into a crucial theological mode of expression with the same value as the language-based verbal interpretation of God.

The inhabitation of the strange in the same

Many theologians regard talk about God’s strangeness/alterity today as an acceptable way out of modernity’s unjust claims to power and truth. The legitimate deconstruction of problematic universal truth claims leads to a relativization of the truth claims of a philosophy of identity and the subject. A new sensibility to differences is required and the appropriate theological strategy is to emphasize God’s alterity and ontological difference from creation in order to interpret the differentiations theologically. Often subordinating soteriology under ontology achieves this goal. The interpretation of God’s nature is put above the interpretation of God’s work.40

Of course, as a response to the uniformative and homogenizing colonialization of the world system, cultivating a sensitivity to difference gains considerably in significance. As a protection against a universalistic theology which mingles the being of the world and the being of God, the theology of alterity, often inspired by a reading of Kierkegaard, could produce an interesting insight in the surplus of God’s nature. It could create an openness for the acting of God which one cannot predetermine and which therefore demands a curious and independent attitude on the part of the believer.

Critically three objections might be raised against the idea of God’s alterity as a new centre for late modern theology. First, promoting differences also represents, as we saw above, a sophisticated instrument for control and power-sharing between culturally strong and weak groups. The philosophy of alterity (and her theological sister) have never entirely freed themselves from modern longings for universal truth claims. Additionally, the category of difference develops, in the context of globalization itself, into a new homogeneous pattern in accordance with the colonializing world system. Philosophies and theologies of alterity do not develop any protection against being misused in the global ‘Empire,’ or ‘the world,’ to use the language of St. Paul.

40 Mark C. Taylor, Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. 1992), pp. 317f. In the tradition of negative theology, Taylor contends that our inability to understand God’s essence is the ground of ‘a/theology’ and he rejects in general all approaches to develop soteriological interpretations of God’s work.
Second, some philosophies of alterity (for example those inspired by Levinas) risk objectifying the stranger as the other of the self. This happens also with the image of God if one understands God exclusively as a negation of everything we know.\footnote{For further discussion see S. Bergmann, So fremd das Gleiche: Wie eine interkulturelle Theologie der Befreiung mit dem Fremden über die Alterität hinaus denken kann [So strange the same: How an intercultural theology of liberation together with the stranger can think beyond alterity], in Sybille Fritsch-Oppermann, editor, Das Antlitz des Anderen: Emmanuel Lévinas Philosophie und Hermeneutik als Anfrage an Ethik, Theologie und interreligiösen Dialog [The Face of the Other: The philosophy and hermeneutics of E. Levinas as a quest to ethics, theology and the interreligious dialogue], Loccumer Protokolle 54/99 (Loccum: Evangelische Akademie, 2000), pp. 57–97.}

Similarly, negative theology, either in David Tracy’s or Mark C. Taylor’s versions, can never be in accordance with classical apophaticism because they collapse the balance of negative and positive, cataphatic and apophatic into a subordination of the Son and the Spirit under a theology of the Father that risks being turned into some kind of metaphysics.

Third, although we can, on the one hand, be happy with the emphasis on the divinity of Christ, which is believable even if not understandable to our rationality and senses, on the other hand, a question remains about God’s own experience of being a human. This is the ‘Christomorphia’ of God, as Moltmann has put it, and what God’s being a human means for the continuation of the history of salvation.

A one-sided emphasis on God’s divinity exposes itself to the risk of returning theology to speculations about God’s essence and nature or to a theologia gloriae, while, as was rightly observed by Joseph Beuys, a one-sided emphasis on God’s humanity fosters a tendency to reduce theology to the indwelling divine and spiritual dimensions both in the Creator and in creation.

