Finding God in Literary Realism: Balthasar, Auerbach, Lynch and a Theology of Prose

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Introduction

In Decree 4 of the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (1995), the delegates noted the connection between God’s incarnation in the person of Christ and human culture: the process of inculturating the Gospel of Jesus Christ within human culture is a form of *incarnation* of the Word of God” (536). The delegates continued by noting the many challenges to inculturating the Gospel within the many cultures that have become overly secularized, even polarized, against the Gospel and its values. Secularized cultures have diminished the importance of the skills necessary to apprehend the Word of God among us because value has been placed elsewhere. For instance, Western culture places great value in scientific, mathematical knowledge and reduces the importance of knowledge gained through other avenues—chiefly those avenues taken by the Word of God made human in Jesus Christ. The Word of God has lost its resonance with some in contemporary culture.

In much the same way the “word” employed by artists in literature has lost its resonance and power within contemporary culture. Poetry, for example, with its many figures of speech, no longer makes meaning in the ears of contemporary hearers. Students in classrooms discount poetic and prose literature when held up against the seemingly concrete language and data of science, math, and economics. For the typical secondary student all metaphors are dead or are interpreted on such an individualistic level as to render them comatose. In this way both the word of literature and the Word of God face similar challenges. As a teacher of literature and a student of theology I have often found that both fields face a common enemy. This paper will not dwell on the enemies but on
the relationship between theology and literature with a goal of developing a starting point for a comprehensive theology of literature.

Despite recent criticism indicating the contrary, Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theological aesthetics makes an adequate foundation for a theology of literature. In 2001, Nicholas Boyle, Professor of German Literary and Intellectual History at Cambridge University, criticized Balthasar’s theological aesthetics as a starting place for a theology of literature. He claims that “unless a theology of literature can explain to us what are the theological implications of telling a good story, it is not a theology of literature at all” (“Art” 109). Boyle also claims that the study of literature is “of central importance to the study of literature, above all in a Catholic university” and “that we should reflect on its relation to the study of theology” (“Art” 109). However, he finds aspects of Balthasar’s method “unpersuasive” (“Art” 109) and recommends that his own approach (cf. Sacred and Secular Scriptures) or that of Erich Auerbach would be better. For Boyle, “Balthasar’s application of a German idealist schema to Christian intellectual history” (“Art” 109) cannot provide a solid methodological foundation for a theology of literature.

Additionally, Boyle claims Balthasar overly discounts the contributions made by authors of novels. Regarding the novel, Boyle writes: “that body of literature should still be of the greatest interest to a theological aesthetics for the fullness of its depiction of a world so interesting to God that He sent His Son to redeem it” (“Art” 108). Following Boyle’s criticism regarding Balthasar’s prejudice against “the novel of bourgeois realism” (Balthasar qtd in “Art” 107), one might ask what are the theological implications for including the fictional realism of the novel in a theology of literature. One may
discover that ways of reading the novel will provide additional theological insights in the realm of a theological aesthetic like Balthasar’s.

Not much has changed since William Lynch wrote in 1960: “any effort to keep literature in its rightful relation with the human and the real is a service, no matter how meager, to the truth and to civilization” (1). He wrote *Christ and Apollo* “to combat the view which makes literature an esoteric and isolated phenomenon in human history” (1). Since Lynch’s *Christ and Apollo*, many other theologians and literary theorists have been concerned with studying the intersection of the two fields of theology and literature. I’m concerned that the two fields might share a common fate—becoming more and more esoteric in the minds of people.

I hope to show how Balthasar’s own project of training people to see the form of Christ in the world can be strengthened by appeals to the literary criticism of Auerbach and the theology of Lynch. Since both theology and literature face similar enemies attacking at similar places, it seems that they both have similar needs in facing the future. In short, a deeper trust is needed in the ability of the beautiful and finite reality to reveal and lead us towards a God who transforms us to be more like God.
Chapter One
Erich Auerbach and William Lynch

1. Introduction—Towards a Secular Scripture

At the beginning of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, a father and son begin their travels through a post-apocalyptic world of ash and debris. They make their way down a road from East Tennessee headed to the shore of the Carolinas. In the very first scene of the novel, the father wakes in the darkness on a wintry morning and reaches for his son. The father has just woken from a nightmare in which he was lead into an abyss, “swallowed up and lost among the parts of some granitic beast” (3). In the abyss he sees a beast, “a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders” (3-4). He wakes from the dream and feels his child breathing slowly and deeply under their “stinking robes and blankets” (3). Although the father has left the dream, only the child brings him fully out of the abysmal dream world, and then, “he knew the child was his warrant” (5). The father exclaims: “If he is not the word of God, God never spoke” (5). The child’s presence brings the father back to the real world, a bleak world to be sure, but real nonetheless. This is the first of many times where the child serves to bring the man more fully into the real world. In a sense, this is the first of many times where the child serves as conduit for the man’s salvation, rescuing him from despair. The concrete reality of the child’s presence in the life of the father saves the man from the abyss and from the clutches of the spider-eyed beast. Through the reality of the son, the father comes into contact with the Word of God. In a sense, one might say that reality saved the father from a desperate act such as suicide. Indeed, the child’s mother took her own life rather than
face the reality of their situation. But the concrete reality of the son saves the father many times throughout the novel. Here we have a novel in which the main characters find God through the everyday, concrete limitations of their world.

However, if Balthasar had his way, in terms of the novel, we might never get a chance to read a novel such as *The Road* and read it in a theological way. The novels written in the genre of literary realism, the very novels for which Balthasar has no time, can be read in such a way as to glean theological insights from them. The key is to discover how literary realism, such as found in *The Road*, makes possible a theological reading of novels like those Balthasar detested. Two literary theorists will help us develop a way of reading the novel in the mode of literary realism in such a way as to show that Balthasar might actually have wanted to preserve the “bourgeois realism” of the novel.

Erich Auerbach will demonstrate that literary realism, a favored mode of the novel, has a chiefly theological foundation. A robust theology of the incarnation undergirds the mode of literary realism. Therefore, in a sense, all texts written in the style of literary realism have a hint of the scriptural. Sacred scripture, in the narrative mode, paved the way for secular texts in the realistic mode. We can interpret secular scripture, looking for God’s way with humanity, in much the same way we interpret sacred scripture. William Lynch will be used to explain how this realistic approach works on a theological level. Lynch, too, grounds his concepts in the incarnation, and he can show us that the imagination’s approach to reality is most effective when it is an analogical imagination. The analogical imagination is the sort of approach to reality that is most faithful to the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus. The fruit of the analogical
imagination—literary realism among others—is ripe for gaining insights about the relationship between God and humanity.

The two theorists, Erich Auerbach and William Lynch, approach literary realism from two different angles. Auerbach surveys the development of literary realism beginning with Homer and the Old Testament and continuing through to the twentieth century. He will be instrumental in helping to identify what secular scripture looks like. Lynch takes a more theological approach to literary realism. He focuses on the role of the imagination in the stance we take towards reality. He will be instrumental in explaining the theological foundation of the artist’s imagination. An in-depth summary and synthesis of Lynch and Auerbach will give a literary and theological foundation for exploring works of literary realism and challenging Balthasar’s dismissal of the literary form of the novel.

2. Erich Auerbach and the Development of Literary Realism

In Erich Auerbach’s work on realism in literature, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, the author famously never gives a definition of the term “reality” or “realism.” The reader is left to piece together such a definition from Auerbach’s close reading of several works of literature, starting with Homer’s *Odysseus* and the Old Testament story of the binding of Isaac and continuing through twentieth century writers such as Virginia Woolf. Instead of providing a theoretical definition of “realism,” Auerbach traces the development of the portrayal, or representation, of reality through several centuries worth of literature, giving characteristics of certain author’s relationship to the real in literature. Hammering together a definition of literary realism from *Mimesis* is no simple task. He chooses certain works of literature, and within those
works, he chooses even more narrow entry points such as a few lines of dialogue or text. For example, from *Odysseus* he chooses as his entry point the scene in which the maid discovers Odysseus’ scar as she washes his feet. Likewise, from all of the Old Testament he chooses one episode, the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. From these narrow “entry points” Auerbach extrapolates certain characteristics from each author’s representation of reality.

The first chapter of *Mimesis* compares these two examples from *Odysseus* and the Old Testament in terms of their use of literary realism, and Auerbach finds the Old Testament author/editor more “realistic” in his portrayal of the events of the binding of Isaac. Odysseus has been gone from his home country for nearly two decades, returns home, and is recognized only by the maid as she tends to the hospitality rituals of cleaning him and discovers an old scar on Odysseus’ leg. Within this episode, Auerbach focuses our attention even more narrowly upon the digression in the middle of the episode in which the scar’s origin is explained. He wonders if this flashback device heightens the suspense of the episode, but he concludes that Homer knew of no such techniques as heightening suspense. Homer, according to Auerbach, is only concerned that “nothing must remain hidden and unexpressed” (6) and, therefore, the scar’s origin must be explained and not “remain hidden.” There are no gaps in Homeric narration; everything is illuminated

...so that a continuous rhythmic procession of phenomena passes by, and never is there a form left fragmentary or half-illuminated, never a lacuna, never a gap, never a glimpse of the unplumbed depths. (6-7)

With Homer there is no background; all is foregrounded in the narrative procession of events. According to Auerbach, “The Homeric style knows only a foreground, only a
uniformly illuminated, uniformly objective present” (7). The narrative light that
illuminates each event comes from outside, shining down upon each object and each
character; there are no shadows with this sort of narrative illumination.

On the other hand, we have the story of the sacrifice of Isaac from the Old
Testament. Here gaps, shadows, and lacunae abound. As Auerbach notes, we know
virtually nothing of Abraham or of the God who calls Abraham. There are no Homeric
digressions illuminating every detail of Abraham’s life or his motivations. Likewise we
know nothing of this God’s background or motivations, such as why he would test
Abraham in such a way. Much in this story is left in the background, left for the reader’s
interpretation. With respect to God,

He has not, like Zeus, discussed [his reasons] in set speeches with other
gods gathered in council; nor have the deliberations of his own heart been
presented to us; unexpected and mysterious, he enters the scene from some
unknown height or depth and calls: Abraham! (8)

In comparison to the Homeric style, the style of the “so-called Elohist” (8) author of
Genesis is “fraught with background” (12). The Elohist’s literary style presents an
advantage over the Homeric style in that the Elohist can present the “multilayeredness’
of the individual character” (13). As Auerbach states: “The Homeric poems, then, though
their intellectual, linguistic, and above all, syntactical culture appears to be much more
highly developed, are yet comparatively simple in their picture of human beings” (13).
As a result, “Homer can be analyzed, but he cannot be interpreted” (13). Since
everything in Homer’s narration is brightly illuminated from all angles, no detail is left
out and no motivation goes unexpressed, there cannot be the multilayeredness of the Old
Testament stories. Competing psychological motivations within Odysseus are impossible,
whereas with Abraham the competing motivations—love of God versus love of son—are
hovering in the background, in competition, throughout the whole story. We have a more realistic portrayal of human beings as a people fraught with entanglements, contradictions, and potentially divisive loyalties.

What accounts for the difference between the two styles is Auerbach’s most important point here. Auerbach, to be sure, respects the genius of Homer. However, as ingratiating as Homer’s narrative “make-believe” (13) might be and as powerful as his method of representation is, Homer “does not need to base his story on historical reality…and…contains nothing but itself” (13). Here lies the difference between the two styles. The Elohist style is based in historical reality, while Homer’s style needs nothing from outside the text as a ground for his narrative reality. Auerbach notes: “It is all very different in the Biblical stories…. ” (14)

Their aim is not to bewitch the senses, and if nevertheless they produce lively sensory effects, it is only because the moral, religious, and psychological phenomena which are their sole concern are made concrete in the sensible matter of life. But their religious intent involves an absolute claim to historical truth. (14)

Unlike Homer, the Elohist author was committed to certain established facts of the story. There was no getting beyond the historical facts, to his mind, of the story of Abraham and Isaac. The Elohist has a different relationship to the truth than does Homer in so much as the Elohist “remains far more passionate and definite” (14) in his commitment to tell historical truth, the “truth of the tradition” (14). Homer trades in legend, while the Elohist recounts historical events. In other words, as Auerbach notes, Homer can be called a “liar” whereas the Elohist cannot since he grounds his narrative in a “universal history” (16) that lays outside of the story of Abraham and Isaac. Because these stories from the Old Testament are set against the backdrop of a larger world-view, the gaps and lacunae
in the narrative present opportunities for interpretation in a way that Homer’s work does not. The stories invite interpretation because the reading community—the Israelites—must fit the stories within their larger universal history of the People of God. This relationship to the historical truth, in the mind of Auerbach, causes the Elohist to write in a style that is more realistic since it portrays multilayered characters and situations. The illumination in the stories seems to come from within them, leaving shadows and gaps, where Homer’s stories, as has been said, are evenly lighted from all angles.

Here Auerbach has been distinguishing between historical presentation and legendary presentation. However there are several other differences between historical presentation and the narration of legend. In addition to the one already discussed, Auerbach points out two other important differences between the two styles. The historical style of the Elohist admits a greater range of character than does the Homeric style. All of Homer’s characters, at least nearly all, are of the ruling class of people. Additionally, these characters are never presented “as developing or having developed” (17). According to Auerbach, “Odysseus on his return is exactly the same as he was when he left Ithaca two decades earlier” (17). He and other characters “appear to be of a fixed age from the very first” (17). The Old Testament characters show much more development: “what a road, what a fate, lie between the Jacob who cheated his father out of his blessing and the old man whose favorite son has been torn to pieces by a wild beast!” (17). Auerbach notes:

The poor beggar Odysseus is only masquerading, but Adam is really cast down, Jacob really a refugee, Joseph really in the pit and then a slave to be bought and sold. But their greatness, rising out of humiliation, is almost superhuman and an image of God’s greatness. (18)
Of the two types of narration—Homeric and Elohist—the latter shows more development in its ability to represent a wider range of experience within a character’s life.

In addition to the above difference between Homer and the Elohist, Auerbach notes another important stylistic difference. Although the rule that states comedy should deal with lower, mundane subject matter while tragedy should deal only with the loftier, sublime subjects had not developed, Homer comes very close to only portraying the sublime categories of life. The Old Testament unflinchingly treats the domestic side of life. Eventually a rule would develop that separated styles—lofty styles for tragedy, grittier styles for comedy. Tragedy would never stoop to treat of life among slaves and housemaids, whereas comedy would deal exclusively with the more mundane, domestic side of life. Auerbach admits this rule was not in place when Homer wrote *Odysseus*, however, Homer comes very close to inaugurating such a style. The Elohist style is very different:

The perpetually smoldering jealousy and the connection between the domestic and the spiritual, between the paternal blessing and the divine blessing, lead to daily life being permeated with the stuff of conflict, often with poison. The sublime influence of God here reaches so deeply into the everyday that the two realms of the sublime and the everyday are not only actually unseparated but basically inseparable. (22-23)

The Homeric style admits of none of the domestic, mundane details of everyday life, or, at least, the domestic affairs of Homeric heroes are not the location of strife, conflict and passion. Thus the Elohist style of the Old Testament establishes a model of representation that renders more complexity and in doing so represents more of reality.

Looking back at his first chapter, we can say that realism is not merely a snapshot of all the details in a given scene, for, on that account Homer would win the day, as he leaves nothing to the imagination. Realism, as Auerbach wants it, seems to be a literary
style that represents more complex, and thus more real, human interactions. In the second chapter of *Mimesis*, he delineates even more characteristics of his preferred mode of realism. However, it is unnecessary to go into as much detail as with the first chapter. It will suffice to merely list these characteristics and offer some thoughts on the consequences of such characteristics.

The second chapter compares chapter 37 and 38 of Petronius’s romance to the Homeric style and finds three stylistic differences within Petronius that lead to a development of literary realism. In this segment of Petronius’ romance, the narrator, at a banquet, asks a fellow guest about a woman who is at the banquet. As his entry point into Petronius’ romance, Auerbach selects the guest’s answer regarding the woman, Fortunata. The answer is narrated in first person and offers a cynical take on the woman, the other guests, and the host of the banquet, Trimalchio. In this response of the banquet guest, Auerbach finds that Petronius advances the development of literary realism. The selected passage from Petronius advances the development of literary realism on three accounts: it is “entirely subjective” (28) with an objective goal, it “strongly exhibits intrahistorical movement” (30), and it offers a “precise and completely unschematized fixation of the social milieu” (30).

