
THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

◆
GOD IN
IMAGINATION,
BEAUTY,
AND ART
◆

RICHARD VILADESAU

Theological Aesthetics

This page intentionally left blank

Theological Aesthetics



God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art

RICHARD VILADESAU

New York Oxford

Oxford University Press

1999

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York

Athens Auckland Bangkok Bogotá Buenos Aires Calcutta
Cape Town Chennai Dar es Salaam Delhi Florence Hong Kong Istanbul
Karachi Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai
Nairobi Paris São Paulo Singapore Taipei Tokyo Toronto Warsaw

and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

Copyright © 1999 by Richard Viladesau

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Viladesau, Richard.

Theological aesthetics : God in imagination, beauty, and art /
Richard Viladesau.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-19-512622-X

1. Aesthetics—Religious aspects—Christianity.
2. Christianity and the arts. I. Title.

BR115.A8V55 1999

230—dc21 98-25261

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

To Marie and Jason

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgments

Quotation from Karl Barth. *Church Dogmatics*. Copyright © of the German original version of Karl Barth *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/3, 3rd edition 1979 Theologischer Verlag Zurich. Used by Permission.

Lyrics from Arnold Schoenberg used by permission of Belmont Music Publishers, Pacific Palisades, CA 90272.

Text of “Betelgeuse” by Humbert Wolfe from *The Unknown Goddess* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1925) reprinted by permission of the Peters Fraser & Dunlop Group Ltd.

Portions of chapter 6 first appeared as the article, “Natural Theology Aesthetics” in *Philosophy and Theology*, vol. 3, no. 2 (winter, 1988); used here by permission of Marquette University Press.

Text from *Acathist of Thanksgiving* by Gregory Petrov, trans. by Mother Thekla Reprinted by Permission of G. Schirmer, Inc. o/b/o Chester Music Ltd. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.

Haiku “Old pond” by Matsuo Bashō from *An Introduction to Haiku* by Harold G. Henderson. Copyright © 1958 by Harold G. Henderson. Used by permission of Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.

“Deer Fence” by Wang Wei, translation from *The Heart of Chinese Poetry* by Greg Whincup, copyright © 1987 by Greg Whincup. Used by permission of Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc. World rights by gracious permission of Greg Whincup.

Text from Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, translated by Constance Garnett (New York: Bantam Books, 1983).

Figure 1. Michelangelo Buonarroti. Detail of Christ Child. *Bruges Madonna*. Notre Dame, Bruges, Belgium.

Figure 2. “God and Adam,” from the cathedral of Chartres, is reproduced by the gracious permission of Éditions Houvet, Chartres, France.

Figure 3. “Persimmons” by Mu Ch’i is reproduced from Jean A. Keim, *Chinese Art. III. Southern Sung and Yuan. Petite Encyclopédie de l’art*, 39 (Paris: Fernand Hazan, 1961), by gracious permission of Fernand Hazan, Editeur, Paris.

Figure 4. Giotto di Bondone. *Crucifixion*. Lower church, S. Francesco, Assisi, Italy. Alinari/Art Resource, N.Y.

Figure 5. Grünewald, Matthias. “Crucifixion” from the *Isenheim Altarpiece*. Musée Unterlinden, Colmar, France. Giraudon/Art Resource, N.Y.

Preface

Professor Mary Gerhart has argued that “a sea change is needed in the field of religious studies, one that must take place in the nexus of the field of theology, the field of art, literature and religion, and the field of science and religion.”¹ In recent years, the interdisciplinary engagement of which she speaks has begun taking place. Within religious studies, there has been increasing scholarly engagement with religion as ideology and as spirituality,² with a correlative interest in the aesthetic and communicative dimensions of religious practice and thought. Particular areas of theology have for some time been involved with topics and methods that have a connection either directly with the “aesthetic” realm or with its study; one may think, for example, of the use of literary theory in scriptural studies and in theological hermeneutics in general, or the study of symbolism in sacramental and liturgical theology. And, finally, a few recent works have explicitly undertaken the task of formulating a religious and/or theological approach to aesthetics.³

It is the purpose of this work to approach the aesthetic from the point of view of a “fundamental” theology. My starting point is explicitly theological; I write from a confessional and spiritual stance. At the same time, my attempt is to engage in the particular kind of Christian theology that attempts with methodical self-consciousness to “give answer” for faith’s presuppositions, viewpoint, and content. In terms of method, this book owes a great deal to “transcendental” theology, especially as practiced by Lonergan and Rahner. From one point of view, its content might be described as a transcendental theology of revelation examined in relation to the different dimensions of the aesthetic realm: feeling and imagination, beauty, and art.

A study of this kind could hardly fail to take into account the monumental *Theological Aesthetics* of Hans Urs von Balthasar; and in fact, Balthasar’s theology will figure prominently here, particularly in the definition of the task. Nevertheless, although Balthasar’s work is invaluable, it will not be my central focus; as the first chapter will explain, my desire is neither to repeat nor to recapitulate what Balthasar and his followers have done, but to engage in a different—and I hope complementary—approach to “fundamental theology.” Indeed, it seems to me that the study of the aesthetic dimension of theology should form a point of

mediation between a more “transcendental” type of theology, like Rahner’s, and a more “hermeneutical” type, like Balthasar’s.