Independent of how one will evaluate the significance of the classical two-natures doctrine and its relevance for ecumenical theology and ecclesiology, for me it still represents one of the sharpest approaches in the history of Christian theology aimed at preserving the uniqueness of the encounter of divine and human, the \textit{communicatio idiomatum}, in the socio-cultural memory of believers. My emphasis here, of course, lies on communication, mixture (Greek \textit{mixis}), mingling and all kinds of relational terms and images developed mainly in the Cappadocian tradition.\footnote{Of course, the notion of nature in its classical version seems to be rather problematic today and I do not feel any need to develop an apologetics for the early church. Our understanding of nature as an evolutionary and ecological process implies challenges and problems for a reconstruction of ancient interpretations, which nonetheless can be sorted out as I have shown earlier. See Bergmann, \textit{Geist, der Natur befreit} [Creation Set Free], p. 321f.}

It seems most important for me to find modes of expression that preserve the idea of a reciprocal encounter of the visible, physical, human and created with the invisible, more than physical divine and uncreated in the mystery, experience and doctrinal discourses about the Incarnation. My emphasis here rests on the ‘in’ in incarnation, on the communication and motion in-between the Creator and the created. Incarnation, following Gregory of Nazianzus, must be understood after the resurrection and ascension of the Son as \textit{inhabitation}, the indwelling and liberative acting of the Holy Spirit in the world. Trinitarian theology offers in my eyes a
sustainable ideational form that can succeed with this task. Not only that, but such a Trinitarian model of theology successfully wrestles with experiences of the absence of God in creation as well as the absence of liberation in history.43

S/he who acts—the space and motion of liberation

With the help of the Cherokee Lutheran theologian George Tinker, I would finally like to reflect on the integrity of the natural and cultural space and its significance for human autonomy, relationality and identity. The art works of the Sápmi, the aboriginal name for the country of sub-arctic Scandinavia, reveal to us how their complex expressions of space reflect a crucial condition that has a bearing on human life and comfort.

Figure 13  Iver Jåks, hva for noe, 1994, wood, coloured glass, rope of reindeer skin. The title ‘hva for noe’ is used as an open phrase in Norwegian, which could mean: “What did you say?” “What is this?” “So what?” or “Sorry, what?” Photo: author.

In his critique of Latin American liberation theology and its dependence on the Western concept of time, Tinker makes clear that aboriginal culture gives space a greater significance than it gives time in their concept of reality. In a wide and open space the patterns of motion and mobility of an Indian group will develop in cycles, thereby affecting their understanding of time. To the contrary, the Latin American theologians, educated in the West and trained in Western philosophy, have built their theology on the concept of linear time and they are therefore perpetuating the modern myth of progress. Liberation for them means leaving the past behind.

Tinker exposes a major weakness in the whole history of Western theology. The reflection about space seems to be neglected. What significance do we attach to the dynamic space for the perception of God’s liberating work and the liberation of the whole creation? For a theology of creation, what are the consequences of the scientific insight that space and time are not at all what Newton conceived? What does it mean that the dynamics of space is ontologically different in kind from that of time? How is God acting in space, transcending the borders of time’s flow? Must we necessarily reduce the “God who comes” to the future (as in Moltmann’s and Jüngel’s systems), or can God meet us from the past, as for example in African traditions?

Human memories never stand still, so how is God at work in the changing memories and inner images? And how can these memories—produced by the ‘Spirit, who liberates’ and who makes free—function both as liberative and captivating powers in our encounter with the strange, with each other and with nature? Tinker claims that the doctrine of salvation needs to focus more on the circularity of liberation, ‘the full circle of liberation,’ but he does not develop his approach any further. In the encounter with the strange country of aboriginal arts, and the experiences, images and concepts of space, land, justice and life, Tinker’s thesis seems to be even more important.

The metaphor of God’s salvation as a ‘liberating movement’ through time presupposes a given space, which is both determined and quiet, and dynamic and noisy, in chaotic change with regard to the forces that touch it. In Hebrew religion, the nomadic culture offered the tent as a symbol of God’s and creation’s spaces, spaces both static and dynamic. In Christian iconography the triangle became a symbol for God’s Trinitarian community uniting the divine persons in a coexistence of peace, justice and love, a *con-viventia*.