First, the passage is completely subjective in that it is narrated through the first person point of view; however, the goal of the passage is to offer an objective view of not only the other banquet guests and Fortunata but also of the narrator himself. Auerbach notes that many modern novelists employ this narrative style, but, at the time of Petronius, it was an original stroke of genius. Instead of Petronius’ saying, “This is so,” he “lets an ‘I,’ who is identical neither with himself nor yet with the feigned narrator”
(27) of the entire work. Through such “intense subjectivity” (27) as this, the “aim is an objective description of the company at the table, including the speaker, through a subjective procedure” (27). As a result, the narrative point of view is shifted to within the scene of the circle of friends at table, and, thus, “the light which illuminates [the scene] seems to come from within it” (27).

Secondly, Auerbach notes that this episode from Petronius’ romance demonstrates what he calls “intrahistorical movement” (30) among the characters. This feature concerns the social placement of characters within their world. The Homeric style places characters in an unchanging social realm, whereas Petronius’s style puts characters within a constantly shifting social order. As Auerbach notes, “Homer evokes the illusion of an unchanging, a basically stable social order, in comparison with which the succession of individuals and changes in personal fortunes appear unimportant” (28). On the other hand, for Petronius, “the world is in ceaseless motion, nothing is certain, and wealth and social position are highly unstable” (28). Homer’s Odysseus, in the much the same way that he appears ageless, seems to always be of the noble order of men and women. His station in life, and the stations of all the other characters, does not change. With the scene from Petronius, things are quite the opposite. Characters are well aware that fortune might be theirs one day, and then the next day she may disappear. Even though stability of fortune is sometimes challenged in Homer, it always appears to be a fixed part of the characters fate. The instability of fortune in Homer never seems to impact all aspects of a character’s life (29). The Homeric fate is not “a fate which results from the inner processes of the real, historical world” (29). In Petronius, the fate of a character seems
much more related to “the highly practical and mundane, or what we may call the intrahistorical, [and the] concept of instability of fortune, predominates” (29).

As a corollary to this second characteristic of Petronius’ style, this “intrahistorical movement” within characters is the common fate of all humankind. Fate does not intervene merely in the lives of one or two heroes; fate, “common and vulgar” (29), is the lot for all characters. The result of this style is “an extremely animated historicoeconomic picture of perpetual ups and downs of a mob of fortune-hunters scrambling after wealth and stupid pleasures” (29).

Thirdly, Auerbach points out “the most significant peculiarity of Petronius’ Banquet: it is closer to our modern conception of a realistic presentation than anything else that has come down to us from antiquity” (30). Auerbach describes this “peculiarity” as a “precise and completely unschematized fixation of the social milieu” (30). This characteristic is marked by little or no “literary stylization” (30) and a “broad and truly workaday style of presentation” (30). In other words,

Petronius’ literary ambition, like that of the realists of modern times, is to imitate a random, everyday, contemporary milieu with its sociological background, and to have his characters speak their jargon without recourse to any form of stylization. (30)

Through this third characteristic of Petronius’ literary realism, he has reached, according to Auerbach, the limits of the advancement of the portrayal of realism in the ancient world.

Subsequent authors would use Petronius’ style of realism, but only in their comic writings. For centuries, this “low” style of Petronius’ was exclusively used by comic writers, while tragedies and more serious affairs clung to the Homeric style. Auerbach notes that modern writers employ the low style of Petronius and have expanded the
boundaries of realism in literature. He notes, “in modern literature the technique of
imitation can evolve a serious, problematic, and tragic conception of any character
regardless of type and social standing” (31). This division or separation of styles results
in a too narrow sort of realism, where “everything commonly realistic, everything
pertaining to everyday life, must not be treated on any level except the comic, which
admits no problematic probing” (31). The result of the separation of styles has a
remarkably impact on the representation of everyday life in literature.

Comic characters have a certain type of relationship to the underlying social order
in the work of comic literature. According to Auerbach, “their relation to the social whole
is either a matter of clever adaptation or of grotesquely blameworthy isolation” (31). In
the case of the person who is isolated from the social whole, “the realistically portrayed
individual is always in the wrong in his conflict with the social whole” (31). In other
words, the “existence of society poses no historical problem” (32) in the literature of the
ancient world. The ramifications of this separation of style go beyond the confines of
literature. The inability to treat everyday life in a serious way affected the very historical
consciousness of the ancients. They were unaware of the underlying forces that shaped
historical movements since they were blind to the effect of the everyday upon society
(33).

To further demonstrate his point about historical consciousness, Auerbach compares an ancient text with a text from the New Testament. Specifically he selects a
passage from Tacitus’ Annals and the story of Peter’s denial of Jesus from the gospel of
Mark. Briefly, the selection from Tacitus takes place just prior to the Germanic uprisings
after the death of Augustus. The selection includes the text of a speech by one of the
German legionnaires who is rousing the German legions into rebellion. According to Auerbach Tacitus has no concern for the day-to-day issues facing the legionnaires and thus no interest in finding out what issues are really shaping the impending revolt. Tacitus’ work of history, with its limited historical consciousness, shows that the separation of styles limited not only the realm of literary realism but also the world of historical understanding. Both Tacitus and Petronius “reveal the limits of antique realism and thus of antique historical consciousness” (40).

On the other hand, the New Testament passage from Mark is fully conscious of the historical details that shape the Jesus movement. The character of Peter, who denies his knowledge of Jesus, is nothing like the German soldier who delivers the speech to the German legions. According to Auerbach, Peter “is the image of man in the highest and deepest and most tragic sense” (41); he is no mere “figure serving as *illustratio*” (41) as in the case of the German rebel. The German rebel merely represents, for Tacitus, the type of a revolutionary. The reason, according to Auerbach, that we have such a full portrayal of a character relies upon a mingling of styles. Here we have an example, in Mark, of the mingling of styles as opposed to the following of the rule of separation of styles.

The mingling of styles in the New Testament is not an artistic choice on the part of the author of Mark. On the contrary, it was rooted from the beginning in the character of Jewish-Christian literature; it was graphically and harshly dramatized through God’s incarnation in a human being of the humblest social station, through his existence on earth amid humble everyday people and conditions, and through his Passion which, judged by earthly standards, was ignominious; and it naturally came to have—in view of the wide diffusion and strong effect of that literature in later ages—a most decisive bearing upon man’s conception of the tragic and the sublime. (41)
In other words, the very setting of the incarnation and the life and death of Jesus, amidst the common people of Judea and Palestine, brought about the mingling of the sublime with the ordinary as the gospel writer set down his text. Again, it was not an artistic choice and, perhaps, not even a choice on the part of the gospel writer, as Jewish-Christian literature always mingled the sublime and tragic with the everyday and commonplace. The result of such mingling of styles is a form of literature that modern readers identify as realism. Peter is a truly modern character, insofar as he is a “tragic figure…who yet derives the highest force from his very weakness” (42) and “such a to and fro of the pendulum, is incompatible with the sublime style of classical antique literature” (42). The result is a more historically conscious style of writing.

As has been noted above, this historical consciousness derives from the portrayal of the everyday and commonplace. Auerbach goes into exhaustive detail describing exactly how the New Testament, in particular the section from Mark dealing with Peter, raises its historical consciousness. It does it by clinging to the concrete in its portrayal of reality. One aspect is how this portrayal of the concrete makes for a universal concern on the part of all of humanity. The Homeric style does not invite such a universal concern because it is focused so exclusively on the individuals such as Odysseus. The individuals of the Homeric style are in a sense sealed off from the concerns of the everyday and the concrete. The New Testament style, because it focuses nearly exclusively on the commonplace and on the common people of the time, more easily universalizes the concerns it raises. It achieves this “because it portrays something which neither the poets nor the historians of antiquity ever set out to portray: the birth of a spiritual movement in the depths of the common people” (42-3). The scenes of the New Testament, in almost
every instance, set out to portray “the same conflict with which every human being is basically confronted and which therefore remains infinite and eternally pending” (42).

The New Testament universalizes the concerns of the everyman through two stylistic methods: point of view and direct address. First, whereas Petronius and Tacitus “look down from above” (46), the writings of early Christianity “are conditioned by the fact that they were composed from a different point of view and for different people” (46). The followers of the Homeric style wrote from the point of view of the higher classes of people and wrote for the higher class. Writing in a different way and from a different vantage point, the writers of the New Testament wrote from within a group of common people and wrote for the common person. The New Testament “is written from within the emergent growths [of a spiritual movement] and directly for everyman” (47). As Auerbach notes in this style we have no rationalistic survey of history and no artistic purpose but a very subjective point of view with regards to the historical movement being portrayed. Because of this, we have a more richly layered portrayal of history and a more realistic narrative.

Secondly, the authors of the Markan text of Peter’s denial of Jesus use direct discourse and happen, as a result, to achieve a more richly layered realism. According to Auerbach, he cannot find “a single passage in an antique historian where direct discourse is employed in this fashion in a brief, direct dialogue” (46) like the dialogue between Peter and the servant girl. Unlike antique histories, the New Testaments, particularly the Gospels, are replete with short, direct dialogues like the one between Peter and the woman who questions him. In antique histories, speeches, like the one delivered by the German rebel, were used as mere illustrations of rhetorical points being made by the
author. The speeches tended to be long and purported to convey the entire speech. This style is a symptom of the antique historian’s lack of historical consciousness. On the other hand, the Gospel writer’s style is a symptom of a deep concern for the everyday.

The first two chapters, which have been examined above, of *Mimesis* set out Auerbach’s presuppositions about the characteristics of the successful portrayal of reality. The remainder of the book tracks the development of these symptoms through two centuries of literature. He treats everything from epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, and eventually the novel itself. The first novel he treats is *Don Quixote* and the last novel is Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, in the final chapter of *Mimesis*. In all of the intervening chapters between the first and the last, Auerbach sticks closely to a development of the tendencies he has noted in the first two chapters. However, it is worth, for the purposes of this paper, examining the chapters on *Don Quixote* and *To the Lighthouse* since both works are in the form of the novel.

In the chapter on *Don Quixote*, Auerbach’s entry point is a scene in which there is “a clash between Don Quixote’s illusion and an ordinary reality which contradicts it” (339). There are many such scenes throughout *Don Quixote*; however, “this one holds a special place” (339). Until this point in the novel, Quixote’s illusion has transformed the everyday reality around him into a fantastical quest of a chivalric, romantic-style, knight. Now in this scene the tables are turned, and it is Sancho, Quixote’s sidekick, who takes an everyday experience, passing three peasant women on a road, and turns it into a fantastical vision of the object of Quixote’s quest, Dulcinea. Quixote’s imagination does not cooperate, and instead of a vision of a beautiful woman, he simply sees reality as it is. Sancho has played a cruel trick on the visionary Quixote. Nonetheless, Quixote’s
illusionary mission remains intact as he convinces himself that the beautiful Dulcinea must be under wicked spell causing her to appear as a homely peasant girl. Thus Sancho’s stratagem works, and Quixote believes he has found the object of his quest.

In his analysis of the scene, Auerbach notes that it “is certainly realistic” (342) inasmuch as “life is treated seriously, in terms of its human and social problems or even of its tragic complications” (342). Even though this is a comedy and even though the Don has lost his grip on reality, the characters are never lifted out of their everyday experience (342). Don Quixote might be mad:

but even so the everyday character of our scene and others similar to it remains unharmed, because the persons and events of everyday life are constantly colliding with his madness and come out in stronger relief through the contrast. (343)

In other words, Quixote has lost his mind and his grasp on reality, but Cervantes has not. Cervantes representation of the real world is highlighted through Quixotes’s conflict with it. Even in the scene noted above, Sancho’s cruel trick and Quixotes’s adjusted delusion serve to highlight the reality of the peasant women. They serve as the most real part of the whole scene and thus anchor the text in realistic representation. The reader is left with a really mad country squire (Quixote) in the real world of Spain.

All of this transpires amidst a farce. None of the characters or the situations ever shift into the tragic and the problematic. Here Auerbach makes a second point regarding the representation of reality in Don Quixote. It might seem a problem that the text never shifts into the problematic and tragic, as do the texts of the Old and New Testaments. However, Auerbach assures us that this is merely the brilliance of Cervantes. That he can maintain a realistic representation amidst a farce is, according to Auerbach, nothing short of a stroke of genius and thus a development of the representation of reality. In other
words, prior to Cervantes no comic author has been able to represent the real world in such a convincing way. According to Auerbach, the “whole book is a comedy in which well-founded reality holds madness up to ridicule” (347). In other words,

This play [between Sancho and Quixote], as we think we have been able to show, is never tragic; and never are human problems, whether personal or social, represented in such a way that we tremble and are moved to compassion. We always remain in the realm of gaiety. But the levels of gaiety are multiplied as never before. (350)

As Auerbach has shown before, this multiplication of layers of understanding is crucial to the representation of reality. It is a symptom of the faithful representation of reality. Therefore, it is not necessary for the text to shift into the tragic and problematic so long as there are multiple layers of understanding or, in this case, multiple layers of gaiety.

In his final point of analysis of Don Quijote, Auerbach notes that Cervantes’ style leads to a certain “brave form of wisdom” (357). Cervantes presents the world at play in a “spirit of multiple, perspective, non-judging, and even non-questioning neutrality” (357) and this is considered a form of wisdom. Cervantes’s style is non-judgmental of the characters and situations involved in the text. For instance, never is Quixotes’s madness judged for or against by Cervantes. Auerbach finds wisdom in this “spirit” of “non-questioning neutrality.”

In the final chapter of Mimesis, Auerbach analyzes Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse. He notes three “symptoms” of Woolf’s representational style that serve at developments in literary realism. Woolf’s use of time in her narration, of multiple points of view, and of a non-omniscient narrator contribute to her mode of realism. For an entry point into the text, Auerbach’s examines a scene between Mrs. Ramsey and her young son James. Mrs. Ramsey is using James as a mannequin for making a pair of stockings
for a lighthouse keeper’s young son. During the scene, Woolf interrupts the narration of the action, which is minimal, with many parenthetical digressions.

The interruptions lengthen the text of the scene and allow for the inclusion of the interior monologues and dialogues of the characters. The interruptions “take up far more time in the narration than the whole scene can possibly have lasted” (529) and “most of these elements are inner processes” (529). Auerbach notes “there is something peculiar about the treatment of time in modern narrative” (537). The peculiarity lies in the “sharp contrast … between the brief span of time occupied by the exterior event and the dreamlike wealth of a process of consciousness which traverses a whole subjective universe” (538). This sharp contrast is a new development in modern literature.

Moreover, Woolf renders the scene and Mrs. Ramsay’s “continuous rumination of consciousness in its natural and purposeless freedom” (538). In other words, Woolf’s narration more closely mimics the way the human person moves through her day of exterior action and interior thoughts.

In addition to the peculiarities of narrative time, Woolf includes multiple points of view within the narration. As Auerbach notes:

The essential characteristic of the technique represented by Virginia Woolf is that we are given not merely one person whose consciousness…is rendered, but many persons, with frequent shifts from one to the other… (536).

The purpose of the effect is to render a more objectively real Mrs. Ramsay. We are given multiple perspectives; we approach Mrs. Ramsay from multiple points of view with the hope of discovering the “real” and thoroughly enigmatic Mrs. Ramsay. Auerbach call this effect the “multipersonal representation of consciousness” (536). The effect allows a reader to get much closer “to objective reality” via “numerous subjective impressions
received by various individuals” (536). Even the narrator has only one perspective from which to view Mrs. Ramsay.

The third and final point regarding the style of To the Lighthouse considers Woolf’s use of a non-omniscient narrator. This grows out of the previous point about the multipersonal representation of consciousness since even the narrator is treated as one subjective consciousness alongside all the others. In fact, according to Auerbach, “the writer as narrator of objective facts has almost completely vanished; almost everything stated appears by way of the reflection in the consciousness of the dramatis personae” (534). Never are we “taken into Virginia Woolf’s confidence and allowed to share her knowledge of Mrs. Ramsay’s character” (534). We are only given Mrs. Ramsay as she is reflected by the multiple consciousnesses of the characters. The narrator seems to be like any other character, any character “who doubts, wonders, hesitates” (535) and knows only limited information about the other characters. Auerbach wonders if this attitude towards objective reality, one of wondering, questioning and hesitating, might indicate the author’s own attitude towards the concept of objective reality.