I am acutely aware of the incompleteness of this study, from the point of view of theology as well as that of aesthetics. I have already adverted to the possibility and legitimacy of dealing with the subject as a whole by a totally different method, represented especially by Balthasar. Indeed, as Frank Burch Brown remarks, “it makes no sense to speak of a single, uniform relation between aesthetics and theology, as if every theology would need or want to engage in aesthetics in the same manner. Any such uniform approach is further ruled out by the simple fact that theology takes many forms.”¹⁴ Because I have consciously adopted a “fundamental” theological approach, I have not dealt in depth with a number of issues that would be important in either a more “systematic” or a more “practical” approach to Christian theology. Several of the recent texts noted above have explored such topics. On the aesthetic side, I have not attempted to survey the various contemporary theories of aesthetics or of postmodern “anti-aesthetics,” nor to formulate a theory of aesthetics, nor to deal with the reasons there has historically been a gap between aesthetics and theology. Brown’s *Religious Aesthetics* deals admirably with these issues, as well as with a number of others that are complementary to the topics in this book.

Even within the limits of the approach I have chosen, there is room for much expansion. I do not attempt to produce, even in outline form, a complete “theological aesthetics,” but only to look at certain limited theological questions within each of the three areas designated by the word “aesthetics.” This volume would be inadequate in size for a thorough examination of any one of these three senses in relation to theology, even if the latter is restricted to its specialization of “foundations.” I have barely scratched the surface in dealing with the mutual relationships of theology and the nonverbal arts, for example, and have not treated the vast realm of literary theory at all. Happily, these topics are ones that promise to engage theologians increasingly, and more detailed and adequate treatments will no doubt appear both to complement and advance the positive aspects of my introductory and schematic study, and to correct its errors.

The last remark brings to light another limitation. I am clearly not well versed in the many fields besides theology that are involved in a theological aesthetics. Those who are experts in one or another field may find my treatments simplistic—or worse. As Balthasar remarked of his own work, the theologian’s choice to speak about aesthetics “appears to betray in him who chooses it an idle amateur among such busy experts.”¹⁵ This is a risk, however, that is probably endemic to interdisciplinary studies. It is my hope that this preliminary treatment may give rise to questions that will advance the dialogue.

The reader will note that each chapter of the book is introduced by a prologue: a presentation and/or a discussion of art, music, or literature that raises in “aesthetic” form the question to be dealt with in the chapter. These introductory pieces—like the art works cited within the various chapters—are not intended merely as “illustrations.” They are, rather, instances of “aesthetic theology”: a reflection on and communication of theological insight in a way irreducible to abstract conceptual thought. In one sense, indeed, one might say that the rest of

the book is commentary on what is said by the works of art. Theological discourse about art and beauty is, of course, quite different from allowing art and beauty themselves speak theologically. It is my hope that this book may function, at least to some extent, on both levels, engaging the reader in an “aesthetic” as well as an intellectual pattern of experience. I cannot, unfortunately, provide music along with the text; but where appropriate, I have referred in the notes to relevant recordings.

A problem arises with regard to works in languages other than English. As Gadamer says, “every translation is at the same time an interpretation. . . . Where a translation is necessary, the gap between the spirit of the original words and that of their reproduction must be accepted. It is a gap that can never be completely closed.”⁶ This gap is particularly significant in poetry. On the other hand, many English-speaking readers would find at least some of the poetry quoted inaccessible if it were simply given in the original. I have compromised by translating the texts as literally as possible, and including the original texts of the most important poems in an appendix. Where I have occasionally quoted from non-English sources in the text, I have provided translations in the notes. (Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.) I have left untranslated some material in the notes that will be of interest primarily to scholars; likewise, where possible I have attempted to include the original of significant technical terms used in translated quotations from theological sources.

I wish to thank Fordham University and my colleagues in the Department of Theology for providing the faculty fellowship that allowed me to complete this book. My gratitude goes also to those who aided in its preparation and production: in particular, to Liana MacKinnon and Ronnie Rombs, who aided in bibliographical searches and in the pursuit of sources; to Prof. Frank Burch Brown, who read an earlier version of the manuscript and made many valuable suggestions; and to Cynthia Read of Oxford University Press, who guided it to publication. My special thanks go to my parents and my family, who taught me in many ways the love of beauty and its connection with God.

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

Abbreviations, *xv*

ONE Theology and Aesthetics, 3

TWO God in Thought and in Imagination: *Representing the Unimaginable*, 39

THREE Divine Revelation and Human Perception, 73

FOUR God and the Beautiful: *Beauty as a Way to God*, 103

FIVE Art and the Sacred, 141

SIX The Beautiful and the Good, 183

APPENDIX Original Texts of Poetry Quoted in Translation, 215

Notes, 221

Index, 287

This page intentionally left blank

Abbreviations

- CSM *Encyclopedia of Theology. The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975).
- DS *Enchiridion Symbolorum, Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, ed. Henricus Denzinger and Adolfus Schönmetzer, S.J., XXXIII ed. (Freiburg in Bres.: Herder, 1965).
- EP *Enchiridion Patristicum. Loci SS. Patrum, Doctorum Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum*, ed. M. J. Rouët de Journal, S.J., 23 ed. (Freiburg in Brisg.: Herder, 1965).
- JBC *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968).
- LThK *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*
- Mansi *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, 31 vols., ed. J. D. Mansi (1757–1798).
- PG *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, ed. Jacques-P. Migne (Paris: 1857ss.).
- PL *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, ed. Jacques-P. Migne (Paris: 1844ss.).
- ST Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Leonine text, ed. Petrus Caramello (Torino: Marietti, 1952).
- TDNT G. Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1964).
- TI Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 23 vols. (New York: Crossroad, 1982–1992).
- WM Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1975).