Summarizing our reflections on the cultural discourse on the strange, the wisdom of apophaticism, the aboriginal art works and with reference to Tinker’s emphasis on

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46 Theo Sundermeier in *Den Fremden verstehen: Eine praktische Hermeneutik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), p. 226, profiles the notion of *Konvivenz* in contrast to the notion of koinonia. In Sundermeier’s model, the hermeneutics of a ‘co-subjectivity’ is central, i.e. the understanding of the connectedness of the one and the stranger.
theology’s spatial dimension, I would like to conclude by formulating an important challenge to a contextual theology of the arts.

Visual arts always work with space as their most crucial and foundational element. Pictorial imagination transfers the painted surface into our inner imagination where new images arise, connected to those that we have perceived outside and to our former memories. Conscious about the unique capacity of the visual artefact to reveal spatial meanings—which makes it totally different from discursive and language based expressions—\(^{47}\) the interpretation of arts can teach theology how to create a theology of a reconciled world community that can flourish in a specific natural surrounding. Such a theology reflects human experiences of the garden of God’s growing reign, but in a way that is not only perceived as a linear liberative process in time but also as a complex transfiguration of spaces and places. Reciprocity, interchange and a trans-contextualizing continuum are characteristics of such an eco-aesthetic theology.

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Aesthetics must always precede ethics in a contextual theology of liberation. Bodily experiences need to be taken much more seriously in moral philosophy and theology. Ethics in itself should be developed as an ‘Aesth/Ethics.’

Another central dimension of a contextual theological ‘Aesth/Ethics’ could not be deepened in this essay. For more about the coining of the term ‘Aesth/Ethics’ in the context of the contemporary ‘aesthetization’ of life worlds, see ‘Space and Spirit: Towards a Theology of Inhabitation’, in Architecture, Aesth/Ethics and Religion, Sigurd Bergmann, editor (Frankfurt: IKO-Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation, London: Transaction, 2005). An interesting discussion of the theoretical warrants behind a liberative theological aesthetics departing from Peirce’s pragmatism in a critical distance to Hans Urs von Balthasar is given by García-Rivera. Although García-Rivera’s approach is creative and constructive in many ways, it seems to me that it is all too logocentric (without any consciousness about the specificity of the production and reception of visual artefacts). It further uses the concept of beauty in an ontologically problematic and unconvincing way. An important contribution to the further deepening of ethics in theological aesthetics is offered by John W. de Gruchy, Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), who centres his approach on soteriological concepts.
characteristic of such a theology is that it evinces a sensitivity to the differences of the strange, refusing to reduce them to the others of ourselves. The circling dance of the praising angels around God in heaven offers an inspiring symbol, as well as the story of the three angels’ visit at Abraham’s and Sarah’s tent, where they rested and had a meal under the tree—an episode interpreted by the Early Church as the physical revelation of the Trinity (Genesis 18). In the full circle of liberation it is not necessary that everyone finds his/her own predetermined place or niche. Rather, I would like to envision it as a polycentric space where the borders between centre and margin no longer divide but unite. The full circle of liberation is for me a space where biological and cultural diversity flourish in a complex web that should be interpreted by poets, artists and theologians in creative alliances.

Might such a space be found in the Sami artists’ “Desire Dream” and “Beach of Life,” where God waits to meet us both as the stranger and the one whom we can recognize? Might this recognition occur in ways analogous to the way Christ appeared to two of his disciples on the way to Emmaus, who “did not recognise him” (Luke 24:16)?

Our experiences of God in such a theology of the arts would be interpreted in both creative and traditional ways.

’S/he who is’ (Elizabeth Johnson), is here understood as ‘S/he who acts’—that is, as God with us and for us, within us and among us, both as the strange and as