Any reader of the genre of literary realism, most often found in the form of the novel, will find Auerbach’s insights helpful for interpreting and understanding the texts of this genre. Most helpfully Auerbach has shown that literary realism is more open to interpretation than other forms of narration because it abounds with shadows, gaps, lacunae, and background. With this in mind we can read texts in the mode of realism with an eye for the complexity in characters and situations. The multilayeredness of the realistic text more successfully mimics the situations of everyday life and shows us that the text is open to interpretation and to insight.
More importantly, Auerbach makes a theological point regarding the mode of literary realism. Literary realism, as he points out, has its origins in the texts of ancient Israel where the belief in a transcendent and immanent God holds sway. The theological point comes prior to the point regarding literary criticism. God was involved in the daily aspects of all people of Israel. God of the Israelites was not interested in the upper class of people, but rather God took interest in the poor and the oppressed. Coming out of this sort of belief, the style of the texts would necessarily result in the type of realism that Auerbach has highlighted. The result, although based in historical facts, is not a dry list of historical events but a narration of the events in the mode of literary realism. This sort of narration, like life itself, remains complex, multilayered, and fraught with background. Like life itself, the text invites interpretation.

Moreover, since the theological point comes prior to the literary theory, we can see that literary realism has something to teach us about God and the ways of God among humanity. God, most especially through the incarnation of Jesus, fully invests God’s self in humanity. Many of the texts, the scriptures, of the ancient Israelites and of the early Christians attest to God’s involvement in humanity. Therefore we can say that the mode of literary realism is, in a sense, a scriptural mode before it is anything else. Because texts in the mode of literary realism are grounded on a theological foundation, we can call all of them a sort of secular scripture—a place where theology may be done. Auerbach has given us a way to find God in all things, even literature. We can use his concepts to spot works in the mode of literary realism—the most scriptural of modes—and from there interpret these works and gain insight regarding God’s incarnation in the world.
After identifying such texts, we can then turn to the concepts of William Lynch who will provide a theology for how literary realism works. If Auerbach points to secular texts and says they are scriptural, then Lynch will explain theologically how the imaginations of these authors worked to produce such rich texts. Lynch will explain in theological terms why we need these works of the imagination and their importance for the life of theology.

2. William Lynch and the Analogical Imagination

William Lynch, in *Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Mind*, also investigates literature and reality. However, he does not deal with literary realism so much as he treats the imagination’s relationship to objective reality. He wonders what attitudes shape our stance towards reality and thus impinge upon our artistic imaginations. Whereas Auerbach concerns himself with representations of reality in literature, Lynch theorizes about reality’s relationship with the mind of the artist, the imagination of the artist. Moreover, once Lynch describes and argues for the correct attitude towards reality, he then builds a theology regarding our stance towards reality. The properly functioning imagination, that is the analogical imagination, focuses on a “Christic point” (223) to all of reality. The deeper the imagination bores into reality, the closer it comes to the “Christic point” of reality, and the point of reality is to lead us back to God the Father. The properly ordered imagination, or attitude towards reality, takes us on a journey similar to that of Christ’s incarnational journey through the world and life of humankind.

In his introduction, Lynch points out that literature has become isolated from and a stranger to the concerns of everyday life. To understand Lynch’s project, one must
grasp fully what he argues against. His goal in *Christ and Apollo* is “to keep literature in its rightful relation with the human and the real” (1), and, in doing so, he hopes to perform a service “to the truth and to civilization” (1). He immediately takes aim against literary theorists and professors who claim “literature is literature and nothing else” (1). These sorts of theorists argue for literature’s ability to stand alone, totally isolated from reality. In fact, according to these theorists, a poem or a novel exists completely for itself; there is no meaning beyond the poem or novel itself. Literature is an “esoteric and isolated phenomenon” (1). There are many attitudes and “forms of aesthetic theory” which give literature “a basically strange character” (1). Lynch briefly lists a few of these theories that set themselves against the sort of theory he is seeking.

Some theorists suggest that the literary imagination is purely and “absolutely ‘creative’” (1). According to these sort people, literature is therefore a self-contained entity with no relationship to anything outside of the creative imagination. Others will argue that the literary imagination can supply a reality better than the one we live in. This world “is pretty bad” and the imagination can make up a better world. It is worth quoting Lynch at some length to hear the tone of his arguments against poor forms of literary theory. Other weaker forms of literary theory suggest:

…literature is a Platonic too (poor Plato) which puts us in touch with absolutes. Or it is a religion, and the writer a new high-priest who alone can put us in touch with the “sacred.” Or we are told that the literary vision is made possible by achieving a “psychic distance” from the actual. Then there are all the non-cognitive theories of poetry which locate it in a world of sensibility without sense. … Far worse, of course, for the good of literature are all those half doctrines which reduce its life of “taste” in the least important sense of that word or which implicitly tell us that there are bound to be terrible hours in the life of hyperactive American when he will have nothing better to do than to read good books. (2)
To banish literature to fashionable drawing rooms of “gentlemen” readers is to not only irreparably harm literature but also to damage the very fiber of our civilization. The “gentleman” is told he should read, but the command to read has a flimsy warrant. The premise “is that literature is wonderful, has nothing to do with anything, and has a place in the American economy” (2).

This relegating literature to matter of taste takes many forms, but there is another way of teaching literature that Lynch argues against. Strangely enough he argues against those who find literature relevant and “begin to find in it a treasure house of philosophy or theology or politics or sociology” (3). This mode of literary criticism, according to Lynch, is “superficial and artificial” in its attempts to find some sort of relevancy within other fields and disciplines. This method, the treasure-trove of examples mode, and the method outlined above both “avoid the question of that true and fundamental relevancy of the literary organism to reality” (3). The average student is perfectly entitled to his or her boredom with literature when it is presented in either of these two methods.

If literature is only relevant because in it are found truths contained in other fields of inquiry, then who needs literature? If literature is simply a matter of fashion, then who really needs it? Lynch argues for the central importance of literature. Literature is not merely relevant to other sciences or simply important for cultivating a certain fashion or style; literature has a unique and vital relation with the very truth of reality. According to Lynch, “the literary process is a highly cognitive passage through the finite and definite realities of man and the world” (3) and, therefore, is important to understanding all the realities and dimensions of life. A sociological, a political, or even a theological process cannot replace this literary passage through finite and definite realities of the world. In
other words we do not read literature find mere illustrations of truths found elsewhere.

We do not turn to Graham Greene because he illustrates in the form of the novel a certain theologian’s position.

The creative, literary imagination’s relationship to and working with reality is a separate, unique cognitive process unlike those of other fields. This cognitive process will be explained further in Lynch’s treatment of the analogical imagination. Lynch’s primary point here concerns literature’s place in the world alongside other disciplines and fields of endeavor. Literature cannot be replaced by science, mathematics, or any other of the empirical sciences. To banish literature through either irrelevancy or a superficial relevancy is, to paraphrase William Shakespeare, to banish all the world.

As the title indicates Lynch’s argument is basically a theological and Christological one. Lynch tweaks the traditional contrariety and pairing of Dionysus and Apollo to include Christ in opposition to Apollo. The pairing of Dionysus and Apollo highlights the contrarieties of “energy and form, infinite and finite, enthusiasm and control, romantic and classic” (5). However, Lynch takes the Apollonian form as “a kind of infinite dread over against Christ who was full of definiteness and actuality—and was on that account rejected by every Gnostic system since” (5). According to Lynch, Apollo stands for a sort of grasping after infinite beauty, a facile form of beauty, “a kind of fantasy beauty” (5) that does not exist in reality. Apollo also stands for “a kind of autonomous and facile intellectualism, a Cartesianism, that thinks form can be given to the world by the top of the head alone” (5). On the other hand, according to Lynch, Christ stands for the completely definite, for the Man who, in taking on our human nature (as the artist must) took on every inch of it (save sin) in all its
density, and Who so obviously did not march too quickly or too glibly to beauty, infinite, the dream. (5)

Christ models for us and contains the energy necessary for a generative entry into the finite world. The finite world is the only starting point for the imagination. One cannot abstract concepts such as beauty, truth, and goodness without first going through the concrete, this-ness of everyday life. Like Christ we have before us the concrete, finite, limited world of things, and through those things comes our salvation through Christ. This is Lynch’s theological argument in a nutshell. However, before moving on to the theological arguments, it must be stated that Lynch’s primary goal is to reestablish “a confidence in the fundamental power of the finite and limited concretions of our human life” (6). Before moving on to the theological dimension of the literary imagination, first we must treat some of its other dimensions: the definite, time, analogical, and only then theological and Christological.

For Lynch, the most important dimension of the literary imagination is the definite or the finite aspect. In other words, the only material the literary imagination has at its disposal is the concrete world of things. The discussion of all subsequent dimensions (time, tragedy, comedy, freedom, the univocal, analogy, the theological imagination, and the Christian imagination) is merely “further and further exploration into the dimensions, the inner dimensions, of this basic literary image of the finite” (10). To grasp his main point about the finite image and its encounter with the literary imagination is to understand all of his work in *Christ and Apollo*.

Nothing shapes our imagination and its product, literature in this case, more than the fact of our own finite, limited world. Human existence, as Lynch notes, “is simple and limited” (11). Moreover, the “human race is not a great complex entity called man,
but many individual men, each leading his own separate, concrete life, each having its own limited, separate identity” (11). Artists, philosophers, and theologians, indeed all of humanity, face their greatest challenge when they encounter the fact of our simple, limited lives. Lynch outlines and dismisses four possible attitudes towards the finite then elaborates his own position.

In brief, Lynch names four possible attitudes towards our finite condition: the “magical view,” psychologism, imagination of the “double vacuum,” and “facers of facts.” None of the four adequately take into account, by Lynch’s way of thinking, the generative possibilities of the finite detail. The magical view “takes the finite as a bag of tricks” (17) to be exploited for grand concepts. The holder of the magical view comes into contact with the finite just long enough to “produce a mystical vision” (16) but so long as to be tainted by the finite. The magical “attitude can be seen in certain Catholics who are more interested in baptismal statistics than in people” (17). In its extreme form, the magical view sees the finite as perhaps an obstacle to be overcome on the way towards grand concepts and heady ideas. Less extreme forms merely use the real world as a sort of trampoline “off which to rebound as quickly as possible into various parts of the sky” (17).

Lynch calls the second inadequate stance towards the finite a psychologism. Instead of rebounding into the fanciful sky of ideas, however, the viewer with this attitude rebounds off the trampoline of facts “back into the self” (17). This type of person aims to create an affective condition within herself or himself. She wants to make “areas of paradise, orders of feeling within the self” (17). Proust’s Swann’s Way serves as his example. In that novel, the narrator recalls several sips of tea that lead him to the insight
“that the object of my quest, the truth, lies not in the cup but in myself” (Proust qtd in Lynch 18). Proust’s narrator has bounced off the trampoline of reality back into himself, and there he shall stay. These are the sorts of imaginations that “declare literature to be non-cognitive, in contrast with science and philosophy, and only serviceable, therefore, to the purposes of the emotional life” (18). Like the magical view, the “psychologistic” (18) imagination seeks to be liberated from the finite details of the concrete world. In these cases, the object viewed by the subject really holds no importance so long as it rouses the requisite emotions. This sort of view requires no belief or faith in the object being viewed for all that matters is the emotion. Within the world of theology, according to Lynch, this view finds its mate within Catholic Modernism of the nineteenth-century, “in which all dogma was safely removed from application to the real and reduced to a set of symbols for the production of religious affectivity” (18).

Lynch describes the third attitude of the imagination towards the finite as the imagination of the “double vacuum” (19). The imagination makes a double move.

On the one hand it plunges down into human reality with the attitude, and perhaps the wish, that such reality may be hell; on the other hand it plunges back up into heaven and ecstasy, though in this case too (as in that of the “magical”) by what means, literary or human, we know not. (19)

This sort of imagination does confront reality in a way that the magical view and the psychologistic view do not. However, it often takes a confrontational attitude towards the finite and “can be rather patronizing in telling us what the facts are and in setting itself up as the only realist in the world” (20). In the world of theology, the theology of Karl Barth most closely resembles this sort of imagination. Although Lynch “hesitatingly” classifies Barth as a thinker of the double vacuum sort, he notes that Barthian theology too easily assigns to Christ “an improperly transcendent character” (26) while at the same time
assigning to the reality through which Christ lived a “negative or deprecatory quality” (26). In his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Barth “represents [Christ] as the greatest Particularity ever to enter the cosmos” (27). Had Barth been satisfied with this ultimate Particularity of Christ “he might have ended with a more complicated, and more valid, theology” (27-8). However, Barth cannot leave well enough alone and destroys the “Christic and all Particularity before the face of the living God” (28). Thus a double vacuum exists; the Particularity is destroyed before a hastily conceived transcendent that bears no relation to the now destroyed Particularity.

Lynch calls the best stance towards finite reality a generative approach, one that sees in the limited nature of existence the very and only source of all of our insights and transcendence. Rather than the double vacuum approach that demolishes the finite on the way towards an ungrounded transcendence, the generative method plunges us into “the real contours of being” (21). Only then can the imagination “plunge up” (22) into insight. The relationship between the plunge down into limitedness and the plunge up into insight is one of causality. According to Lynch, “the plunge down causally generates the plunge up” (22, italics in original). Lynch admits that he says nothing new in the expression of his theory. Plato, Heraclitus, and St. Paul expressed a version of this theory. Plato warns we should not go too fast from the particular to one; Heraclitus writes, “The way up is the way down” (23, italics in original); and St. Paul “seems to attribute the ascension of Christ into Heaven causally to His descent into the earth” (23). Lynch takes Christology as his model in this regard. He notes: “Christ moved down into all the realities of man to get to His father” (23). Christ models for us how the literary imagination is to work.
This causal relationship between the finite and insight—the upward plunge—is the heart of Lynch’s project. As he notes early on:

What I am attempting to formulate throughout this book is an ideal attitude for the imagination in relation to the finite—ideal in the same sense that it preserves a balance, somehow avoiding the conflict which threatens the imagination in an act in which it is apparently being drawn in two directions at once: down into the concrete, up into the unlimited. (25)

A separation between the two—finite and unlimited—cannot be admitted if we are to live in the real world and at the same time yearn for “maximum beauty and insight” (25). Only Lynch’s Christology resolves the tension between the seemingly two opposite directions of the imagination “in a continuous, open and dynamic way” (26). Unlike Barth’s Christology, Lynch’s method shows no need to go beyond or to transcend the limited Christ. God the Father seemingly needs nothing more than the human and, therefore, limited Christ. Christ, as son of the Father, “represents an ideal point at which the imagination can relax the strain of its double aspirations” (26). To assign to Christ an “improperly transcendent character” (26) or to “assign to the finite, through which He walked, any negative or deprecatory quality” (26) would do a disservice to both Christ and to finite reality. In other words, an improperly transcendent character would be one in which Christ too quickly transcends the limitations of the finite world. Christ must be seen as fully incarnate in all the various limitations of humanity.

Ultimately, to separate the two poles of our imagination would be a disservice to truth itself. The truth is, according to Lynch, a “narrow gate” (41). Indeed that narrow gate is through the “gate of the finite, the limited, and the definite” (41), but the truth is very powerful as it allows us access to the unlimited freedom of the sons and daughters of God. Lynch, after describing the problem he is trying to resolve, sets out several ways “of
finding the gate” (41). Among these ways are time, tragedy, and comedy. Afterwards Lynch examines the ways in which “‘ideas’ enter into the formal structures of different literary images” (154). These ways are the univocal, equivocal, the analogical, the theological imagination and the Christian imagination. For the purposes of this study, it will suffice to examine only the analogical, theological, and Christological ways.