This page intentionally left blank

Theological Aesthetics

This page intentionally left blank



Theology and Aesthetics

Prologue: Karl Barth on Mozart's Place in Theology

Here¹ I must speak about Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Why and in what respect can one call this man “incomparable”?² Why is it that, with almost every measure that went through his head and that he brought forth on paper, he produced, for those who can receive it, music that it is an understatement to call “beautiful”?—music that for the saved is not entertainment, not enjoyment, not exaltation, but rather food and drink; music full of comfort and admonishment, as we need them; music that is never dominated by technique, nor ever sentimental, but always “moving,” free and freeing, because it is wise, strong, and sovereign music. Why can one hold that Mozart has a place in theology (especially in the doctrine of creation, and then again in eschatology)—even though he was no Father of the Church, nor even, apparently, a particularly assiduous Christian (and who was a Catholic, besides!), and who, when he was not actually working, seems to our way of thinking to have lived somewhat superficially? One can say that Mozart belongs in theology because precisely in this matter, namely the goodness of creation in its totality, he knew something that neither the real Fathers of the Church, nor our Reformers, neither the Orthodox nor the Liberals, neither the adherents of natural theology nor those powerfully armed with the Word of God, and certainly not the Existentialists, knew as he knew it—or at least they did not know as he did how to express it and show its worth; something moreover that the other great musicians before and after him likewise did not know the way he did. In this matter he was pure of heart, head and shoulders above both optimists and pessimists. 1756–1791! It was just during this time that the theologians and other honest folk were having a hard time defending the good Lord, who was placed in the dock because of the Lisbon earthquake. But in the face of the problem of Theodicy, Mozart had the peace of God, which surpasses all reason—whether praising or blaming, speculative or critical. The problem caused him no struggle—it simply lay behind him. Why concern himself with it? He had heard—and he allows those who have ears, even to this day, to hear—what we shall only see at the end of time: the total coherence of the divine dispensation. As though from this end, he heard the harmony of creation: a harmony to which the darkness also

belongs, but in which the darkness is not blackness; where there is deficiency, but without being a defect; sadness, without becoming despair; gloom that nevertheless does not degenerate to tragedy; infinite sadness that nevertheless is not forced to make itself absolute. And for this very reason, this harmony contains cheerfulness, but within limits; its light shines so brightly because it shines forth from the shadows; it has a sweetness that is also sharp, and therefore is not cloying; it has a life that does not fear death, but knows it very well. *Et lux perpetua lucet (sic!) eis:*³ even the dead of Lisbon. Mozart saw this light as little as any of us; but he *heard* the entire world of creation that is encompassed by this light. And it was fundamentally right that he did not hear a middle, neutral tone, but heard the *positive* tone *stronger* than the negative. He heard the latter only in and with the former. But in this inequality he nevertheless heard both together (one example, among many: the Symphony in G Minor of 1788!) He never heard abstractly only the one side. He heard *concretely*, and therefore his compositions were and are *total* music. And insofar as he heard the created world entirely without resentment or bias, what he brought forth was not his, but creation's own music: its dual, but nevertheless harmonious praise of God. He really never had to or wished to express himself in his works: neither his vitality nor his sorrow nor his piety, nor any program at all. He was wonderfully free from the constriction of needing or wanting to say something himself in his music. Rather, he simply offered himself to be to some extent the opportunity through which a bit of wood, metal, or cat gut could let themselves be heard and played as the voices of creation: the *instruments*—from the piano and violin, through the horn and clarinet, down to the venerable bassoon, and somewhere in their midst, without any special pretension, and precisely for that reason distinguished, the *human* voice—sometimes leading, sometimes accompanying, sometimes in harmony, each giving its particular contribution. He made music from each of them, using human emotions as well in the service of that music, and not vice versa! He was himself only an ear for that music, and its mediator for other ears. And he died when his life's work, according to the clever people, was just ripening to reach its true fulfillment. But after *The Magic Flute*; after the *Clarinet Concerto* of October 1791; after the *Requiem*; who can say that the fulfillment was not *already reached*? And was it not already there in what has been preserved from the very young Mozart? He died in misery as a kind of "unknown soldier," and has this in common with Calvin and with Moses in the Bible: that no one knows where he was buried. But what difference does that make? What is a grave, when a life was permitted to perform this service: in simplicity and unpretentiously, and therefore in such serenity, credibility, and urgency, to bring the good creation of God—to which the limitations and the end of humanity also belong—into language?

This had to be inserted here—before we turn toward chaos!—because we find in the music of Mozart—and I wonder whether one can find it so strongly in any of those who came before or after him—a shining and (I might say) a convincing proof that it is a *slander* on creation to ascribe to it a share in chaos because it includes in itself a "Yes" and a "No," because it has a side turned toward God but also a side turned toward nothingness. Mozart allows us to hear that even in this second side, and therefore in its totality, creation praises its Master,

and thus is perfect. On this threshold of our problem—and this is no small thing—through Mozart order is created for those who have ears to hear; and better than any scientific deduction could have done it.⁴

The Problem of Theology and Aesthetics

Let us begin by reiterating Barth's question: why and in what sense can one say that Mozart has a place specifically in *theology*? There can, of course, be no question about Mozart's place in the history of Western culture, to which Christianity also belongs. And no one who has "ears to hear"—no one who has been moved to exaltation or peace or joy by the sublimity of Mozart's music—could deny that it can perform a "spiritual" function analogous to religious experience, and in this sense belongs to the history of Western "spirituality" along with many other works of art, great and small. But—unless we regard Barth's claim as merely a rhetorical flourish, a justifiable hyperbole—is this enough to merit Mozart a position within theology? Can we really ascribe to him a place in the process of *fides quaerens intellectum*—that is, in the quest for precisely the *understanding* of faith?