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The most fruitful way forward, in my judgement, requires a theological aesth/ethics grounded in soteriology instead of ontology, rooted either in Barth’s or Balthasar’s dogmatics. George Pattison offers a Kierkegaard-inspired superiority to ‘the knowledge of God the redeemer’, which needs to be widened not only as knowledge but also as a reflection about the sensual experiences of God’s redemptive acting. See George Pattison, Art, Modernity, and Faith: Restoring the Image (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2001). It is not clear how a Barthian trinitarianism (criticized rightly for its modalistic and christocentric tendencies) is connected to the reflection about human experiences of spatial planning building and living in Gorringe’s inspiring version of liberation theology (cf. Chapter I in: Timothy J. Gorringe, A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Contextual theology is grounded in bodily experiences while propositional theology is grounded in dogmatic postulates. Systematic theology, in my understanding, needs to be developed as a discursive and creative reflection about the aesthetics and ethics of life-threatening conflicts as well as of liberative and life-promoting experiences in the spaces, places and stories of God’s salvific acts. Following Herbert Marcuse (Die Permanenz der Kunst [München, 1977]), the specificity of art lies in its unique capacity to create authentic utopian visions based on memory. Put in a theological language, the arts are necessary to keep alive God’s and the believers’ visions for creation’s freedom (despite all experiences of evil). Put in the language of Australian aboriginals, the arts are based in God’s dreaming for the earth.

49 Sallie McFague, The Body of God: An Ecological Theology (London: SCM Press, 1993). McFague, who, on pp. 112–16, describes sin as a refusal to ‘take one’s place’. The goal of her pan-en-theistic environmental ethic is to attain to a state where all creatures find and take their niche in creation.

the near, both distant and yet present, no matter whether we recognize him/her or not. Intuitions and knowledge, visual images inside us and in artistic artefacts are in such a theology as important as sacred words and worlds. More important would be the sacred longing for the ‘God of the Here and Now’ than the belonging to this or that tribe and place. At the same time, belonging to some or more tribes and places creates the site where God waits to surprise us by rebuilding new open spaces in heaven and on earth. Our longing for God and our belonging to creation are sacredly interwoven.
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Chapter 16

Aesthetics and the Built Environment

Timothy Gorringe

1. Beauty and the Built Environment

Since the late eighteenth century utilitarianism has been the reigning ethical system in everyday life, tacitly assumed by the dominant science, economics. Money, what we can afford, is the bottom line. This has meant that decisions about beauty have usually taken second place in debates about the fashioning of the built environment. Sometimes there has been good reason for this, as in the re-building of the English city of Plymouth after World War II, where money was in short supply, and Nicholas Abercrombie’s plans for the building of a really beautiful city, to match the eighteenth century forms of Nash or Wood simply could not be realized. On the other hand, it has also been the view of the Gradgrinds on every committee that beauty was a desirable extra, an add-on, but not strictly speaking necessary. D.H. Lawrence raged against this attitude, protesting that the great crime of the moneyed classes in the Victorian era ‘was the condemning of the workers to ugliness: meanness and formless and ugly surroundings, ugly ideals, ugly religion, ugly hope, ugly love, ugly furniture, ugly houses, ugly relationships between workers and employers’. He went on: ‘The human soul needs actual beauty even more than bread.’

For an older metaphysic that would have been self-evident. Plato had argued in The Republic that beauty, which is measure, form and order, makes an impact on our souls. The Republic is essentially an inquiry into how to bring justice into human life, and for Plato justice and beauty resemble one another, in that both involve proper order and relation. Justice is for Plato a matter of right relations both between the different parts of the community and the different parts of the individual soul. What today we might call integrity or ‘being a whole person’ was essential, in his view, to the well being of the community: a community of fragmented, disordered selves could not, by definition, possibly be just. It is precisely the next move which is contentious, or even demonstrably untrue, however. For the implication would appear to be that beautiful architecture and music produces well ordered people, and vice versa, something we know to be false. For though high crime rates are correlated to poor environments, the fault is not with the environment as such, but with the social forces which create and sanction them. And, on the other hand, it is quite possible to live in the heart of Venice or Siena, let’s say, and be a fascist. Hence, no simple relationship between ethics and environment can be established.

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This is true but it is not a telling objection theologically for, as Nicholas Wolterstorff argues, aesthetic delight is a component within, and a species of, that joy which belongs to the shalom that God has ordained as the goal of human existence, and which here already, in this broken and fallen world of ours, is to be sought and experienced. Wolterstorff importantly brings aesthetics and ethics, theology and politics, together. Beauty may not be strictly speaking more important than bread (an argument challenged, in a rather different way, by the famous story of Ambrose’s response to famine relief) but equally it cannot be dismissed as politically and theologically unimportant. Practically speaking, as Lawrence implies, there was for centuries a view that the upper classes of course took beauty—fine houses and parks, clothes, painting, and so on—for granted, whilst the poor could whistle for what they may. This overlooks that fundamental human equality which, from the late fourteenth century at least, was seen to be a consequence of the gospel. Beauty is part of ‘life in all its fullness’ (John 10:10) and it is there for all. To ignore it is to ignore a key aspect of the divine command.