For Lynch, his concept of the analogical imagination is the most important way that meaning gets into the mind through the literary image. There are two other ways—univocal imagination and equivocal imagination—that meaning is made through the literary image. However, neither is adequate to the task in that they do not respect the tension that exists between the limited concreteness of life and the unlimited, transcendent. The univocal imagination too quickly wants “to reduce everything, every difference, and particularity in images, to the unity of a sameness which destroys or eliminates the variety and detail of existence” (154). On the other hand, with equivocal imagination “there is neither spontaneous movement toward nor exploration into the related dimensions of any image or situation” (154). The equivocal imagination knows only difference, where “every experience must be an isolated experience, unpolluted by the taste of any other” (154). Artists and social scientists of this persuasion take offense at the “‘intrusions’ of philosophy or theology because [they] believe both have qualities and ambitions which are alien to the idea of literary autonomy” (175). Regarding the equivocal imagination, which reduces everything to absurdity and solipsism, Lynch writes:

It is a terrible thing, and yet there is a secret love for it in many souls, and he who does not accept it is accused of a failure of nerve. This seems to me nothing more than another version of the age-old, pretentiously strong,
Pelagian elite-artist telling the weak among the people to go to the devil if they are weak. (176)

The analogical imagination yields a more compassionate artist and falls midway between the univocal and equivocal imaginations.

The analogical imagination serves as the centerpiece of Lynch’s work. The analogical imagination has the dynamic flexibility and adaptability to make downward and upward plunges without resorting to a univocal or equivocal way of thinking. The analogical imagination is adamant about “keeping the same and the different, the idea and the detail, tightly interlocked in the one imaginative act” (180). Lynch reminds the reader that analogy comes from *ana-logon*, which means according to measure. Calling this sort of literary imagination analogical means that it “should grasp the human reality (which is always the same) not univocally (for it is also always different), but according to the measure of its every dimension, according to the measure of all its definiteness” (180). Lynch calls analogy the most important shaping aspect of the book. The analogical imagination, when it comes to work in the field of literature, is that capacity within the artist to unify disparate elements of reality without doing injury either to the theme of the work or to the elements that comprise the work.

Lynch goes into some metaphysical detail when examining the analogical imagination because even “the finest talents among our literary and critical people never leave off all the minor tortures of tackling the same problem in their field as do the philosophers in theirs” (182-3). Like the philosophers who have tried to explain “the difficult relations between the one and the many, the same and the different” (183), the literary theorists “fall into as many dilemmas and dichotomies” (183). Some writers, like Mallarme, Rimbaud and Poe, try to ignore the “division of the sensible world” (183) and
opt for some “pure” form of poetry, a poetry that wants to dissolve all difference in search of “the perfect, poetic dream” (183). Other writers or critics, like Henry James and T.S. Eliot, “admit that we have two worlds on our hands but try resolutely to fight off a real dichotomy between them” (183). Still, other writers such as John Crowe Ransom “come terribly near to accepting the dichotomy” (184), yet Lynch remains unconvinced. This type of theorist only seems to believe in the real distinction between the one and the many. They still cling to the idea that there is a world of transcendent meaning to which details and fact are only peripherally related. Lynch says, “They think there is a center of inviolate logic and a fringe of inviolate detail” (184). However, these writers can be excused of their ignorance of the analogical idea, since “many a teacher of analogy thinks that an analogical idea is a common abstractable fact which is to be applied in a sense partly the same and partly different to all its subjects” (184). These writers and critics do not understand the radical nature of the analogical idea and how it resolves without destroying the tension between the one and the many. A third group of writers and theorists has truer instincts when it comes to the one and the many. According to Lynch, “this group tries manfully after an interpenetrative relation between the one and the many” (187). They try to bring together sense and sensibility because “they see the main enemy as that moment of dissociation in our history when sense and sensibility became separated into the different camps of science and imagination” (187). This dissociation leaves human beings incomplete and fractured with technology and science being divorced from sensibility and religion. This group comes closest to using what Lynch calls the analogical imagination.
Lynch begins his explanation of the analogical imagination with a discussion the metaphysical solutions to the problem of the one and the many. His goal in this section of the book is to show how “analogy is a metaphysical explanation of the structure of existence, indeed of all that exists” (200). He wants to understand the “analogue unity of the one and the many” (189). For this to work, Lynch must:

achieve some kind of interpenetration of unity and multiplicity, sameness and difference, a kind of interpenetration in terms of which the two contraries become one and the same thing—but ‘become’ this only because existentially they always have been it. (190)

This interpenetration of unity and multiplicity yields a new type of “organism” that is different from what Lynch call the “clear idea.” The analogical idea is more obscure than the clear idea. Going after the clear idea, one always insists, “the boundaries of its member parts are always potentially or in fact recognizable” (190). Lynch says that organizing reality is different from merely putting clear ideas together. The organization of reality, which is the job of the imagination, yields a complex, analogical “organism” that is more sophisticated than merely putting contraries side by side. In the analogical way of thinking, the two contraries are recognized as one thing. Thus is the accomplishment of the metaphysics of analogy.

Next, Lynch turns his attention to another dimension of the imagination: the theological imagination. Some will want to argue against any necessarily theological aspect of imagination. Some, say Lynch, will want to argue for a pure poetry that is free from, among many things, theological thinking. However, argues Lynch, “if the autonomous mind and imagination are content to stay within the present limits of its achievement, it will take on all the vices of the equivocal mind and imagination” (221). In other words, arguments for pure poetry, literature free from theology, rely upon a way
of thinking that is not analogical, one that reduces everything to difference. There is no point to this sort of equivocal imagining. The theological imagination, since it is thoroughly analogical, focuses on a “Christic point” (223).

By way of example, Lynch calls our attention to society. Speaking analogically, society exists on many levels of being. There are many analogues for society to be found in human existence. Society has a “gradated existence” (222) or, in other words, an analogical existence. It exists on the cellular level within the human body, and there “are widening and horizontal forms of society, which achieve their existence out of the stuff of familial, economic, and political life” (222). Likewise, there exist vertical levels of society “which drive the soul into higher and higher (or, if you will, deeper and deeper) expressions of communion” (222). The highest goal of such communion Lynch calls “union with God (222). Contrasting this sort of analogical thinking about society, the Protestant imagination “sometimes seems to conceive society a necessary evil” (222). Society might serve its function well enough on within the lower levels of being, but, when it comes to union with God, the human must abandon all forms of society, standing “in nakedness before God outside of society” (223). By this Protestant way of thinking, God is a great silence or an abyss, and the last leaping off point prior to the abyss is human finitude. Not so with the analogical way viewing finite reality.

Never are we required to abandon society prior to communing face-to-face with God. Lynch argues: “the Catholic imagination does not force me to imagine that at the end I must free myself from all human society to unite myself with God” (222). God, by this way of thinking, is not silence. God is the Word and the Word is Christ who is the head of the Church. For God, Christ, inasmuch as he incarnates himself in our finite
world, seems to be enough, and since we are no better than God, then Christ, inasmuch as
he leads us back to the Father, should be enough for us, as well. So with society, the
deeper we go into the reality of society, the closer we come to union with God. There is a
“Christic point of society” that takes us as deeply as we need to go on our journey
towards union with God. Facts, such as “society,” have dimensions that are accessible
through the levels of being and the analogical way of thinking and imagining. According
to Lynch, “the mysteries of Christianity are a penetration deep into the fact of man, all the
way into his Christic center” (223-4).

4. Conclusion

In a 1951 article, “Adventure in Order,” William Lynch notes Auerbach’s
contribution to the field of historical literary criticism, specifically his work in Mimesis
on the development of a “sense of realism and actuality” (44). Lynch argues that
Auerbach’s true genius lies in uncovering the development of literary realism as it might
actually have happened. One common way of thinking about the development of literary
supposes that first came “a true analogical sense and then … an ascent to the level of
history over against myth” (44). Auerbach, according to Lynch, found it to be just the
opposite case:

It was precisely the historical and nonmythical view contained in the new
supernatural religion which is at the origin and birth of the analogical
realism of the West. It would be valuable enough to say that the two,
historical religion and analogy, go hand in hand; but that the one creates
the other seems to be a proposition of such overwhelming importance for
the contemporary literary critic and religious thinker… (44).

As noted above in the analysis of Auerbach, the Old Testament and New Testament
modes led to a more realistic representation of reality. To Auerbach’s insight, Lynch adds
important metaphysical and theological claims regarding the very structure of reality.
Lynch argues for a rightful place for literature and the life of the imagination in our contemporary world. Not a place merely alongside other disciplines, but a place of prominence and preeminence. Literature, especially literature in the mode of realism, can show us the very structure of the world and of humanity and lead us back to the Father.

If Auerbach has shown us what realism looks like and has shown us that realism has its roots in the ancient religion of the Israelites and the early Christians, then Lynch has demonstrated how an imagination deeply rooted in finite reality can lead us back to God. Auerbach allows us to call realism a sort of secular scripture. Lynch gives us the theological processes involved in the literature of realism, and in doing so he prepares us for the theological reading of secular scripture.
Chapter Two
A Theological Reading of Cormac McCarthy

“Woe to the man who did not believe it!” (Auerbach 14)

1. Introduction

Anyone approaching the relationship between literature and theology must come
to terms with Hans Urs von Balthasar’s monumental work on aesthetic theology.
Nicholas Boyle, although critical of Balthasar on some points, calls him a “highly
intelligent critic” (109) and finds “many jewels” (109) in his writings on literature and
theology. Many theologians writing on theological aesthetics, within which field we find
literature and its relationship to theology, find they must grapple with Balthasar on art,
beauty, and literature. Nonetheless, Boyle points out a “lacuna” (107) in Balthasar’s
work, and that misstep has provided the impetus for this project. According to Boyle,
Balthasar overlooks the important role of the novel, “the principal literary form of the last
three centuries” (107).

In the fifth volume of Glory of the Lord, The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern
Age, Balthasar calls the novel “bourgeois realism” and accuses it of trashing the aesthetic
world with a “broad, dull stratum of inner-worldly, almost religionless ‘cultural
humanism’” (qtd in Boyle 107). The novel, according to Balthasar, adds nothing to the
field of art but “man in his milieu, environment, nature, cosmos, growing into them or
growing out of them, explicating or complicating himself” (qtd in Boyle 107). The novel
advances “the self-dissolution of immanent anthropology that in its closed logic has
increasing recourse to perversion to arouse any kind of excitement” (qtd in Boyle 108).
According to Boyle, this “breathtaking…snobbery” towards and “disdain” for the novel
resonates with “critical arguments…advanced against modern literature and art in the
1920’s and ’30s by sympathizers with National Socialism” (108). This prejudice against the novel is unfortunate since “that body of literature should still be of the greatest interest to a theological aesthetic for the fullness of its depiction of a world so interesting to God He sent His Son to redeem it” (Boyle 108).

That there is a theological reason to pay attention to modern novels should come as no surprise after looking at the contributions of Auerbach and Lynch. In the the novel, especially those of the past three centuries, realism and the analogical imagination came into their own. Auerbach shows that literary realism has its roots in Jewish-Christian traditions of storytelling. If Auerbach is right with regards to Jewish-Christian storytelling, then literary realism is the most incarnational form of literature since it is more capable of portraying the multilayeredness of humanity and is more grounded in historical movements. By multilayeredness, Auerbach means that more dimensions of the human situation can be presented at one time, through portrayal of conflicting motives, intrahistorical movements, and the simultaneous representation of different socio-economic classes. The multilayeredness of literary realism is more incarnational since it portrays a more complex human situation—the human situation into which Christ was incarnated.

Lynch, for his part, describes how the analogical, Christological imagination is best suited for encounters with the objectively real world. The analogical imagination does not destroy difference and crush it into sameness, nor does it resist the plunge upward into transcendence. The novel is the best test case for the theological points of Lynch and Auerbach.

2. A (Un)Holy Saturday: *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West*
This chapter focuses on the contemporary American author, Cormac McCarthy. Cormac McCarthy, born in 1933 in Rhode Island, moved with his family at the age of four to Knoxville, Tenn. He was raised Catholic, he served in the Air Force, and he attended the University of Tennessee. His first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, is set in East Tennessee and was published in 1965. His first novels tend to be set in East Tennessee, while his later works are set in the American Southwest. His novel, *Blood Meridian* (1985), represents the turning point in his writing on several accounts. This was the first of many novels to be set in the American Southwest and was the first of his novels to achieve both critical and popular acclaim. He has won the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. He lives a private life in New Mexico with his third wife and their young son. He rarely grants interviews, only reluctantly giving one to Oprah Winfrey after she chose *The Road* as her book club selection.

The novels of McCarthy make for good test cases with regards to Balthasar, Lynch, and Auerbach for three reasons. First, McCarthy was raised Catholic and attended Catholic High School in Knoxville, Tenn. He is considered in some circles to be a Catholic writer, although his present views on religion and Catholicism are unknown due to his very reclusive lifestyle. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, he is considered to be one of the best living authors in the United States. A New York Times poll of contemporary authors and editors acknowledged *Blood Meridian* as runner-up for the best novel of the past twenty-five years. Harold Bloom, the Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale University, placed three of McCarthy’s books within his Western Canon: *Blood Meridian, Suttree, and Child of God*. With *Blood Meridian*, according to
Bloom, McCarthy has “has attained genius” (Pierce). In another interview, Bloom calls
*Blood Meridian*, “one of the greatest novels of the Twentieth Century, and perhaps the
greatest by a living American writer” (Wallach). Perhaps as a testimony to his importance
within American letters, his old typewriter recently sold at auction for $254,500. Thirdly,
Balthasar himself might accuse McCarthy of having written novels that do no more than
show “man in his milieu, environment, nature, cosmos, growing into them or growing out
of them, explicating or complicating himself” (qtd in Boyle 107). Moreover, Balthasar
might accuse McCarthy of an oeuvre that advances the sort of fiction that Balthasar
abhors because it relies so much upon “perversion to arouse any kind of excitement” (qtd
in Boyle 108). All three reasons make McCarthy a good starting place for trying out a
theology of literature based on readings of Auerbach and Lynch.

The first novel to be analyzed is *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the
West* published in 1985. A novel based on historical events from the American Southwest
during the 1840’s and ’50s, *Blood Meridian* is a gory, blood bath of a novel chronicling
the travels of ‘the kid.’ The protagonist ‘the kid’ joins up with a gang of mercenaries who
hire themselves out for the wholesale slaughter of the Native American populations on
the border between Mexico and the United States. The group is led by ‘Judge’ Holden
and Capt. John Joel Glanton, two characters based on historical figures who likewise
wreaked havoc among the Native and Mexican populations on the U.S.-Mexico
borderlands. The kid runs away from home, in East Tennessee, at the age of 14 for no
other reason than “in him broods already a taste for mindless violence” (3). He travels
west, eventually making it to Texas where he joins up with the vicious Glanton gang.
Above all else, *Blood Meridian* is a graphically violent novel. In one scene, the
gang rides up on a tree filled with the bodies of gruesomely murdered infants hung in the
tree like so many filthy ornaments. For a taste of the violence of the novel, it is worth
quoting two scenes at length:

Five wagons smoldered on the desert floor and the riders dismounted and
moved among the bodies of the dead Argonauts in silence, those right
pilgrims nameless among the stones with their terrible wounds, the viscera
spilled from their sides and the naked torsos bristling with arrowshafts.
Some by their beards were men but yet wore strange menstrual wounds
between their legs and no man’s parts for these had been cut away and
hung dark and strange from out their grinning mouths. In their wigs of
dried blood they lay gazing up with ape’s eyes at brother sun now rising in
the east. (158-9)

…

…some of the men were moving on foot among the huts with torches and
dragging the victims out, slathered and dripping with blood, hacking at the
dying and decapitating those who knelt for mercy…and one of the
Delewares emerged from the smoke with a naked infant dangling in each
hand and squatted at a ring of midden stones and swung them by the heels
each in turn and bashed their heads against the stones so that the brains
burst forth through the fontanel in a bloody spew and humans on fire came
shrieking forth like beserkers and the riders hacked them down with their
enormous knives… (162).

Very few scenes in American literature rise to this sort of violence and even fewer do it
with such “gorgeous language” (Shaviro 143). What good can come from this perversity
of violence and gore? At first glance, Balthasar might have a point when we writes that
novelists are reduced to having “recourse to forms of perversity in order to awaken any
kind of tension” (Balthasar 410). Any theological reading of *Blood Meridian* will have to
come to terms with the novel’s grim violence. First, though, will be to establish the
novel’s realistic credentials according to the symptoms of realism as noted by Auerbach.
Having established the novel’s realistic bona fides, we can then glean a theological reading vis-à-vis Lynch.