Gerardus van der Leeuw makes a similarly striking statement about Bach: in him, "the artist is priest, is himself a theologian."⁵ But van der Leeuw is referring specifically to Bach's sacred music, his ability to combine "his service to the congregation with his service to art, the liturgical structure of his work with its aesthetic structure."⁶ In this context it is understandable that "here art has become in truth a holy action":⁷ the church musician is a minister, and the composer who sets sacred texts has not only the pastoral function of communicating the Word but also—if the task is undertaken in earnest—the implicitly theological one of understanding it and illuminating it for contemporary hearers. (That van der Leeuw considers Bach's accomplishment a "miracle" testifies to the rarity of a successful integration of the theological and artistic functions of the church musician; nevertheless, their connection is clear.)

But Barth seems to go further: it is not a question of Mozart's success as a liturgical musician (indeed, it might be argued that the spiritual qualities of Mozart's sacred works have little to do with their intended church settings and are entirely separable from the latter). Rather, it is Mozart's music itself, according to Barth, that conveys an insight that must be called "theological."

If we ask how this can be—in what sense an insight that is neither expressed as *logos* nor directly concerned with *theos* can nevertheless belong to "theology"—then we come to the heart of the question of the possibility of theological aesthetics. Is the place of a Mozart or a Bach exceptional, or does all art, precisely as art, have an intrinsic relationship to the object of theology? If so, what is the nature of that relationship?

This first chapter will inquire whether there can be an integration of these two endeavors—art and theology—within theology itself. Before attempting to discuss what such an integration would entail, however, our first step will be an attempt to clarify the meanings of the terms "aesthetics" and "theology" and to discern the boundaries and dimensions of their intersection.

The Notion of Theological Aesthetics

Hans-Georg Gadamer remarks on the importance of engaging in conceptual history,⁸ since many of the concepts that we take for granted, like art, history, beauty, or science, have a history and are conditioned by epochal concerns and biases. A thorough historical study of all the terms involved in the interaction of theology and aesthetics is beyond the scope of the present work; but it is necessary at least to indicate briefly some of the different meanings given to our principal terms, and the consequent ambiguity of the notion of a “theological aesthetics.”

The Concept of Aesthetics

The term “aesthetics” (derived from the Greek αἰσθησις, meaning “perception by the senses”) was apparently coined by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, whose 1750 tract *Aesthetica* was concerned with the study of the sensible (as contrasted with supra-sensible) mode of knowledge.⁹ Already in Baumgarten several elements are present in the notion. He first speaks of “aesthetics” as the “science of cognition by the senses” (*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*). As such, it is the preliminary or “lower” part of cognitional theory or epistemology—“*gnoseologia inferior*.” However, Baumgarten also calls aesthetics the “art of thinking beautifully” (*ars pulchre cogitandi*) and the “art of forming taste” (*ars formandi gustum*),¹⁰ and he identifies its goal as the attainment of “beauty”: “The end of aesthetics is the perfection of sensitive cognition, as such. But this perfection is beauty.”¹¹ In Baumgarten’s usage, then, “aesthetics” is the study dealing with the “lower” faculties of the mind, imagination and intuition, as well as with their products, art and poetry.¹² Baumgarten thus raises to the level of a “science” the examination of a level of cognition that rationalist philosophy had neglected as being “obscure” and inferior to the realm of clear ideas.¹³

The Enlightenment’s adoption of Baumgarten’s designation of a special “science” of aesthetics had far-reaching consequences. Hans Urs von Balthasar points out that the attainment of independent status for aesthetics also had the negative consequence of insulating it from logic and ethics. This would provide the background of the exclusion of the aesthetic from theology by Kierkegaard and his followers.¹⁴ Vienna University philosopher Augustinus Wucherer-Huldenfeld makes a related criticism: aesthetics as developed from the Enlightenment definition presupposed a Cartesian division between mind (spirit) and body. It confined aesthetics to the latter sphere, and defined beauty as the object of such aesthetics. This led to the “scientific” (*wissenschaftlich*) canonization of the “vulgar misunderstanding of the beautiful,” with the concurrent loss of the ontological sense of beauty and its eventual reduction to a product to be “consumed.”¹⁵ Contemporary thought, as we shall see through the course of this study, largely reacts against such consequences, and attempts to restore the aesthetic to its larger life context—including the religious and theological dimensions.

Kant, in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), protests against the “misuse” of the word “aesthetics,” and restricts its application to the etymological sense: the

science of sense perception and its conditions (although in the *Critique of Judgment* of 1790 he allows a wider usage).¹⁶ Hegel, on the other hand, limits the term in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* to the study of the beautiful, and more specifically to the "Philosophy of Fine Art" (explicitly excluding the consideration of the beauty of nature, which he considered inferior). He immediately acknowledges, however, that this use is etymologically incorrect:

The name "aesthetics" in its natural sense is not quite appropriate to this subject. "Aesthetics" means more precisely the science of sensation or feeling. Thus understood, it arose as a new science, or rather as something that was to become a branch of philosophy for the first time, in the school of Wolff, at the epoch when works of art were being considered in Germany in the light of the feelings which they were supposed to evoke. . . . The name was so inappropriate, or, strictly speaking, so superficial, that for this reason it was attempted to form other names, e.g. "Kallistic." But this name, again, is unsatisfactory, for the science to be designated does not treat of beauty in general, but merely of *artistic* beauty. We shall, therefore, permit the name Aesthetics to stand, because it is nothing but a name, and so is indifferent to us, and moreover, has up to a certain point passed into common language.¹⁷

A notable expansion of the meaning of this "so frequently misused" term occurs in Schiller's celebrated series of "Aesthetic Letters."¹⁸ Although he identifies the object of his inquiries as "the beautiful and art,"¹⁹ he understands these terms in the widest possible context. The "aesthetic" is the area of integration of the human faculties: it designates the condition of spirit (*das Gemüt*) in which sensation and reason are active at the same time.