2. Can the Built Environment be Art?

Let us grant that beauty in the built environment is a matter of proper concern. For some accounts of aesthetics this would mean that it would be necessary to talk about art (an increasingly perplexing notion in the past century, of course). In relation to some classic cityscapes—Siena, for instance—we might say, as we walk around marvelling, ‘It’s a work of art!’ Lewis Mumford, who was much impressed by the medieval Italian city, agreed. The city is a fact in nature, like a cave, a run of mackerel or an ant heap, he wrote. ‘But it is also a conscious work of art, and it holds within its communal framework many simpler and more personal forms of art.’

Mind takes form in the city: and in turn, urban forms condition mind. For space, no less than time, is artfully reorganized in cities: in boundary lines and silhouettes, in the fixing of horizontal planes and vertical peaks, in utilizing or denying the natural site, the city records the attitude of a culture and an epoch to the fundamental facts of its existence. The dome and the spire, the open avenue and the closed court, tell the story, not merely of different physical accommodations, but of essentially different conceptions of man’s destiny. The city is both a physical utility for collective living and a symbol of those collective purposes and unanimities that arise under such favouring circumstance. With language itself it remains man’s greatest work of art.

Exactly the opposite position was taken by the greatest writer on the city after him, Jane Jacobs. In cities, she argues, we are dealing with life at its most complex and intense. ‘Because this is so, there is a basic aesthetic limitation on what can be done with cities: a city cannot be a work of art.’ She granted that art was needed in the

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arrangement of cities, but insisted on a distinction between art and life. When they are confused within cities, she said, you get not art but taxidermy.  

Mediating between these two views is the Dutch town planner, Nicholas Habraken. Of course, he grants, ‘no living town is beautiful in the way a work of art is’. The beauty of a town is more like the beauty we find in nature—of plants, rocks, people. ‘When we think a town is beautiful we mean something else … that we can identify with it, that in the shape we see we can encounter the inhabitants, that we feel a confrontation with daily life.’

I am inclined to believe that towns and cities can indeed be works of art, though often of very poor art. Less contentiously, however, I think that we have to grant that every city—indeed every village and suburb—has its aesthetic, a particular quality to its urban space. As Nicholas Wolterstorff implies, the question of aesthetics is not irrelevant to the question of human liberation, to what promotes fullness of life. Despite what I have said about Day’s ‘ecologically healthy place’, I do not believe that there is a one-size-fits-all aesthetic for the built environment. Criteria we use to judge a village are inappropriate to a city, and vice versa. Criteria we use to judge small ancient cities like Heidelberg or Oxford are inappropriate for New York or Chicago. Contrary to much current prejudice, I am prepared to believe that the suburbs could also be beautiful. I therefore propose a range of aesthetics to apply to the built environment. But before considering these I want to amplify the one criterion we have so far: Day’s ecological healthiness.

3. Criteria of Beauty in the Built Environment

Let us grant that the built environment can and ought to be beautiful; but the critic can immediately object that we live not simply ‘after virtue’, but ‘after aesthetics’: you think New York is beautiful; I think it a vision of chaos; I like sleepy market towns; you think them boring, naff and twee. Are there any objective criteria of beauty to which we could all appeal? I suspect that the answer to this must be similar to Alasdair MacIntyre’s response to ethical debate, that there has to be an ongoing debate in which all parties are prepared both to listen to others and to go on contending for their positions until they consider them indefensible. However, I find helpful the sideways move of the architect Christopher Day. For he challenges his readers to find an ecologically healthy place which is not also beautiful. ‘Ecologically healthy’ here functions as an objective criterion of what counts as beautiful. This definition might also have some appeal to the Gradgrinds, at least to those who see that their business interests are likely to be harmed by global warming. For Day what is beautiful also nourishes the human spirit—something which might be granted on any definition

of beauty. Can we, he asks, as shapers of the built environment, offer as wide and symbiotic a range of spirit nourishment as can healthy landscapes?7

In order to take the question further, let us briefly pursue Aquinas’ suggestion that beauty includes three conditions: integrity, due proportion and brightness or radiance (claritas).8 How might these conditions or features apply to the built environment?