Although some have found certain elements “are comparable to Homeric style as Auerbach describes it in the first chapter of *Mimesis*” (Donoghue 409), McCarthy’s style exhibits many more similarities to the more realistic style of the Old and New Testaments as described in chapters one and two of *Mimesis*. Perhaps there are some ways in which McCarthy is more Homeric than not; however, for the most part McCarthy’s work in *Blood Meridian* falls in line with Auerbach’s development of literary realism. For instance, McCarthy shows the ‘intrahistorical movements’ at work in the American Southwest, the subtext, if you will, to all of the romantic Western novels of the 19th and 20th Centuries. Moreover, in his treatment of characters and subject matter, McCarthy exhibits the low style of the Elohist and Gospel writers, rather than the sublime treatment indicative of the Homeric style. Like the writers and redactors of the Old Testament, McCarthy unflinchingly portrays the domestic side of life rather than the lives of the ruling class elite. His tale is told from the ground level where history actually happens.

Several critics have focused on *Blood Meridian*’s relationship to actual historical events. However, it is worth noticing and commenting upon his use of history and legend in light of Auerbach’s theories of history vis-à-vis literary realism. If McCarthy is writing *Blood Meridian* in the mode of literary realism according to Auerbach, then he is making a truth claim in the same way the Elohist authors of the Old Testament are making claims regarding the truth. Moreover, McCarthy, like the Elohist authors can be said to have a “religious intent” (Auerbach 14) inasmuch as he is making “an absolute claim to historical truth” (Auerbach 14). It will be the purpose of this section to show how
McCarthy uses history in keeping with the models of literary realism according to Auerbach and to investigate his “religious intent.” In a sense it might be said that McCarthy is writing sacred scripture for his contemporaries.

The majority of the novel takes place against the historical backdrop of an interesting, if little known, time in American history. Just after the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) and prior to the American Civil War (1861-1865) by thirteen years, the novel takes place in an historical and literal no man’s land. It is set well before the Cowboys and Indians period of the mid- to late-nineteenth century as chronicled in many western novels and movies. It is set within, if you will, a lacuna of American history. McCarthy uses just enough historical material to allow the novel to be called an historical novel, but the rest of the novel’s material comes from the mind of McCarthy. McCarthy takes the opportunity offered by this lacuna to fill in the gaps of history with his own history, his own truth claims about what happened in the deserts of northern Mexico and the American Southwest. In fact, the very objective, often remote, narration makes it seems as if he is narrating an objective history of the events of the novel. In a sense, McCarthy writes a prequel or a pre-myth to the traditionally received histories of the Cowboy and Indian period of American history from which so many myths regarding the American Southwest have sprung.

In an article entitled, “‘What kind of indians was them?’ Some Historical Sources in Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian,” John Emil Sepich likewise notes that the “story unfolds in a relatively forgotten mid-nineteenth century” (121) of the American story. Sepich then outlines and summarizes some of the historical documents from which McCarthy took the skeleton of his story. He does this to enhance “a reader’s appreciation
of the novel” and to provide details as to McCarthy’s way of making the novel (121).

However, Sepich does not suggest that there is any significance to McCarthy’s choice of such a little known time. In recent interview, McCarthy himself states the reason for writing about such a time period:

I ended up in the Southwest because I knew that nobody had ever written about it. Besides Coca-Cola, the other thing that is universally known is cowboys and Indians. You can go to a mountain village in Mongolia and they’ll know about cowboys. But nobody had taken it seriously, not in 200 years. I thought, here’s a good subject. And it was. (Jurgenson)

McCarthy wrote in and about the Southwest because few had done so with any seriousness. In McCarthy’s seriousness we can detect a desire to make truth claims about the hidden American Southwest. There is significance in his choice of a time and place with only the scantest legends and thinnest historical record to be had. This means that, no matter how scant the historical background of the novel, McCarthy is, unlike Homer, not just writing “make-believe” (Auerbach 14) stories that are self-contained and are meant solely to “bewitch us” (Auerbach 14). Setting the novel within an already existing framework of history makes McCarthy rather more like the Elohist authors than Homeric authors. Unlike an historian he fills in the gaps in the historical record with fictional representations.

If it is true that McCarthy is more Elohist in his literary realism, then like the Old Testament Blood Meridian can and should be interpreted. It cannot, as some critics have argued, be dismissed as merely a gory, blood bath with no meaning beyond its own violence. According to Dana Philips, McCarthy’s book “seems designed to elude interpretation” (434), and its “violence tends to be just that; it is not a sign or symbol of something else” (435). Since violence is McCarthy’s favorite and most often used tool in
his writer’s toolbox, then we can assume Philips and other like her find nothing else in
the book to interpret. If the violence holds no meaning, and it plays such a significant part
in the book, then none of the book is worth interpreting. If Philips is right, then the book
is like Homer’s *Odyssey* in the hand of Auerbach. We are merely able to analyze the
book, not seek for some second, more important meaning. However, his choice to make
it a historical novel, to base it on historical truths, seems to suggest that there is, as with
the Elohist texts, a “secret second meaning” (Auerbach 13). As with the Elohists,
McCarthy is a very incarnational author in that he sets his novel within the context of
history.

If, like the Elohist, McCarthy’s relationship to the truth “remains a far more
passionate and definite one” (Auerbach 14), then *Blood Meridian* can be said to be “not
primarily oriented towards ‘realism’” (Auerbach 14) but towards the truth. Like the
Elohist, McCarthy is limited by “the truth of tradition” (Auerbach 14) handed down in
the historical details of his source material. Therefore, if McCarthy is a latter-day Elohist,
then he is obliged to be oriented towards the truth because he has chosen to ground his
novel in historical fact. Moreover, if he is a contemporary Elohist, then like the Bible’s
claim to truth, *Blood Meridian’s* claim to truth “is not only more urgent than Homer’s, it
is tyrannical—it excludes all other claims” (Auerbach 14). Moreover, like the Bible,
*Blood Meridian* “insists that it is the only real world” (Auerbach 15). Like the Bible,
*Blood Meridian* wants “to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels”
(Auerbach 15). “Woe to the man who did not believe it!” (Auerbach 14).

What then are we to believe after reading *Blood Meridian*; what is *Blood
Meridian*’s “second, concealed meaning” (Auerbach 15)? What is at stake if we choose
not to believe McCarthy’s story? The easiest answer would go something like this. There is real evil in the world, and should we choose to ignore that fact, then we will pay with our lives and our religion. Nothing in the novel survives the onslaught perpetrated by the legion of scalp hunters and their co-leader the ‘judge.’ At the end of the novel, after all of the Glanton’s gang has been killed, only the judge remains, and “he says that he will never die” (349). Evil persists in the world, as represented in the life and deeds of the judge. This reading has its merits. One could come away from the novel and simply believe that the second, concealed meaning has to do with the perdurance of evil throughout history. None of the main characters in the novel are redeemed or redeemable, none becomes a force for good in the face of evil. It would be hard to say much more than evil exists, and woe to those who do not consider the reality and tenacity of this evil. However there is a richer reading to be had.

In 1848 “the kid,” a motherless son of an East Tennessee schoolteacher, runs away from home at the age of 14 and never returns to this home. He travels southward and westward, eventually ending up in Texas where he meets up with a band of filibusters. The filibusters hire themselves out to various villages and communities along the very porous Texas-Mexico border. One governor of a Mexican region offers them $250 in gold for every Indian scalp they can collect. The filibusters run out of Apaches and begin to collect scalps from friendly Mexican farmers and benign agricultural Indians. Nothing survives the onslaught of the filibusters; everything is laid waste in the path of the filibusters. Two of the main historical figures in the novel, “Capt.” John Joel Glanton and “judge” Holden, lead the filibusters on their rampage westward through bleak and grim mountainous deserts. An attack by Indians eventually decimates the gang
of filibusters, and they are variously killed and dispersed. The kid survives and along with another survivor, Tobin, an “ex-priest,” they make their way to the west coast of California, seeking a place to recover from their battle wounds. However, the ex-priest and the kid are separated from one another. The final chapter of the novel takes place 1878, thirty years after the kid ran away from home. Presumably the kid, now referred to as “the man,” has been wandering throughout the western part of the United States territories. Nothing suggests that he continued his murderous ways. He travels back to Texas where he finally meets up with the judge, the only other survivor from the original gang of filibusters. They talk briefly in a bar; then the novel closes as the judge murders “the man” in an outhouse behind the bar. Now, the judge, a gruesome murderer of children and women, is the only survivor of the group filibusters. At the end only the “vast abhorrence of the judge” (254) remains, and he claims, “that he will never die” (349).

Something more goes on than merely a statement about evil in the world, even though it is a theologically true statement. McCarthy has not marshaled all of his passion behind this simple claim. *Blood Meridian* is a far richer and more complex work than this. The evil and the violence add up to more than the sum of their parts. Look at the religious language of *Blood Meridian*. The novel is replete with religious language and imagery. For instance, McCarthy refers to many of the people in the novel as “pilgrims,” “hermits,” “anchorites,” “acolytes,” and the kid himself is a “wretched baptismal candidate.” Religious articles abound: rosaries, crucifixes, tabernacles, scapulars and altars.
Each border town has a church that is often noted by the narrator. The churches are in various states of decay. In one, the chancel floor is filled with the naked corpses of parishioners who were murdered by a tribe of Indians. Many of the churches are crumbling and empty. Early on, the kid stumbles into a ruined mission church: “He walked around the side of the church and entered the sacristy…. The domed vaults overhead wereclotted with a dark furred mass that shifted and breathed and chittered” (28). If, in fact, the condition of this church is representative of the state of Christianity throughout the novel, then it is a shambles of its former self, everywhere left in dusty ruins. In one such church, “a dead Christ in a glass bier lay broken in the chancel floor” (63). It would seem that Christianity, at least in this “terra damnata” (64), has run its course and no longer has any impact upon or importance for the people.

Nonetheless there are believers in this scorched and ruined land. On at least three occasions we witness religious ceremonies. In one such scene, the kid, a “wretched baptismal candidate” (29), is reluctantly baptized through the bars of a jail cell by a Spanish priest. In the book’s second to last chapter, when the kid wanders alone through the American Southwest, he stumbles upon a group of pilgrims engaged in one of the book’s religious rituals. Although unfamiliar to the kid, the scene he stumbles upon is a reenactment of the way of the cross wherein “a man tied to a rope … was pulled this way and that by his companions and a hooded man in a white robe bore a heavy wooden cross on his shoulders” (326). From a short distance the kid watches the ritual:

They were all of them barefoot and they left a trail of blood across the rocks and they were followed by a rude carreta in which sat a carved wooden skeleton who rattled along stiffly holding before him a bow and arrow. He shared his cart with a load of stones and they went trundling over the rocks drawn by ropes tied to the heads and ankles of the bearers and accompanied by a deputation of women who carried small desert
flowers in their folded hands or torches of sotol or primitive lanterns of pierced tin. (326)

The next day, the kid finds the group murdered as they were in the midst of their ritual of crucifying the “alter-christ” (327).

The company of penitents lay hacked and butchered among the stones in every attitude. Many lay about the fallen cross and some were mutilated and some were without heads. Perhaps they’d gathered under the cross for shelter but the hole into which it had been set and the cairn of rocks about its base showed how it had been pushed over and how the hooded alter-christ had been cut down and disemboweled who now lay with the scraps of rope by which he had been bound still tied about his wrists and ankles. (327).

The kid finds the group on Good Friday and discovers their mutilated corpses the next day on Holy Saturday.

Holy Saturday is perhaps the strangest day in the Church’s liturgical year. According to an ancient homily that is included in the Church’s Office of Readings, “something strange is happening—there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness” (Office 496). According to the Apostle’s Creed, on this day, after his crucifixion and death Jesus descended into the netherworld. Many theologians have wondered how to interpret this descent into the netherworld. The more traditional of these claim that Jesus entered the netherworld triumphantly to harrow the souls there. However, some, like Balthasar, claim that the descent into the netherworld was an extension of the suffering and abandonment of Jesus’ experience on the cross. Balthasar

1 The phrase “descendit ad infernos” is often translated either as “descended to hell” or “descended to the dead.” I have used the term “netherworld” following Balthasar’s point in Mysterium Paschale, that the reference is not to hell but to Sheol, “the state in which humanity is cut off from access to God” (177) quite apart from “speculations of later Judaism, influenced as these were by Persia and Hellenism, about the difference of destiny which distinguishes men by way of reward and penalty after death” (161).
claims that Jesus went passively into the netherworld where he continued to experience the abandonment by his Father. According to Balthasar, “only what has been endured is healed and saved” (Mysterium 165) and, furthermore, “abandonment by God before death must not only continue but intensify after His death” (qtd in Johnson 339).

Either way, Holy Saturday, a much forgotten about day in the Church year, stands in the middle of the two greatest events of the Jesus event. “The events of “Holy Saturday” stand quite literally at the center of Christ’s reconciling work” (Johnson 338). The theology of McCarthy’s crucifixion scene noted above indicates that he is more in line with Balthasar’s theology of Holy Saturday.

Therefore, in a sense, Blood Meridian is representation of Balthasar’s theology of Holy Saturday, where Christ descends passively and helplessly into the netherworld. The “alter-christ” is helplessly crucified and mutilated by the marauding Indians. The company of “penitents” in attendance at the ritual huddles under the cross for protection but find nothing except death. Here Christ has no power, for he is dead. With this reading in mind, suddenly McCarthy’s use of religious language and imagery begins to make sense. All of the empty and crumbling churches, the ineffectual piety, and the complete victory of evil and violence over everything make sense when we realize that in Blood Meridian Christ is dead and is not with us. The only character who survives and seems to exercise some amount of control over his own destiny is that of the judge, Holden. He can be seen as a figure of Satan, and there is no Christ figure in the novel. In fact, there is no sign of redemption in any character.
The implications of Balthasar’s theology of Holy Saturday will help us determine the religious intent and implications for *Blood Meridian*. According to Balthasar in *Mysterium Paschale*:

That Jesus was really dead, because he really became a man as we are, a son of Adam, and that therefore, despite what one can sometimes read in certain theological works, he did not use the so-called ‘brief’ time of his death for all manner of ‘activities’ in the world beyond…In the same ways that, upon earth, he was in solidarity with the living, so, in the tomb, he is in solidarity with the dead. (148-9)

There is no activity on the part of Jesus and seemingly no communication on the part of the person of Jesus. On Holy Saturday, he is gone from the world in the very same way as all who have died leave the world—finally and forever. His descent into the netherworld is a function of the depth of his incarnation. Had he not gone to the netherworld he could not have been said to be sent for all. His descent shows the depth of his solidarity with humanity. Here Balthasar is demythologizing the traditional teaching regarding Jesus’ descent into the netherworld, stripping it of all non-biblical “mythical accoutrements of a combat in Hades” (160). On Holy Saturday, therefore, there is no mystical combat between the forces of good and those of evil. It would seem that the forces of evil have won the day. Silence, on the part of God, predominates the scene.

Into this very silence, McCarthy sets his novel. The Word of God is mute throughout *Blood Meridian*. Together the words “silence,” “silent,” and “silently” appear seventy-four times in the novel. While together the words “God,” “Jesus,” and “Christ” appear thirty-six times. Silence wins the day. In fact, towards the end of the novel the kid finds a Bible and carries it around with him for several months. However, the illiterate kid cannot read a word in it. The Word of God, as found in scripture, is indeed rendered silent and mute.
This silence on the part of God is the unique and revelatory feature of Holy Saturday. Rowan Williams, following Balthasar’s line of thought, claims that on Holy Saturday “God is revealed when there is nothing to be said about God, nothing to be said about God by God incarnate…the silence of Holy Saturday is in fact the definitive revelation” (37). This silence on the part of God made man is not accidental or superfluous but is a necessary feature of the Christ event. Balthasar goes so far as to write: “It is for the sake of this day that the Son became man” (qtd in Williams 37). Again Balthasar notes: “As Trinitarian event, the going to the dead is necessarily also an event of salvation” (176). It is necessary for our salvation that Jesus take on all of humanity in all of its forms. Therefore, only on Holy Saturday does Jesus plumb the very depths of the darkest human condition. Only he, as God, measures the depth of the abyss that is complete rejection of God and absence from God. Although silent and mute, Jesus in the netherworld saves us at the very root of and clearest expression of human sinfulness.