All things that can in any way appear to us can be thought of under four different aspects. A thing can be related directly to our sensible condition (our being [*Dasein*] and well-being [*Wohlsein*]): that is its *physical* character. Or, it can be related to the intellect [*Verstand*] and create knowledge in us: that is its *logical* character. Or it can be related to our will, and be treated as an object of choice for a rational being: that is its *moral* character. Or, finally, it can be related to the totality of our different powers, without being a definite object for any single one of them: that is its *aesthetic* character.²⁰

Hence Schiller's notion of an "aesthetic" education toward "taste and beauty" is in fact aimed at "the development of the whole complex of our sensual and spiritual powers in the greatest possible harmony."²¹

On the basis of this brief survey we may already distinguish several interconnected but distinct centers of interest within "aesthetics":

1. The general study of sensation and imagination and/or of "feeling" in the wider sense of nonconceptual or nondiscursive (but nevertheless "intellectual") knowledge.
2. The study of beauty and/or of "taste."
3. The study of art in general and/or of the fine arts in particular. (I use the word "study" rather than "theory" in order to include empirical, phe-

nomenological, historical, and other such approaches besides the philosophical or systematic.)

In each of these, either the receptive or the creative aspect may be emphasized: the aesthetic as a mode of apprehending reality, or as a mode of articulating or constituting the real.²² The three will coincide or diverge to varying degrees, depending on the way in which terms are defined, on the relative weight given to each, and on the positions one takes regarding their relationships. The center of interest will also depend on the degree to which one's approach is subject- or object-oriented. In an object-centered approach, the emphasis is on a class of "aesthetica," whether these be defined by a relationship to beauty or to art. In a completely subject-oriented approach, on the other hand, the study of aesthetics would not concern any particular class of things or qualities: the determining factor would be an "aesthetic frame of mind," or (in Lonergan's terminology) an "aesthetic pattern of experience" on the part of the experiencing subject. The result is that virtually anything can be an aesthetic object, given the right subjective conditions. (It should be noted, however, that the "subjective" approach is compatible with an aesthetics that takes "beauty" as its proper object, when "the beautiful" is regarded as a transcendental quality of being. See chapter 4.)

It may be assumed that the study of sensation and imagination will always be presupposed (although not necessarily explicitly treated) as the theoretical underpinning for any "aesthetics;" but the relation between the other two senses is debatable.

It might be argued, for example, that the third division, the study of art, is simply a subset of the second, the study of the beautiful—or perhaps vice versa. Yet we find that neither the meaning of "beauty" and "art" nor their relationship one to another is entirely straightforward.²³ Is "the beautiful" an objective and universal quality toward which all art must strive; or is it purely relative to subjective or cultural perceptions? Does "ontological beauty" determine art's goal—or do artists determine what we perceive as beautiful?

That the latter can sometimes be the case seems incontestable. As Gadamer remarks, "a verdict on the beauty of a landscape undoubtedly depends on the artistic taste of the time. One has only to think of the description of the ugliness of Alpine landscape which we still find in the eighteenth century—the effect, as we know, of the spirit of artificial symmetry that dominates the century of absolutism."²⁴ Oscar Wilde makes the point more audaciously by having one of his characters argue the position that Nature itself imitates Art:

For what is Nature? She is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. . . . Nobody of any real culture, for instance, ever talks nowadays about the beauty of a sunset. Sunsets are quite old-fashioned. They belong to the time when Turner was the last note in art. . . . Yesterday Mrs. Arundel insisted on my going to the window, and looking at the glorious sky, as she called it. . . . And what was it? It was simply a very second-rate

Turner, a Turner of a bad period, with all the painter's worst faults exaggerated and over-emphasized. . . .

Where, if not from the impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them and their master, do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river, and turn to faint forms of fading grace, curved bridge and swaying barge? The extraordinary change that has taken place in the climate of London during the last ten years is entirely due to this particular school of Art. . . . To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence. At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysteriousness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I daresay there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist until Art invented them. Now, it must be admitted, fogs are carried to excess. They have become the mere mannerism of a clique, and the exaggerated realism of their method gives dull people bronchitis.²⁵

We shall return in a later chapter to a closer examination of the idea of "the beautiful" and its ontological status. For present purposes it will suffice to note that at least one major current of thought regards the beautiful as the object of "disinterested" pleasure. As Gadamer makes clear, much of Western aesthetics (in the second sense) follows the Greeks, for whom "the beautiful" (τὸ καλόν) is identified with things whose value is self-evident: one cannot ask what they are for.²⁶ Similarly for Kant, the object of aesthetic pleasure can neither be employed as useful nor desired as good; moreover, "real existence" (*Dasein*) adds nothing to aesthetic content, which consists entirely in self-presentation (*Sichdarstellen*).²⁷