Day’s criterion of ecological health might well come under the first condition, integrity. This is bound up with the settlement’s interaction with the natural environment—with rivers, harbours and hills, the landscaping of space with parks and trees. These can either be cared for, understood as sources of beauty, or they can be culverted, torn down, turned into car parks, and so on.

A less cogent account of what counts for beauty here is the idea of formal unity. This may indeed be a factor which makes for beauty, but we may, for example in response to Haussmann’s Paris, find it too closely linked to a vision of arbitrary order. Even more fundamentally, as Kevin Lynch argues, ‘A city is a multi purpose, shifting organization, a tent for many functions, raised by many hands with relative speed … final meshing, is improbable and undesirable.’9 A living city, then, will not have just one aesthetic and its space will rarely be artistically unified.

Proportion, Aquinas’ second criterion, is likewise not merely a matter of symmetry. What counts, as Wolterstorff argues, is that a place is internally rich and varied, that there be enough to stimulate and sustain our interest.

With regard to Aquinas’ third criterion, radiance or colour, we only have to think of the Impressionists’ account of London, Paris or Rouen to realize the importance of light and shade in our appreciation of place. ‘I’ve got a motif which will make poor Mourey despair’, wrote Pissarro to his son in October 1896. ‘Imagine, from my window, the new quarter of Saint-Sever, straight across, with the frightful Gare d’Orleans all new and shiny, and a lot of striking chimneys, big and small. On the first plane, boats and water, left of the station the working-class quarter which runs along the quay to the iron bridge … it’s morning with sun and mist. That imbecile Mourey is a brute to think that it’s banal and down to earth. It’s as beautiful as Venice.’10

In addition to these formal criteria I would want to insist that the question of meaning or purpose, of overall world-view or, to use a notoriously slippery word, ‘spirituality’, also is a key determinant of the beautiful. Form alone does not constitute a beautiful city or place—the Hellenistic cities or Versailles are instances of that.11 Leonie Sandercock justly insists that in the post-war rush to turn planning into an applied science, the city of memory, of desire, and of spirit was lost.12 She seeks instead a city aesthetic

7 Day, Places of the Soul, p. 182.
8 Summa Theologiae, 1a, 39.8.
which has a much more overtly spiritual dimension, than that which has emerged under the auspices of centralized planning. Beautiful places exude life. John Turner found in Latin American favellas and barrios a quite remarkable struggle for beauty and resilience of spirit. Relatedly, the question of what a city does with its poor also affects our understanding of the aesthetic. How can that be beautiful which fails to respect the image of God, that image through which we understand the corporate personality of the city? Justice, in other words, is a key determinant in what makes something beautiful.

4. Different Aesthetics in the Built Environment

Given this very abbreviated discussion of criteria of the beautiful, I will look briefly at three different aesthetics: first, the one associated with ‘organic’ settlements; then, second, I will consider geometrically structured settlements; and finally, I will look at suburbs.

i. Organic settlements

The principle underlying organic growth, says Christopher Day, is that the physical form grows out of activities, out of the meeting of users and environment. Lewis Mumford made a fundamental distinction between organic and mechanical forms of growth. ‘In organic planning one thing leads to another and what began as a seizure of an accidental advantage may prompt a strong element in a design which an a priori plan could rule out.’ The organic approach, then, ‘springs out of the total situation’, and works cooperatively with the ‘materials of others’, perhaps guiding them, but first acknowledging their existence and understanding their purpose. In the organic view, the city was ‘enveloped by sky and earth, at once nurtured and held in check by this primordial frame’. Responding to these principles, architects influenced by the picturesque adapted their building to the terrain, as in Bath after 1727, and in Edinburgh after 1767, or introduced deliberate breaks in rectilinearity, as in Nash’s Regent Street in London.