Moreover, in this act of Holy Saturday, according to Williams, God’s absolute transcendence is revealed in Christ’s descent into the netherworld. According to Williams,

Transcendence, in the sense of radical liberty from the systems of the created world, is given definition by God’s enduring, as God, the depths of Godlessness…The emptiness of Holy Saturday is precisely the fullness, the already actual fullness of God; God can only be in humanity’s hell because of what God already and eternally is. (37, italics in original)

If this is true, and if McCarthy has given us in Blood Meridian a picture of the netherworld, a “terra damnata” (64) as the narrator calls it, then McCarthy makes a deeply theological point about God’s transcendence and complete otherness from the
humankind. The resurrection has not yet occurred, for it is Holy Saturday in all its seriousness, and Satan (the judge) decides the fate of all in the novel. McCarthy, in *Blood Meridian*, has given us a “hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning”(55). In fact, like Balthasar, he has demythologized all previous notions of the netherworld and has given us something more representative of what the netherworld actually must be like. The netherworld is a place entirely cut off from God and without God.

The novel’s baptismal imagery provides another point of departure for a looking at the descent of Christ into the netherworld. In the funeral liturgy of the Church, we proclaim that the deceased “in the waters of baptism died with Christ” (81). Baptism is first a death before it is a cleansing experience of “new life” (81). As noted above, the kid is referred to as a “wretched baptismal candidate” (29). The kid then must die before he is given any opportunity to be raised from the dead. His death, coming without any provocation at the end of the novel, is like the symbolic death in baptism. Many critics have tried to make sense of the kid’s death. Some suggest that the judge perceived in him some sort of weakness or unwillingness to devote his life to a mission of complete annihilation. The judge detected that the kid does not have “the heart of a common assassin” (311) and claims there is “a flawed place in the fabric of [the kid’s] heart” (312). Since the kid is not a fellow nihilist like the judge, the judge must destroy him or risk having his world view upset.

However, this reading is not entirely satisfactory, especially considering what McCarthy is doing with the Holy Saturday themes. If God is actually supremely transcendent then he even transcends even the judge’s nihilism. Nothing, even a nihilist,
is outside of God’s purview since Christ has plumbed the depths of the netherworld. The kid, in this Holy Saturday novel, has died with Christ and has yet to resurface from the life-giving waters of baptism. Like the dead and mutilated “alter-christ” the kid has been rendered completely passive in his death. We, as readers, are brought to the point of having to depend upon faith to imagine what will happen next in the life of the kid.

Here we find McCarthy’s truth claim and his resulting religious intent. Through the imagery of the Holy Saturday ritual in Blood Meridian we are led to the brink of Christian faith. On Holy Saturday Christian faith is most desperately needed and can be said to start on the day of Christ’s visitation to the netherworld. We have no resurrection yet to make our trust in God any easier. In Blood Meridian the reader is given a taste of the faith required of Jesus on Holy Saturday. Jesus, unaware of the impending resurrection, exhibits a ‘blind’ faith in a God that cannot be perceived. This is quite different from the situation of Christians after the resurrection who have the resurrection to ground their faith upon. Jesus was truly entering into a place of silence, a place bereft of God, and displayed the ultimate faith in God. For our part, when faced with the silence of God we can take consolation in what Jesus accomplished through his blind faith.

Nicholas Boyle makes a similar point in distinguishing between sacred and secular literature. Secular literature can only take us to the brink of Christian faith; only divine command and revelation can take us beyond the brink and usher in an age of faithful followers of the crucified Jesus. The revelation of the resurrection is required to go beyond the pale of Holy Saturday.

3. A Community of Sinners: Child of God
In an earlier novel, *Child of God* (1973), McCarthy tells the story of a misfit and outcast named Lester Ballard, “a child of God much like yourself perhaps” (4). However, Ballard is unlike what we might consider to be the typical child of God. He is a pedophilic, necrophilic, voyeuristic loner who lives in the Appalachian Mountains of Sevier County, Tennessee. The last survivor of a long line of degenerates, Ballard has been run off of his family’s property. He is forced to leave the family’s house, and someone else from the nearby village of Sevierville takes up residence in the Ballard house. In a sense, this is Ballard’s last connection to civilization. From this early point in the novel he is cut loose from the rest of society and wanders the mountainside bothering the poor residents of Sevier County.

In a telling scene from the first part of the novel, Ballard visits a Sunday morning church service at Six-mile Church.

The congregation at Six-mile Church would turn all together like a cast of puppets at the opening of the door behind them any time after services had started. When Ballard came in with his hat in his hand and shut the door and sat alone on the rear bench they turned back more slowly. A windy riffle of whispers went among them. The preacher stopped. … Ballard had a cold and snuffled loudly through the service but nobody expected he would stop if God himself look back askance so no one looked. (31-2)

Such is Ballard’s relationship to the community of the children of God. He is virtually unseen by them throughout the entirety of the novel. His days are spent hunting for frogs, squirrels and young women. He is a very disturbing character, and on some accounts makes the men of *Blood Meridian* look tame in comparison.

At one point in the novel, he finds a man and a young girl, both dead, in the backseat of a car where they presumably died of carbon monoxide poisoning. The dead couple is locked in an embrace as they were in the midst of having sex when they
succumbed to the fumes of the car’s running engine. Ballard opens the car, pries apart the dead couple and then has sex with the dead girl’s corpse. Afterwards he carries the corpse back to his dilapidated house where he hides her in the attic. Over a period of a few days he brings her down from the attic, dresses her up in a dress bought for her, and “makes love” to her corpse repeatedly. Ballard has little to redeem him. He murders several women, taking their bodies into the cave where he lives. Eventually he is captured by a group of vigilantes and ends up in a state hospital. He dies of pneumonia in the hospital, and his body is shipped to the state medical school in Memphis. Students cut and study his corpse, and “at the end of three months when the class was closed Ballard was scraped from the table into a plastic bag and taken with others of his kind to a cemetery outside the city and there interred” (194). An outcast to the last, he is buried, notably, outside the city.

The title of the book suggests that McCarthy might have a religious or theological intention. However, unlike Blood Meridian, Child of God contains little to no religious imagery, language or reference points. Critics agree “the text is not concerned with a theological question, as the title might suggest” (Bartlett 3). Again we are faced with a novel that Balthasar might judge perverse in its attempts to interest the reader through gross titillation and spectacle. The book appears to be “wholly devoid of religion” (Metaphysics 410), representative of “the dissolution of an immanent theology” (410, and having “recourse to forms of perversity in order to awaken any kind of tension” (410). However, we must take McCarthy’s title seriously as we must take seriously the character of Lester Ballard. As Bartlett points out:

This grotesque outsider could serve as stuff for a gratuitously shocking horror story. But Ballard represents a serious figure for McCarthy—not
primarily a case study in psychology or criminology, but a fictional figure quite within the bounds of human possibility. Some degrees of human evil prove difficult to apprehend, must be seen to be believed. (3)

Taking seriously both the title and the character of Ballard, with the help of Auerbach and Lynch, might yield a reading that would satisfy on the level of a theological reading of *Child of God*.

In “The Work of Jesus Christ as an Advocate,” the seventeenth-century Baptist author and preacher John Bunyan wrote: “no child of God sins to that degree as to make himself incapable of forgiveness” (Bunyan). Perhaps one could read *Child of God* as a test case of this hypothesis, wondering if Ballard was in fact redeemable. Nothing in Ballard suggests that he was about to turn from his wicked ways, and we are not told of any deathbed conversion. Has McCarthy simply placed the questions in the lap of the reader: Is Ballard forgivable? Has he done too much to be able to then be forgiven? In this case, the novel serves as a test case for bounds and limits of Christian charity and Christian forgiveness. The reader is forced to make a decision about the nature of Ballard’s character. Perhaps McCarthy is pushing the Christian reader to the limits of Christian charity. However, this reading works too quickly to move beyond the horrible details of Ballard’s life. It does not respect the details of McCarthy’s presentation of Ballard’s life.

One of the novel’s central images is that of Noah. At one point in the novel torrential rains visit the small town of Sevierville. Residents cannot recall the last time that floods like these visited the region. The sheriff of Sevier County asks a fellow resident, “You ain’t seen a old man with a long beard buildin a great big boat anywhere’s have ye?” (161). Another resident reckons that the floods have come as a result of the
region’s sinfulness. The sheriff tells of a woman who said, “It’s a judgment. Wages of sin and all that” (164). The sheriff replies: “everybody in Sevier County would have to be rotten to the core to warrant this” (164). The woman does not reply. This image of Noah must be taken seriously. Lynch would not let us pass too breezily over such an allusion and such an image as Noah’s flood. This image of Noah’s flood makes for a convenient entry point for an interpretation of *Child of God*.

Although it would be easy to dismiss Ballard as merely a “false acolyte or antiseptic felon, a practitioner of ghastliness, a part-time ghoul” (174) McCarthy’s narrator does seem to indicate more than this. The reader is meant to view Ballard as a child of God. Because he is a child of God, we need to view him as a member of the community in Sevier County. We are not to view him as isolated from the community, as merely a crazed individual who sets himself apart from the community. We are, because of the flood imagery, meant to see the entire community as complicit in and a cause of the evil that Ballard wreaks upon his brothers and sisters in Sevier County. The evil of the novel does not belong solely to Ballard. It is hard to say which came first, Ballard’s wrongdoing or the community’s exile of the Ballard and his family.

Ballard is not the only exiled refugee in this novel. In a scene towards the end of the novel we are told of a hermit who like Ballard lives in a cave. An old man tells a sheriff’s deputy of the hermit’s tough existence:

> You think people was meaner then than they are now? the deputy said. The old man was looking at the flooded town. No, he said. I don’t I think people are the same from the day God first made one.

As they ascended the courthouse stairs [the old man] was telling them how an old hermit used to live out on House Mountain, a ragged gnome with kneelength hair who dressed in leaves and how people were used to going by his hole in the rocks and throwing stones on a dare and calling him to come out. (168)
Like the old hermit, Ballard, too, is an object of the town’s hate and violence. It is as the author of Genesis writes: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil and continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (Gen 6: 5-6). The town does not like people who live differently from themselves, and they exact harsh violence upon them. Although there are very few scenes in which we are meant to sympathize with Ballard, he is not an unsympathetic character. The title itself, *Child of God*, shows that McCarthy is testing the bounds of our sympathy for this desperate character.

The reader is meant to view him with some amount of sympathy. This makes for the central tension in the novel. McCarthy presents a figure who is violent and murderous but at the same time a child of God. Towards the end of the novel, when Ballard is being chased by vigilantes, he stops for a rest in a clearing in the woods, and “squatting there he let his head drop between his knees and he began to cry” (170). The reader remains unaware of the cause of the tears; are they tears of repentance, sadness, or anger? But the tears are enough to make the reader pause and wonder if Ballard is somehow more human and more complex than the townspeople think. The reader is asked to perhaps reevaluate his or her judgments regarding Ballard.

In terms of the flood of Genesis, Ballard represents both the evil of the people surrounding Noah and the object of God’s sadness and regret. Nonetheless, Ballard is a child of God. One who is redeemable by the Christ who “in taking on our human nature…took on every inch of it (save sin) in all its density, and Who so obviously did not march too quickly or too glibly to beauty, infinite, the dream” (Lynch 5). *Child of*
God is not a glib rush to beauty or the infinite, but a slow drudgery through a “concrete life...having its own limited, separate identity” (Lynch 11).

4. Finding the Narrow Gate: *The Road.*

The third and final novel for analysis is McCarthy’s most recent work, *The Road* (2006). McCarthy returns to the setting of his earlier works, East Tennessee, and tells the harrowing tale of a nameless man and his young son who journey through a post-apocalyptic world of ash and ruin. They travel southward through North and South Carolina looking for warmer weather and perhaps friendlier people. There are very few survivors in the world, most having been burned to blackened skeletons during the unspecified event which brought ruination to presumably the whole planet. Many who have survived are reduced to lives of cannibalism and worse. About the event itself, the reader knows very little. “The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (52) is all the reader is told of the event that destroys most all living creatures on earth. There is no vegetation or insect life. Only a few desperate humans roam this part of the country; every day brings a frantic search for food among the abandoned homes and stores of the decimated towns and cities.

*The Road* is perhaps McCarthy’s most explicitly theological work. There are many references to God and belief, an encounter with a “prophet” named Eli, allusions to religious ceremonies, and discussions of the meaning of a destroyed world with perhaps a destroyed God. The father refers to the son as “the word of God” (5). Moreover, the father encourages the son throughout the novel by telling him to continue on the road because the son must “carry the fire...inside [him]” (278-9). Perhaps here, the “fire” serves as an allusion to the Holy Spirit or some other internalized grace. However, some
critics have read the religion in the book in an ironic way. The thinking goes that McCarthy criticizes the father and types like him who would tell their children to believe in something like religion when it is clear that no religion exists and that their plight is hopeless. As evidence, these critics turn to the mother of the child who kills herself rather than face the inevitable. “Sooner or later,” she says, “they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him” (57). She seems to be the realist in the novel while the father fills his son’s head with ideas about God, spirit, meaning, and mission.

Critics who follow this line of reasoning suggest that belief in God, a God who was never there in the first place, has fallen by the wayside like so many others things from the old world in the ravaged wasteland. However, this is a strange reading given that the mother kills herself before the narrative of the book begins. Moreover, there are heart wrenching scenes of love between the father and the son as they make their way south. If the book’s point were merely one of nihilism, then these scenes would be laughable ridiculous in the face of the trials they go through to survive. The scenes between the two are not ridiculous, and it is hard to believe that McCarthy, who’s own son is about the age of “the boy,” would criticize paternal love. At the very least, the loving relationship between the two serves as a foundation for all meaning in the novel. However, the father sees more in the boy than merely a son to be taken care of. There is a deeper reason for his care and concern for the boy. He finds something in the boy that can be found nowhere else in the “barren, silent, godless” world. The father calls him a “golden chalice, good to house a god” (75) and a “glowing…tabernacle” (273). As noted above, he considers the boy to be the word of God (5), and the boy says of himself, “I am the one” (259), a phrase that resonates deeply with Christian scripture.
Nonetheless one may continue to read the novel as a critique of the foolishness of religious belief. Then the novel becomes a story of two fools who should have killed themselves when they had the chance, but instead wander stupidly towards their own certain, and probably violent, deaths. This would certainly be the most cynical of all readings. But admittedly the novel never comes down squarely on the side of God. There is always something to undermine the character’s trust in a benevolent, transcendent being. Thomas Schaub sums up this central tension in the novel:

McCarthy seems intent upon investing his story with elements of religious allegory (or at least implication). Insofar as the father and the son have no names, these characters invite the reader to think of the son as of the father, the son imbued with the father’s values, living on after the father dies, praying to his father. At the same time, the novel suggests that this ethico-religious dimension is merely the invention of the father—that the father’s love of his son is such that he views his son as a “child of god.”

In terms of the book’s theology this is the central question of the book—is God just make believe or is God a real presence in the world. Does the father’s relationship for the son allow him to keep up a practice (religious belief) from the previous, pre-apocalyptic world? Or does the father’s relationship with the son teach him something about a transcendent God who persists in the face of the near-complete destruction of the world?

Another way of putting the central tension within the novel is by comparing it to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. In other words, are the fires that have consumed the world the purifying fires of purgatory or the punishing fires of the inferno? McCarthy opens the book in a way similar to the opening of Dante’s *Inferno*. Like the pilgrim father of *The Road*, Dante’s narrator begins his trek through hell “within a dark forest” (*Inferno*). The father wakes from sleep “in the woods in the dark and the cold of night” (3). There are allusions to the creatures of hell. He has just woken from a dream in which he sees
himself and his son “like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast” where “a creature … raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders” (3-4). This certainly sounds like a scene from the bottom of Dante’s inferno. Moreover the earth is charred and destroyed; there seems to be no escape from it for the people trapped there. There are other indications that we are in Dante’s Inferno. There are many cannibalism scenes in The Road—humans held captive in basement for food, a newborn baby roasted on a spit, the skin and guts of a road agent piled on the side of the road, etc. Cannibalism is the ever present threat to the boy and the father. The father knows that if they are captured, they will not merely be killed, but they will be eaten as well. In the XXXIII Canto of Dante’s Inferno there is a scene of cannibalism. Count Ugolino, a political traitor, is damned for all eternity to gnaw at the back of the skull of his political opponent, Archbishop Ruggieri. Dante comes upon the scene to find, Ugolino’s “mouth uplifted from his grim repast, that sinner, wiping it upon the hair of the same head that he behind had wasted” (Inferno). This is as grim as any of the scenes of cannibalism in The Road, and would seem to indicate that our pilgrims travel on a road through hell.