It is not at all clear, however, that "art" always pursues such an end. It may first of all be questioned whether the different activities designated as "art"—painting, sculpture, theater, dance, architecture, music, poetry, narration, literature, photography, cinema, and so on—can actually be subsumed under a single category at all.²⁸ Even if we presume that there is, if not a common "essence," at least a certain "family resemblance" between the various arts, we nevertheless must recognize in them a wide variety of both forms and purposes. As Mikel Dufrenne points out in his introduction to a UNESCO study on aesthetics,

art does not have, always and everywhere, the same status, content, and function. . . . Today the world 'art' is highly suspect and the extent of the concept is very vague. . . . It is not only the "theories" of art which hesitate to determine its essence, it is also the practice of artists, who continually give the lie to any definition.²⁹

Maritain reminds us that τεχνή is "art" as well as ποιήσις.³⁰ Aristotle defines art as the ordination of reason by which acts reach a determined end by determined means,³¹ and in his spirit Maritain sees the "useful" arts—or the practical

"crafts"—not only as the origin of all art but also as the embodiment of its most typical characteristics as a "virtue of the practical intellect."³²

Even if we make a distinction between useful and "fine" arts, it is not apparent that the latter must necessarily be defined by their having "beauty" as their goal.³³ Although some theories of fine art see the pursuit of beauty as its intrinsic nature, others argue convincingly for different meanings: play, representation, communication, emotional expression, and so forth. (These goals, of course, need not necessarily be mutually exclusive, and some may be combined with the idea of "beauty" as an end of art. This is particularly true of theories of art as representation. Kant, for example, defines art as "the beautiful representation [*Vorstellung*] of a thing." In this way even what is ugly may become beautiful through its representation in art.)³⁴ Among the Greeks, it was frequently assumed that mimesis was the sole intent of art.³⁵ Some art seems to aim at the production of emotions—not necessarily positive ones—for their own sake.³⁶ Even negative psychic states may be "enjoyed" because of the "aesthetic distance" that allows us to feel them while recognizing that their cause is not "real." (As an example one might think of the Japanese Butoh dance form, which purposely creates a sense of eeriness and revulsion in the viewer.) Art may even be self-defining; it may be "the ingenious manipulation of fixed forms and modes of treatment which makes the work of art a work of art"³⁷ rather than a relation to some end (be it "beauty" or any other).

On the other hand, art may be seen (as in Dewey) primarily as a mode of communication.³⁸ At least some forms of the fine arts can be didactic. This is especially true in the religious sphere. Here art (in the form of ritual, symbol, dance, images, gestures) is employed to convey a message (although not necessarily a verbal one). Although religious art sometimes attains to sublime heights of beauty (one may think of the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel, or the stained glass windows at Chartres), it may be questioned whether this is intrinsic to its purpose—or even whether it may at times impede its primary religious function.³⁹ (This theme will recur throughout our study, and will be explored thematically in the final chapter.)

The presumed connection between art and beauty becomes even more questionable when we look outside the Western tradition. Maritain writes that "the dynamism of Indian art itself tends, I would say, to a supreme end which is not beauty, but praxis, practical use, especially spiritual experience."⁴⁰ James Martin briefly summarizes the views of several Hindu aestheticians who confirm Maritain's view. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, for example, insists that "all art is essentially iconographic, and that authentic art forms and objects embody and transmit 'spiritual' meanings."⁴¹ True art is ideational; modern (Western) aesthetics errs in placing its goal in the life of feeling. "Aesthetic" satisfaction for its own sake is a form of idolatry or of dehumanization.⁴²

It would seem, then, that we should avoid attempting to formulate an a priori definition of the connection between the "beautiful" and the arts. We will instead admit, with Gadamer, that there can be different criteria for what constitutes "art"⁴³ and with David Tracy that we need a "critical pluralism of methods of understanding and explaining" the experience of art.⁴⁴ In that case, we will be

justified in seeing “art” and “beauty” as two interrelated but distinct centers of interest for “aesthetics” in our inquiry into its relationship to theology.

The Object(s) of Theology and the Object(s) of Aesthetics

Just as several different objects or centers of interest are possible for “aesthetics,” so likewise for “theology.” Hans Küng and others have examined in a schematic way theology’s move through a number of paradigm changes that can be seen in the light of a shift in “point of view” toward progressive interiority.⁴⁵ Changes in theology’s method naturally imply different conceptions of its object as well. In a very general and schematic way we may discern three interconnected objects of theology’s attention that emerge in the progression: God, faith (or religious experience), and (in extension of the second) theology itself.

In its classical and “objective” phase, theology is conceived as a body of knowledge (*scientia*) concerning God: “*Deus est subiectum huius scientiae*.”⁴⁶ (Naturally other things—indeed, ultimately all things—are treated by theology as well; but they are a proper study for theology only insofar as they are considered in relation to God.)⁴⁷ As theology turns increasingly to the human subject, its object is re-conceived in terms of reflection on faith or religious experience or simply “religion.”⁴⁸ Theology becomes a *Glaubensverständnis*.⁴⁹ Finally, theology may turn to reflection on its own methods, hermeneutical principles, and conditions of possibility; it becomes “the theology of theology.”⁵⁰

Dimensions of Theological Aesthetics

On the basis of the foregoing, what is meant by “theological aesthetics” in its wide sense is the practice of theology, conceived in terms of any of these three objects, in relation to any of the three senses of “aesthetics” outlined above; that is, theological aesthetics will consider God, religion, and theology in relation to sensible knowledge (sensation, imagination, and feeling), the beautiful, and the arts. The nature of the relations can be varied. Here I will briefly outline several interconnected themes. My treatment is meant to be suggestive rather than exhaustive. I will, for example, advert only in passing to literary studies and their methods, which have in recent years increasingly been integrated into scriptural, hermeneutical, doctrinal, and methodological studies. I shall instead concentrate on the non-literary embodiments of beauty, feeling, and art in their connections with theology.