Camillo Sitte, a leading advocate of organic design, associated the pleasingness of organic design with the social use of city form. His preference for public squares, and the right choice and disposition of structures in and around them rested on the perception that they had to serve a vital purpose for community life. But, secondly, he also liked the irregularities in old planning because ‘they were not conceived on the drafting board but developed gradually in natura, allowing for all that the eye notices in natura and treating with indifference that which would be apparent only

14 Day, Places, p. 95.
16 Ibid., p. 450.
‘Nature’ also provided the context for the whole. Of course, appeals to ‘nature’ can be a mask for all forms of historical prejudice but there are good grounds for once again learning to read what the medieval theologians called the ‘book of nature’ and for making use of those lessons in the built environment. It is part of the unlearning of that art which has, since at least the seventeenth century, been a manifestation of the *libido dominandi*.

These so-called organic plans instantiate an aesthetic of surprise. Mumford cited Alberti: ‘Within the heart of the town it will be handsomer not to have the streets straight but winding about several ways, backwards and forwards, like the course of a river.’ Note, again, the appeal to a natural feature. Defence was part of this but it also meant that the pedestrian will ‘at every step discover a new structure, and the front and door of any house will directly face the middle of the street, inviting an inspection of the richness of carved detail’. Against geometrized blocks Sitte defended ‘the small incident, the twisted street, the rounded corner, the little planted oasis unexpectedly come upon’.

Spiro Kostoff, however, questions such arguments, noting that Siena, a copybook example of a supposedly ‘organic’ plan, has ‘one of the most highly regimented designs of medieval urbanism’. In most cities, he argues, the organic and the planned are jumbled together. Roman cities in northern Europe, for example, were depopulated after the fifth century C.E., and then slowly re-populated, a process which left the original grid scarcely visible. The organic analogy, Kostoff claims, can be traced to the rise of biology as a life science in the seventeenth century, but it is inept. Cities do not repair themselves, but are produced and repaired by human will. What is really meant by ‘organic’ planning is planning that responds to its site—hill, river, seafront—or to land division prior to settlement, as in Leeds; to the coming together of several villages, as Aristotle proposed, or to the process of piecemeal changes over centuries. The sum of all these processes can produce a built environment dramatically different than that produced by imperial planners, and this is what Sitte and Mumford appealed to.

**ii. Geometry**

The Swiss architect and planner, Le Corbusier, despised organicism. ‘The pack donkey meanders along, meditates a little in his scatter brained and distracted fashion’, he wrote; ‘he zigzags in order to avoid the larger stones, or to ease the climb ... he takes

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22 Kostoff, *The City Shaped*, p. 84.
the line of least resistance. But man governs his feelings by his reason."25 For him, the picturesque was boring and sentimental.26 To be human is to go straight for your goal; a straight line symbolizes self-mastery. He worked out his aesthetics glorifying the machine. In that case, as the Goodmans noted, ‘the resources of architecture are helpless’.27 And as David Harvey observes, we find here ‘a subterranean celebration of corporate bureaucratic power and rationality, under the guise of a return to surface worship of the efficient machine as a sufficient myth to embody all human aspirations’.28 For Le Corbusier, ‘A city made for speed is made for success.’29 It was another reason for straight streets. ‘The curve is ruinous, difficult, dangerous; it is a paralyzing thing.’30 Since crossroads are an enemy to traffic, the number of streets should be diminished by two thirds. The car was the vehicle of aesthetic appreciation. ‘A critic said on straight streets he would die of boredom. I was astounded and replied: “You have a car and yet you say that!”’31 The so-called Athens Charter of 1933 stipulated that traffic flow should be the primary determinant of city form.32

From the beginning this manner of building sought to promote ‘order’. Roman cities set out a vision of the ‘pax Romana’, which ironically and in fact rested on terror. Mike Davis today speaks in this vein of the ‘carceral city’. In relation to Los Angeles he speaks of a ‘totalitarian semiotics of ramparts and battlements, reflective glass and elevated pedways’ which rebukes any affinity or sympathy between different architectural or human orders.33 The neo-military syntax of contemporary architecture insinuates violence and conjures imaginary dangers.34