However, there are also scenes to indicate that our pilgrims travel not through hell but through a purgatory of sorts. They are driven to pursue their mission of finding a better place to live. McCarthy refers to them several times as “pilgrims” on a journey to a better place. The father has hope for a better future. After they find a can of Coca-Cola, the boy asks why his father wanted him to drink the soda: “It’s because I wont ever get to drink another one, isnt it?” (24) The father responds, “Ever’s a long time” (24). The
father indicates that their eternity might not be spent in a wasteland of hell, but that there may be better days ahead. Their mission has meaning and has an end.

Nonetheless, even though McCarthy suggests that both realities are possible—both purgatory and hell—he never resolves this tension that plays out throughout the book. The best solution towards a meaningful reading of the book means turning to Lynch’s ideas about the imagination’s attitude towards reality. The father uses an analogical approach towards reality. This suggests that the father approaches reality not with a univocal or equivocal imagination, stances that would prevent him from making insights regarding transcendence. He takes a generative stance towards the finite reality before him—never leaping too quickly to transcendence nor flattening all of reality into a dull sameness.

It would be very tempting for the father to become what Lynch calls a “facer of facts.” The boy’s mother takes this approach towards reality and concludes that all of reality has been destroyed and reduced to ash. Her imaginative stance towards reality is one of the univocal type. She sees no difference in anything, all reality for her has been reduced to a dull sameness. Love for her child and for her husband mean nothing anymore to her because she cannot see past the ash, destruction and murder that surrounds her. She believes that her husband approaches reality through the lens of the magical view—finding a too easily discovered transcendent hope. She believes she has the best read on the very limited and very finite reality that they face. However, her reading of reality leads to her self-destruction in her suicide.

The father, on the other hand, has what Lynch calls a generative approach to the finite (26). An imagination “that sees in the limited nature of existence the very and only
source of all our insights and transcendence” (26). He rarely lets his mind wander off into a dreamlike transcendent world, for his very survival depends on his ability to deal directly with his limited reality. For this reason, McCarthy gives us in excruciating detail the ins-and-outs of their daily routine. The process of finding food, building fires, heating the food, eating the food, fixing oil lamps, repairing broken shopping cart wheels, and the other minutiae of their daily existence.

Only because the father plunges into “the real contours of being” can he then “plunge up” into insight regarding his divine mission (“I was appointed by God …to take care of you” (77)). In a world where nearly all referents have been shorn of their meaning, the father finds meaning in his mission to take care of his son. The situation that the two face mightily tests their ability to see reality through the lens of a generative approach to the finite. Most of reality has been shorn from its foundations:

The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (88-9)

Here we see the challenge to the generative approach to finite reality in a world where former systems of meaning have fallen apart. All of the different things of the world are vanishing, leaving only a “raw core” with which to make meaning.

Lynch notes that the truth is found through the narrow “gate of the finite, the limited, and the definite” (41). McCarthy gives us a very narrow gate indeed. Through the “raw core of parsible entities” the boy and the man are left with little from which to make meaning of their world. They are forced by the apocalyptic destruction to find the truth through their mission with one another on the road. And perhaps here we find what
Auerbach would call McCarthy’s religious intent. In the final analysis, McCarthy is making a statement about finding a transcendent truth in a world where making of meaning seems nearly impossible. Through what little there is left in the world, the two pilgrims find a higher meaning to life through each other and their common mission to find a better life.

In fact, there is a Christological element to the truth that they discover. Lynch notes: “Christ moved down into all the realities of man to get to His father” (23). So too the boy and the man plunge into the depths of the reality surrounding them in order to get to something like the Father. After the boy’s father dies, a family of “good guys” (283) finds the boy and adopts him as one of their own. The mother of the family

would talk to him sometimes of God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget. The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time. (286)

The father had taught the boy to pray to him just before the father died. And so the boy does pray to “his father.” By the end of the novel, the end of the road, the boy discovers an ability to connect with a transcendent reality through prayer to his father.

5. Conclusion

Cormac McCarthy, although he has often been accused of such, is not a nihilist. He does not merely string together meaningless scenes of violence for titillating effect. On the contrary, with his graphic violence he plumbs the extremes of humanity and tests the limits of what Lynch calls the generative approach to the finite. McCarthy easily plunges “down into the concrete” (Lynch 25), but one may wonder if he makes the generative plunge “up into the unlimited” (Lynch 25). The analysis of the three novels above shows that he does indeed make the generative upward plunge into transcendence.
Albeit through the presentation of horrific suffering, these three novels are aware of a transcendent reality beyond the limited and finite actions of the characters. The suffering that takes place in these novels presents provides the means for “imagining the horizon of our hope” (McManus 477). Schillebeeckx’s category of “negative contrast experience” helps to show how the unflinching portrayal of so much violence can dialectically lead to a sense of goodness. The evil portrayed in these novels brings us to a better sense of the good by which the evil may be judged. However, this transcendent reality does not render dull or ineffectual the actions and personalities of the characters and the details of the novels.
Chapter Three
Reappraising Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetics

1. Introduction

As noted earlier, Balthasar discounts the novel. However, with the help of Auerbach and Lynch, and a close study of Balthasar’s own theology, we can see how his own theology of literature might be strengthened and deepened by including the novel, at least the three novels we have looked at. The exclusion of the novel from a theology of literature is problematic on at least four accounts. First, we would be excluding the chief genre of literature of the past three hundred years. This is too big a chunk of world-wide literary output, and a theology of literature without the novel would be therefore incomplete. Secondly, according to the insights of Auerbach, we would be excluding a type of secular scripture. Auerbach shows us that literary realism, which the novel tends to prefer over other literary modes, is the true descendent of the sacred texts of ancient Israel and early Christianity. Thirdly, to exclude the novel is to risk excluding a good part of the product of the analogical/theological imagination as set out by Lynch. The novels we have analyzed above are the products of an analogical imagination, an imagination that is most incarnational and thus a pathway back to God. Lastly, Balthasar’s own theology of literature, which is a part of his larger theological project, is actually well-suited to examining and including the novel. Using Balthasar’s theological insights can help us take full advantage of including the novel in a theology of literature.

The projects of all three men are highly incarnational. The incarnation serves as a point of intersection for the though of Balthasar, Lynch, and Auerbach. Since Auerbach argues that the foundation of literary realism is to be found in the theology of incarnation, then it is possible to show that the novel (the chief form of literary realism) should be
considered by Balthasar’s theology. Grounded as it is in incarnational theology, literary realism, in the form of the novel, serves as a place where readers can “see the form” of Christ. With regards to the thought of Lynch, his insistence on the use of the analogical imagination can help Balthasar’s project insofar as it provides certain skills needed to “see the form” of Christ in the world.

2. Balthasar’s Theological Project—“The fascination is with Jesus Christ” (Balthasar, “Theology” 64)

To begin, it is necessary to track the development of Balthasar’s work from his beginnings with literature to his ultimate project with theology. This will highlight certain aspects of central to his theology: beauty, Gestalt (form), and his intense focus on Christ.

In a 1980 address at the Catholic University of America, on the occasion of the receipt of an honorary doctorate, Balthasar explained his own academic journey from the study of literature to the investigation of theology. His goal with the talk was “to acquaint you with my reasons for changing from the study of humanities to theology” (“Theology” 62). He began his post-graduate career with “ten semesters” of German philology and literature and received a doctorate in the field. He “never earned a doctorate in theology” (62). However, the questions he investigated in literature led him to the field of theology. He wondered why a certain work of art “becomes incomparable within its own genre” (63). For instance, “why the difference between Kyd’s Hamlet and that of Shakespeare? Why does Plato rank so high among philosophers that a modern scholar could say that all later philosophers were merely commentators?” (63).

Answering this question regarding the formation of classics in the field of art, Balthasar developed “the keynote that later became central in [his] theology” (63). He
developed the concept of *Gestalt*, “an expression hard to translate: form, figure, shape” (63). He compares *Gestalt* to Gerard Manley Hopkins’s concept of “inscape.” Like “inscape,” *Gestalt* expresses a concept in which “the mind sees an organized whole, with all the articulation of detail necessary for the comprehension of the basic idea manifest in its fullness” (63). Elaborating on *Gestalt*, Balthasar writes:

> A great work of art is not built from already coined words but creates from the imprinted language new, never-heard words which, when uttered, explain themselves to those who have eyes and ears to hear it…Each time [great works of art] reveal, even for the “skilled senses” of gifted listeners, greater depth, deeper satisfactions. (63)

A great work of art has a form, a shape, a *Gestalt* that maintains all of the detail, subtlety and difference in a work of art while at the same time conveying a fully unified idea.

Continuing his journey from literature to theology, Balthasar then compares great works of art to the communion of saints. Saints, like the classics in art, “partake of the uniqueness of God not only by species but especially individually” (64). It seems that the perfection of each saint is a limited, creaturely instance of a participation in the infinite, “uniqueness of the one God” (64). In this way, saints are like great works of art in that they have the capacity to powerfully reveal through their uniqueness, or in the words of Lynch, they reveal through their finite, creatureliness. Even though there is a communion of saints, “a family” (64), “each is incomparable” (64) and reveal the uniqueness of God through their participation in the beautiful form. It is easy to see how Balthasar could transition from his focus on art and literature to an intense focus on theology, especially in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the most unique, most revelatory work of God on earth.
Jesus Christ becomes Balthasar’s starting point for his theological project, not some “religious sense that subjectively exists in every person” (64). While he admits that all of humanity has “the desire to see the wholly good” (64), and that this desire can lead one to a study of philosophy of religion or to the history of religion, he insists that this is not enough for a theological starting point. Only taking Jesus Christ as a starting point will lead one to a truly Christian theology. After leaving behind philology and literature, Balthasar’s new “fascination is with Jesus Christ” (64). Balthasar is most interested in Christ as a starting point because “he is the one and only exposition of God (John 1, 8), infinitely rich and of a paradoxical simplicity that integrates all the elements” (64-5). We come to know this Jesus through “a magnificent polyphony” of “testimonials of faith” (65) that we find in the gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and St. Paul. Balthasar compares the variety of testimonials to a statue “that has to be observed from all directions to understand its self-expression” (65). The more views we can take in, the more we come to see the “unity of the inspiration” (65).

Here we come to the purpose of Balthasar’s theological project. He wants to train us to be able to view Christ from as many different angles as possible so that we can recognize him (66). Upon recognizing him, we will be drawn into God the Father. Since “God does not show himself to us only to be admired [but] he wants to draw us into his own life” (67). As Balthasar claims, “God created man as a God-seeker so that He may freely manifest himself as a finder of man” (68). The task of reading and recognizing Christ in the world is very similar to reading and recognizing meaning in works of literature. The transcendental category of the beautiful serves as the foundation for seeing the form of Christ in the world and for making meaning in literature.
Through the category of the beautiful, Balthasar’s theology provides a good way
to approach literature with an eye towards reinvigorating both literature and theology.

Balthasar develops this approach through his theological aesthetics in Seeing the Form,
the first volume of The Glory of the Lord. He begins with a reconsideration of the
thr{e}ncendental categories: truth, goodness, and beauty. The category of beauty had, after
Kant, become separated from the other transcendental and reduced by some philosophers
to nothing more than a subjective element of perception, understood in the categories of
psychology and individual taste.

He carefully distinguishes between two ways of doing theology vis a vis beauty.
The word ‘aesthetic’ when used in the phrase, ‘aesthetic theology,’ “will inevitably be
understood in the worldly, limited and therefore, pejorative sense” (79)—a theory of
beauty wherein beauty is divorced from the other transcendentals. However, by the term
‘theological aesthetics’ Balthasar means an theology “which develops its theory of beauty
from the data of revelation itself with genuinely theological methods” (117). The
foundation for Balthasar’s concept of beauty is nothing less than revelation itself. This is
very different from other definitions of beauty wherein a standard is found within the
perceiver. On the contrary, Balthasar’s beauty is grounded in revelation, most especially
the revelation as found in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. It would be a terrible
misreading of Balthasar to divorce his concept of beauty from the fully incarnated Christ,
especially the Christ we see upon the cross. More on this later.

Balthasar develops his theory of theological aesthetics in two phases: a theory of
vision and a theory of rapture. The development of this two-fold concept highlights the
role of faith in the training of the person to behold the form of Christ in the world. The
theory of vision develops concepts helpful to perceiving the “form of God’s self-revelation” (125), and the theory of rapture emphasizes “the incarnation of God’s glory and the consequent elevation of man to participate in that glory” (125). The two theories cannot be separated from each other; vision leads to rapture. The grace which allows us to see the form of Christ in the world is the same grace which enraptures us and makes possible “man’s participation in God, which from God’s perspective is actualized as ‘revelation’…and which, from man’s perspective, is actualized as ‘faith’” (125).

According to Balthasar, the human spirit is on a road that “seeks for Christian truth (intellectus quarens fidem)” (126) and this journey is aided by the “form of God’s revelation” (126). The journey on this road, illuminated by “the rays of divine light” which show the form of revelation in the world, is made easier through the revelation of God in Christ. The searching human spirit is trained “in an act and habitus which will become perfect faith once the vision has itself been perfected” (126). Grace illuminates the journey of the human spirit whose response is a faithful following of the way. As the journey continues, the human spirit grows more adept at perceiving the form of the way (Christ) and “the image in which God initially appeared and illumined me deepens and acquires traits that reveal new and even deeper aspects of its rightness” (126). Faith is the graced habitus or virtue that allows me to see the form, become enraptured by the content of the form, and more closely follow the way of truth. In a sense then, beauty is what trains and shapes our Christian faith in its journey towards God.

The centrality of beauty to Balthasar’s two-fold aesthetic project can be seen further in his warnings as to what happens when beauty is separated from the other
transcendentals (aestheticism). To ignore beauty and exclude it from theology has even more drastic consequences than entering an age of aestheticism.

We can be sure that whoever sneers at [beauty’s] name as if she were the ornament of a bourgeois past—whether he admits it or not—can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love. (Seeing the Form 18).

When beauty is no longer considered important, then

naked matter remains as an indigestible symbol of fear and anguish. Since nothing else remains, and yet something must be embraced, twentieth-century man is urged to enter this impossible marriage with matter, a union which finally spoils all man’s taste for love. But man cannot bear to live with the object of his impotence, that which remains permanently unmastered. He must either deny it or conceal it in the silence of death. (Seeing the Form 19).

Without beauty we are lost and left unable either to pray or to love. Without an ability to recognize beauty in the world we are left with only facts and the material world. Lynch calls people with this attitude towards reality the “facers of facts,” and they deny that finite reality can lead to transcendent insights. Lynch writes that people of this attitude “tell us nothing much can come out of our reality” (Christ 20) and moreover there is no such thing as objective “beauty or salvation” (20).

Both Balthasar and Lynch agree that to loose the capacity see meaning in reality will lead to disastrous consequences: no prayer, no love, no salvation. As a solution to this problem, Lynch focuses on the person’s imaginative capacity to recognize meaning in finite reality, whereas Balthasar chooses to focus on the form of the beautiful as it is linked with the true and the good. According to Balthasar, “the appearance of the form, as revelation of the depths, is an indissoluble union of two things. It is the real presence of the depths, of the whole of reality, and it is a real pointing beyond itself to these depths” (118). Moreover,
We are ‘enraptured’ by our contemplation of these depths and are ‘transported’ to them. But, so long as we are dealing with the beautiful, this never happens in such a way that we leave the (horizontal) form behind us in order to plunge (vertically) into the naked depths. (119)

With Lynch the analogical imagination in contact with finite reality leads us to the transcendent, whereas in Balthasar it is being enraptured by the beautiful that leads us to the transcendent.