Theological Aesthetics as Practice: The Aesthetic Dimension of Theological Discourse

Karl Barth wrote concerning theology:

if its task is correctly seen and grasped, theology as a whole, in its parts and in their interconnexion, in its content and method, is, apart from anything

else, a peculiarly beautiful science. Indeed, we can confidently say that it is the most beautiful of all the sciences. To find the sciences distasteful is the mark of the Philistine. It is an extreme form of Philistinism to find, or to be able to find, theology distasteful. The theologian who has no joy in his work is not a theologian at all. Sulky faces, morose thoughts and boring ways of speaking are intolerable in this science. May God deliver us from what the Catholic Church reckons one of the seven sins of the monk—*taedium*—in respect of the great spiritual truths with which theology has to do.⁵¹

It is notable that for Barth, theology is beautiful precisely as a “science.” But many think that theology’s pursuit of “scientific” status has also led to negative consequences. Hans Urs von Balthasar contends that it is theology’s attempt to imitate the method of the exact sciences that has undermined the beauty of theology.⁵² Not only has modern theology neglected beauty as an object of inquiry, but also it has largely lost its connection with living religion and spirituality—that is, with the pursuit and communication of “great spiritual truths.” Already at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Alois GÜGLER, a representative of early Catholic Romanticism, commented on theology’s lack of spirit: “How many manuals of dogmatic and moral theology could we pick up without finding in them any inkling of religion?”⁵³ The modern technological world, according to Balthasar, has lost its sense of knowledge as wonder and contemplative receptivity; instead, the ideal of knowledge has become *Bewältigung*: mastery, domination, exploitation.⁵⁴ The academic world largely reflects this ideal of abstract, objectivizing rationalism; and academic theology has to a large degree allowed itself to be seduced by it.⁵⁵ In this way it stands in danger of losing its inherent spirituality, and with it its inherent poetry and beauty. In a world that is without beauty—or at least that “can no longer see it or reckon with it”—Balthasar warns, “the good also loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out.”⁵⁶ Likewise theology, if it neglects its connection with spiritual beauty, loses its ability to convince.

Many other commentators echo Balthasar’s concerns. Bruce Lawrence notes that theology “privileges reason not feeling, and religious academics, even those not allied explicitly with theology, tend to mirror its emphasis: though many may have had the experience of spirituality, they feel peer pressure to discount or hide the impact of some inner force motivating and perhaps guiding their life’s work.”⁵⁷ Karl Rahner reformulates Balthasar’s comment that modern times lack a *kniende Theologie* (theology “on its knees” in worship) by saying that we are lacking a mystagogical and “poetic” theology. As a consequence, Rahner joins in calling for a return of the aesthetic dimension to theology.⁵⁸ This means not only that theology should take account of feeling, beauty, and art as aspects of religion and of primary religious language,⁵⁹ but also that theology itself should speak “with feeling” and in images, integrating the religious and poetic elements into its mode of discourse. Theology cannot be a merely “abstract” science, since its goal is to guide us beyond all concepts to the experience of God’s mystery.

Rahner’s writings have powerfully reintroduced into academic theology the notion that the very heart of its method must be a “*reductio in mysterium*.”⁶⁰ This

methodological principle is based on the insistence that the concern of theology can be nothing but God, and that the reality of God is missed if it remains for us merely an idea. Theology aims at an existential encounter with God. But:

God, and what is meant by God, can only be grasped when we surrender our own conceptual understanding to the ineffable and holy mystery which lays hold on us as the mystery which is near to us and which embraces us in love.

The theologian is not the purely intellectual expositor but the one who thrusts all duly explained earthly realities into the incomprehensible mystery of God. The theologian is the one who shows that no human proposition . . . is ultimately really understood unless it is released into the blessed incomprehensibility of God.⁶¹

The intrinsically mystagogical and supra-rational dynamism of theology implies that in its exercise it must also have a "poetic" element:

we must admit that it is a consequence as well as a defect of a theology that is rationalistic and proceeds only "scientifically" that the poetic touch is missing. Nowadays we demand from theology something which, although not new, has been neglected during the last few centuries: theology must somehow be "mystagogical," that is, it should not merely speak about objects in abstract concepts, but it must encourage people really to experience that which is expressed in such concepts. To that extent we might understand poetic theology as one method of a mystagogical theology.⁶²

To achieve the goal of incorporating such a poetic element, theology must have the courage to overcome the fear (albeit sometimes well-founded) of aestheticism. It "must abandon the conviction that the only legitimate interest of students of religion in art is or should be an explication of the allegedly religious or theological significance of specified artworks,"⁶³ and must be willing to see its own task as including an aesthetic element. The need for an "aesthetic theology"⁶⁴ comprising both a "theopoiesis" and a "theopoetics" is particularly evident in the attempt to reintegrate pastoral and spiritual theology with systematics, as well as in the study of the Scriptures. But there is also room for the poetic within the more abstract areas of theology. As Amos Wilder points out, the works of many of the greatest and most "intellectual" theologians of the past have been shot through with imagination.⁶⁵ Contemporary theologians should be willing to follow their example.