The underlying theological problem with modern architecture, observes John de Gruchy, has been that ‘it was too vulnerable to ideological manipulation by those opposed to the common good’.35 This, however, is not a modern but an ancient problem. It was already obvious in Hellenistic and Roman times, and was typified in the Baroque. Cities laid out in this way (i.e., geometrically) may have a high degree of unity, and they clearly appeal to many, but one has to ask what vision of the human good lies behind them. In the case of Le Corbusier, quite as clearly as in Roman or Baroque examples, what such forms express is a deeply authoritarian and class divided account of human society. Can we, in the interest of unity of

26 Ibid.
29 Le Corbusier, The City of Tomorrow and its Planning, p. 179.
30 Ibid., p. 16.
31 Ibid., p. 270.
34 Ibid., p. 226.
form and striking proportion, overlook this political and ethical meaning in making judgments about the beautiful?

iii. The banal arcadia

Since the time of Augustan Rome, at least, cities have had their suburbs, but suburbs as we know them today are the product of the rise of the middle class. In their origin, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, their inspiration was romantic and indeed arcadian. The suburb was to be *rus in urbe*. It was organic, because every house had a garden, but it was geometrical too, because a fairly rigid ground plan was needed to cater for the greatest number of semi detached or detached houses. In the twentieth century the suburbs attracted both vehement critics, but also its fair share of defenders. The critics argued that suburbs were sociologically, culturally and aesthetically boring, and that they took up far too much land. In a land-hungry planet, so the arguments went, we have increasingly come to realize, suburbs cannot be built for eight billion, or however many the population explosion will finally reach. The defenders of suburbs, on the other hand, argued that they were in fact good places to bring up children, they enabled a modest dream of independence, and they were in fact not culturally dead but honeycombed with dense networks of community association. Aesthetically they were ‘leafy’, and the emphasis on individuality meant that, even if the ground plan was boring, there was nonetheless endless incident from house to house as everyone gardened, painted and decorated differently. James Richards therefore argued that the suburbs represented an authentic continuation of the picturesque tradition, continued by amateur gardeners, landscapists, decorators and handymen.36 Twentieth century suburbia was, in his view, a response to a world made unsafe for self-sufficiency. Suburban architecture is the attempt to create a kind of oasis in which everything can be accounted for and the unpredictable excluded.37 The suburb gives to people a sense of belonging to a fairly sympathetic world and an opportunity of making out of that world something personal to themselves—an outlet for their idealistic and creative instincts.38

If we apply our three criteria of beauty outlined above, it becomes fairly obvious that the suburbs fail: they are not ecologically healthy; they lack integrity and proportion; and such colour as they have comes largely from gardens, which are mostly too small for really large trees. On the other hand, we have to ask what are the alternatives to suburbs if we are going to ensure that people have sufficient privacy and space, and somewhere to exercise their creativity. Not everyone is convinced, however, that the compact city is the answer.

5. The Churches and the Debate about Beauty

At the start of this essay I noted Nicholas Wolterstorff’s argument that beauty in the built environment was a proper part of the church’s concern, integral to its longing for shalom. I have noted elsewhere that there is a strange silence about the built environment in theological ethics, which is only just beginning to be broken. The nineteenth century Christian socialists were very properly concerned for the living conditions of the poor, but although this led in places to practical housing developments it had no systematic development in theory. Like all the items of the basic Human Rights charter of the United Nations, ‘shelter’ as it is there called is part of what defines our humanness. We can, of course, debate where it comes in the scale of priorities, but in every class-divided society this discussion sounds rather specious, if the rich live beautifully and comfortably and the poor in relative squalor. Decent housing—which, I have argued, includes beautiful housing—is an unavoidable part of the church’s concern for justice. As the world’s population grows inexorably (and exponentially) we must ask not simply how it is to be fed but how it is to be housed. In the course of the next century this is going to be a central question of theological ethics and therefore, for the reasons I have given, of aesthetics.
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