At the same time, the recognition that theology should speak with and to the "aesthetic" dimension should not imply a loss of the distinction between conceptual thought and feeling, or the abandonment of the former in favor of a theology conceived as a purely "poetic" or "rhetorical" enterprise. Frank Burch Brown, while arguing for the necessity of aesthetic sensitivity in theology, nevertheless cautions that "theology cannot satisfactorily appropriate aesthetic truth simply by becoming aesthetic itself or by failing to exercise its own rational capacities."⁶⁶ If systematic theological language is usually not of the same kind as the language of originating religious experience, this is because it performs a special function with

regard to the latter: it is a second-order language that distances itself in order to reflect critically on experience.⁶⁷ As Rahner writes:

There is also a theology that, holding its breath, as it were, patiently and rightly undertakes long conceptual explorations from which we cannot expect immediate religious or mystical experiences. We have to leave it to individual theologians to decide to what extent they appeal or do not appeal to religious experience in their theology.⁶⁸

Nor should we deny the power of abstract conceptual thought about God to be deeply beautiful in its own way. When it genuinely mediates personal insight, it can be attractive, elevating, personal, and spiritually engaged—as anyone knows who has been drawn into wonder and prayer by “abstract” theology. Heidegger’s remark in *Identität und Differenz* on the metaphysical conception of God is well known: “the first cause as ‘*Causa sui*’ [self-caused]; this is the accurate name for God in philosophy.” For Heidegger, real religion can have nothing to do with God so conceived: “before this God one can neither fall on one’s knees in awe, nor can one play music and dance before this God.”⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the *qawwali* singers of the Sufi tradition praise God in ecstatic song under the title *Al-Qayyūm* [“the Self-Subsisting”]; the highly emotive *bhajans* of north India in their expression of love for Krishna can also refer to God as the Absolute of nondualist Vedanta; Olivier Messiaen composed haunting and disquieting meditations based on St. Thomas’s ontology of the divine subsistence.⁷⁰ Aquinas and Śaṅkara were both metaphysicians as well as mystics and poets. Could we not find many other examples of living religion mediated by metaphysical thought that contradict Heidegger’s assertion? Or rather, should we not take the important truth in Heidegger’s critique of “ontotheology”—like that of Pascal’s distinction between the “God of the philosophers and savants” and the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”⁷¹—as a warning against a certain objectivizing and conceptualist kind of thinking that has little to do with genuine metaphysics or theology?

As Lonergan says, the primary differentiation of consciousness in the history of humanity is that between “common sense” (including the mythical, symbolic, and artistic realms) and transcendence, not that between “theory” and transcendence. This means that most religious experience will have a symbolic mediation, rather than a conceptual one. Nevertheless, the latter is not excluded.⁷² Naturally, the extent to which abstract thinking can mediate spiritual experience will depend largely upon the individual mind involved: not only on the presence or absence of “intellectual conversion” but also on one’s degree of familiarity with the conceptual language, one’s temperament, and one’s background. But is this not true of art as well? “For those who have ears to hear,” as Barth says, Mozart’s music is sublimely spiritual; but not all have such “ears to hear.” And some music (one might think of twelve-tone compositions, for example, or Messiaen’s musical “grammar”) is “difficult” and even inaccessible to the listener who is not disciplined in its aesthetic language.

Moreover, while insisting on the need for an “aesthetic” theology, we must also admit that on the practical level there are perhaps others who can speak to faith with feeling better than academic theologians, who cannot all be poets and

artists. Although there is need for a more profound engagement of theology in general with the aesthetic realm, each still retains its own independent validity, and a certain functional differentiation is both valid and fruitful. Theology, after all, is not all-sufficient; as Lonergan says, it "illuminates only certain aspects of human reality" and therefore must "unite itself with all other relevant branches of human studies."⁷³ Within theology, a special point of contact is found in those operations outlined by Lonergan as the "functional specialty" of "communications," which deals with the process of leading others to share in "one's cognitive, constitutive, effective meaning."⁷⁴

Without retracting what has been said about the legitimacy and desirability of an "aesthetic theology," therefore, we must also admit that theology will remain primarily in the "intellectual" rather than the "aesthetic" pattern of experience. Hence the desired union of theology with other branches of study implies collaboration, rather than a fruitless attempt to subsume every aspect of human endeavor into theology as such. Frank Burch Brown characterizes the normal relationship of conceptual theology to the arts as complementarity and dialectic. Having asked the question whether theology itself can be an "art" (in the sense in which he defines the word), Brown replies that

insofar as the means and ends of theology are largely intellectual and conceptual (as they characteristically are) then its constructive, imaginative work is not basically or even mediately aesthetic. Here there is making, but without aesthetically embodied meaning. This explains why theology in its intellectual forms cannot in itself fully succeed in its goal of "bringing all of life and the world into relation with God" and why it must exist in complementarity and dialectical relation not only with praxis but also with those richly aesthetic arts that can bring these relations imaginatively to life.⁷⁵

The Aesthetic as a Source for Theology

The realm of aesthetic experience (or the aesthetic level of experience) may serve as a source for both historical theology and systematic theological reflection in at least two ways. First, it is a locus of explicitly religious (and theological) experience, expression, and discourse; second, it is a locus of secular human experience that is either (a) "implicitly" religious or (b) susceptible to correlation with the sacred. That is, the aesthetic realm provides theology with "data" concerning its three objects (God, religion, and theology itself), as well as with knowledge of the cultural matrix to which these are related in reflection.

AS A LOCUS OF EXPLICITLY RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

First of all, the realms of imagination, feeling, symbol, and art are a locus of the Christian faith and tradition on which theology reflects. The history of Western art provides the most obvious example. John Ruskin remarked that every civilization records its history in three books: those of its words, its deeds, and its art; and that of these three, the last is the truest. An analogous statement may be made