In the case of the form of beauty, we are drawn towards the beautiful into an encounter with the very depth of being itself—God. The encounter with this depth is a transforming encounter for the beholder of the beautiful form. In other words, the real power of the form is to enrapture and transform the perceiver. The rapture is not so much individualistic, private ecstasy as it is being drawn out of a false self and being transformed into a truer self. This dynamic is never truer than in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. In the form that is the life of Christ, there is both revelation and concealment:

Jesus is the Word, the Image, the Expression and the Exegesis of God. Jesus bears witness to God as a man, by using the whole expressional apparatus of human existence from birth to death, including all stages of life, the solitary and social situations. He is what he expresses—namely, God—but he is not whom he expresses—namely, the Father. This incomparable paradox stands as the fountainhead of the Christian aesthetic, and therefore of all aesthetics! (Seeing 29).

The encounter with Christ transforms us into an alter Christus wherein we become our truest self “in Christ.”

As Yeago points out regarding Balthasar’s Christology, “Christian faith is centered on a particular person, Jesus of Nazareth, who is confessed to be of universal significance precisely as a particular person, in his singular, contingent concreteness” (97) (cf. Lynch 5-6). In other words, Jesus Christ does not save us “because he
symbolizes or mediates some more general truth, value, or dynamism; rather it is just in
the concrete *Gestalt* of his unique identity and the contingent singularity of his story that
his all-encompassing redemptive significance is to be found” (97).

However, within this revelation lies a paradox—“alas, we see God’s glory only in
reflections and riddles, even unto the greatest paradox, the abandonment of Christ by God
on the cross (“Theology” 67). Here we find the most important consequence of defining
beauty not in terms of worldly beauty—a beauty beholden to taste. The most “beautiful”
moment of Christ’s life, according to Balthasar, is paradoxically the abandonment and the
suffering of Christ on the cross. It is in Christ’s complete self-emptying that we find the
most beautiful aspect of the passion, death, and resurrection. According to Balthasar,

> What God’s glory in its good truth is, was to be revealed in Jesus Christ,
and ultimately in his absolute obedience of Cross and Hell. The unique ray
of the divine majesty of love is to become visible form the unique
momentum of this event, establishing the norm for everything that can lay
claim to the predicate ‘glorious’… (*The New Covenant* 243)

Here we see that Balthasar’s concept of theological beauty clearly does not depend on
matters of taste, for who would find the suffering of the cross and the subsequent
suffering in hell a “beautiful” thing.

Rather than something to titillate and entertain us, beauty is beautiful because all
the parts are in a compelling harmony and integrity as a whole (Gestalt). The beauty of
God can

> make its voice heard in very many different ways, for it would not be a
statement about God unless it were the expression of his hiddeness just as
much as the expression of his manifestation, possessing dimensions
enough to make itself known in Cross and death as much as in
Resurrection” (*The New Covenant* 242)
This odd paradox insists that God reveals something about God’s self as much through being absent as God does through being present. Christ is not beautiful as Michelangelo’s David is beautiful. As Raymond Gawronski notes:

> The beauty of Jesus is one that ‘was marred,’ one that, being truly beautiful, was also somehow terrible. In the hauntingly beautiful suffering servant passages, the mysterious passages where Balthasar sees the uniqueness of the New Testament revelation suddenly, unaccountably emerging in the middle of the Old Testament, we find a prophecy of one whose beauty is not of this world. In fact, it is a face one would not notice, and even that face was marred. (201)

Because Christ is God and God is beautiful by definition, then all that Christ does, especially in the passion, death, and resurrection, is beautiful a priori.

However, this way of thinking might present a problem in terms of the relationship between the beauty of Christ and ‘intramundane,’ or worldly beauty. Balthasar’s logic might go something like this, as noted by Stephen Fields: “once we accept in faith the revealed beauty of the Christ-form, then we are led to wonder whether the Grand Canyon, the Pantheon and Grunewald’s altarpiece are authentically beautiful” (175). This sharp a divide between divine beauty and worldly beauty is unsatisfying for Fields. There must be a link between the two beauties.

Field’s analysis of Balthasar’s aesthetics raises the question of the relationship between divine beauty and worldly beauty. If God, through the revelation of Christ, shows the world what true beauty looks like, and if that beauty is seen in the ugliness of the cross, then what are we to do with worldly theories of beauty? Fields finds that there must be an “analogical middle path” (176) between what he and Lynch call the univocal path and the equivocal path. A univocal approach would “sacrifice Christianity’s notion of the divine transcendence” (176), whereas an equivocal route “would juxtapose” divine
beauty and worldly beauty “as contradictory” (176). Fields argues that Balthasar does not give a full enough treatment of the relationship between the two beauties (divine and worldly).

Therefore, Fields, attempting to strengthen Balthasar’s claims regarding beauty makes an appeal to the analogical relationship between divine and “intramundane” beauty. He writes: “As analogous, God’s beauty and intramundane aesthetics must enjoy marked difference within a certain authentic similarity” (176). Fields, makes Balthasar “more apparently coherent” on this subject by turning to Balthasar’s interpretation of Aquinas’ doctrine of analogy. Oddly, Fields has not turned to the work of Lynch, who seems to have already worked through this problem in Christ and Apollo. Lynch, like Fields, also points out that analogy is the link between divinity and the created world.

Thus for Balthasar theology “in the strict sense of the word cannot do any abstracting at all; all it can do is display the normative content shining out from the irreducible fact” (A Theology of History 22) of Jesus Christ in all of his concrete reality. The theologian’s task is to put back together the normative content with the irreducible fact. In the words of Nicholas Boyle, “the event and its meaning shift apart and have to be reconnected, mediated to each other, by institutional or personal memory or symbolic embodiment, by signs enacted and by words spoken and written” (Sacred 73). When the two are put back together, we have testimony. Testimony “is the communication of truth…through events, through singular, real instances of the overcoming of evil, of that which is unjustifiable by any rational rule” (Sacred 72).

3. Balthasar’s Literary Project
Although Balthasar’s work primarily supports his theological project, he remained closely connected to his previous endeavors in literature. According to Ed Block, “Balthasar’s theology is so enmeshed with his literary sensibility that it … even vitiates that theology” (207). The two projects are not easily separated from one another as he notably examines secular literature in Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles, the third volume of The Glory of the Lord. There he examines several secular authors, among them the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.

The value of his literary criticism, according to Block, can be noted for its “assertion of beauty’s relation to the Being which gives all things their inherent beauty” (207). Moreover, for “those interested in Balthasar’s religious thought” knowing his relationship to literature “can only enrich the appreciation of—and critical engagement with—his theological work” (Block 207-8). As another theologian has pointed out, “few theologians in this century have written both highly technical and creative treatments of the Trinitarian and Christological doctrines, and informed discussions of Shakespeare, Shaw, Brecht, and Ionesco” (Yeago 95).

According to Block, Balthasar’s approach to literature can be distinguished from the methods of others by his focus on literature as a “relative singularity” in history. For Balthasar, certain “relatively singular events in history” (209) make claims upon us. Christ’s claim to be the way, the truth and the life represents a claim to absolute singularity. This claim to absolute singularity can only be understood by analogy with other realities that are relatively singular. Examples of relative singularities are love, death, and art. Christ operates in the same way that love, death, and art makes claims upon humankind (Block 208-9). Like Christ, love, death, and art are relatively singular
moments in people’s lives. Block notes three distinct characteristics about Balthasar’s method of approaching the relative singularity of great works of literature. First, Balthasar rejects the genetic fallacy, which insists that a work can be explained totally by examining its presuppositions and its origins. In other words, there is more to a work of art than its historical context, its predecessors or the sum of its parts. Second, Balthasar stresses “astonishment as the first moment of aesthetic appreciation” (Block 209). This astonishment is the feeling of being overwhelmed by the work of art. As Balthasar notes: astonishment “is not possession, but being possessed, that lends wings to Christian hope. It vibrates with the thought that the earth should reply to heaven in a way that heaven has already addressed earth” (Truth is Symphonic 191). Thirdly, Balthasar stresses “objective standards of appreciation over the subjective readiness of the viewer/reader to ‘get’ the work” (Block 209). On this point Balthasar insists that individual readers of great works of literature must be attuned to the objective standards of great works of art. In “Why I Am Still a Christian,” Balthasar insists

a great work of art has a certain universal comprehensibility but discloses itself more profoundly and more truly to an individual, the more attuned and practiced his powers of perception are. Not everyone picks up the unique inflection of the Greek chorus of Sophocles… (qtd. in Block 210-11)

On this third point it is worth defending Balthasar against charges of elitism. Some, like Nicholas Boyle, have accused Balthasar of sounding snobbish on this third point about the objective standards of great works of art. Boyle goes as far as comparing Balthasar’s literary method to that of the Nazis (“Art” 108). Balthasar does seem overly concerned with identifying great works of art, what David Tracy might call classics. Sometimes it can seem that Balthasar is more interested in separating the literary sheep
from the goats than he is concerned with gleaning theological insights from literary works of art. Perhaps Balthasar’s disciples are more to blame for trying to identify and narrow the range of works that can be considered objectively great. Sometimes the disciples of Balthasar are the ones who sound most snobbish, even gleeful, as they consider themselves among the select few who get all of Shakespeare. They can also sound happy in their being among only a few who ‘get’ Jesus.

However, these were not the goals of Balthasar’s theological projects. His goal, like Lynch’s is to place literature (and Christ) in its rightful place within civilization. In other words, his goal is to broaden, not narrow, the audience through training them to see the form of Christ in the world. Likewise, Lynch wants to salvage literature from the hands of those who want to make it more and more esoteric. The relative singularities of life are not reserved for some special coterie, in fact, on the contrary, all people encounter moments of relative singularity in love, death, and art. Balthasar’s goal is to have more and more people be able to truly comprehend the full import of such moments. By pointing out the analogical relationship between ‘relative singularities’ and the ‘absolute singularity’ of Christ, Balthasar attempts to open up access to Christ to all who have experienced death, love or art. Balthasar bemoans the current situation wherein people cannot perceive meaning in the world; he does not celebrate the fact.

Although predisposed against the genre of the novel, Balthasar did write at length on at least one novelist, the French writer Georges Bernanos (1888-1848). Looking at Balthasar on Bernanos will give us further indications of Balthasar’s literary project. Bernanos engaged Balthasar in several ways, especially because he had a “feel for the truth, including the truth of his own times” (Bernanos 18). According to Block, Balthasar
was “most drawn to the person and work of Bernanos” because he “was not a theologian” (214). Balthasar explains his fascination with authors who are not theologians:

> Some also hold it against theological authors that nowadays they are too concerned with writers of literary works instead of plying their own trade. …it could just be that in the great Catholic literary figures we find more originality and vibrancy of thought—an intellectual life thriving superbly in a free and open landscape—than we do in the somewhat panting, long-winded theology of our time, which is satisfied with quite slender fare. (Bernanos 17)

Here we see Balthasar himself arguing a writer, in this case a novelist, actually makes for better a theologian than do the theologians themselves. “Catholic literary figures,” among whom I would include Cormac McCarthy, have a greater “originality and vibrancy of though” when it comes to theological topics. Balthasar supposes that these writers of fiction are somehow writing better theology than some theologians who are offering “quite slender fare.”

Balthasar’s commentary on Bernanos provides a point of comparison with McCarthy’s work and perhaps a entry point for including the work of McCarthy in a Balthasarian theology of literature. Much of Bernanos’s writing, according to Balthasar, attempts to get at the “depth of evil” in the world. Without an understanding of this depth of evil, “reality must remain an unknown” (Bernanos 197). Balthasar writes:

> all those who have tried to plumb the abyss of evil in man by means of psychology or by a process of uninhibited ‘stripping down’ have experienced the shipwreck of absolute boredom, of the void with nothing to say. To reconnoiter hell by means of ‘analysis’ results in the kind of disintegration that in the end leads precisely to hell. Such ‘analysis’ will never produce the desired ‘synthesis’ of hell, which can be achieved only from the standpoint of its opposite, namely, God. Thus the imaginative writer cannot perform his task without the aid of theology, because ‘art…needs one thing above all else: namely, truth. (Bernanos 197).
Investigating evil, in other words, for the sake of investigating evil will render nothing but “boredom” in the literary work. The author, according to Balthasar, who best synthesizes hell is the author who uses theology as an aid in writing. With this in mind, Cormac McCarthy’s investigation of the wasteland of hell in *Blood Meridian* resonates with Balthasar’s comments on hell. McCarthy looks at hell, I have argued, through the lens of Holy Saturday, that is, aided by the Church’s theology of Holy Saturday. *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* are perhaps the works where McCarthy’s “originality and vibrancy of thought” are best on display as he investigates hell on earth.

4. Balthasar and Auerbach

The works of Lynch and Auerbach can supplement Balthasar’s theological and Christological project. Auerbach will show how “great works of art” can be said to include literary realism and its chief form of expression, the novel. Lynch can show how the imaginative process of the artist is a participation in the drama of our salvation.

In his article, “‘Art,’ Literature, and Theology,” Nicholas Boyle correctly notes that although they were contemporaries working in similar fields, Balthasar never references or acknowledges the work of Erich Auerbach (108). Comparing *Mimesis* to *The Glory of the Lord*, Boyle writes:

*[Mimesis]* too was written by a German scholar, though a scholar of the Romance languages. Universal in its sympathies where Balthasar is parochial, passionately engaged with literature and the business of criticism rather than with the art and aesthetics of a bureaucratic elite, Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* is not mentioned in any of Balthasar’s volumes which I have consulted. Yet Auerbach’s thesis that Western literary realism has been made possible by the combination in the Gospels of a Jewish-Christian typological substructure with what the ancients knew as the ‘low style,’… is of direct relevance to what is or ought to be Balthasar’s central theme—the manifestation in the flesh of the glory as the only-begotten of the Father. (108).
Boyle’s critique of Balthasar is unfair on a few accounts. While it might be true that Balthasar does not mention Auerbach when perhaps he should have, this does not mean that Balthasar and Auerbach are in disagreement. Moreover, while it is true that Balthasar might detest the “low style,” this does not mean that he could not be persuaded to take into account the insights of such works of literature and their theological claims, especially where they buttress his own central claims regarding Christ. Moreover, Balthasar cannot be blamed entirely for his literary snobbery. Many literary critics of his time and culture likewise would have dismissed the low style of novels. In other words, he comes by his snobbery honestly. To compare fairly Auerbach and Balthasar, one needs to look at Auerbach’s explanation of the origin of and reason for the low style. Here Auerbach and Balthasar may be seen as more compatible with one another than Boyle admits.

For Auerbach, the origin and cause of the “low style” has its roots in the incarnational theology of Jewish-Christian theology. One may say that literary realism was born of the incarnational theology of Jewish-Christian theology. As noted above in chapter one, the mingling of styles (low and high) as found in the New Testament was not so much an artistic choice as it was a result of incarnational theology:

[literary realism] was rooted from the beginning in the character of Jewish-Christian literature; it was graphically and harshly dramatized through God’s incarnation in a human being of the humblest social station, through his existence on earth amid humble everyday people and conditions, and through his Passion which, judged by earthly standards, was ignominious; and it naturally came to have—in view of the wide diffusion and strong effect of that literature in later ages—a most decisive bearing upon man’s conception of the tragic and the sublime. (Mimesis 41)
Literary realism is founded upon a theology of incarnation, and the sort of incarnation that placed God’s only begotten “in a human being of the humblest social station” amidst people of very humble conditions.

Balthasar’s own thinking on the incarnation is not much different from Auerbach’s. Christ was made man in a very concrete and historically real way. Christ is not an abstraction or an idea, but a human in every way. According to Balthasar,

As One and Unique, and yet as one who is to be understood only in the context of mankind’s entire history…Jesus bears witness to God as a man, by using the whole expressive apparatus of human existence from birth to death, including all stages of life, all the states of life, the solitary and the social situations. (Seeing the Form 29).

Both Balthasar and Auerbach stress the “social” setting of the incarnation. Both emphasize the humble nature of the social setting. Both stress similar features of the incarnation and one can find agreement between the two. Both take the incarnation as starting points for their projects. In other words, the content of revelation serves as the objective standard by which literature may be judged.

Auerbach’s insight regarding the mingling of styles and its relationship to the incarnation can strengthen Balthasar’s own literary project. Auerbach, as Boyle notes, takes into consideration a much wider range of literary works than does Balthasar. Auerbach highlights the development of literary realism, a category Balthasar misses because of his educational background in German philology. Overlooking literary realism, Balthasar weakens his highly incarnational theology by missing the most incarnational of literary forms. To include literary realism in a Balthasarian theology of literature, will result in a fully incarnational approach to literary criticism and theology, one that sees more deeply the human situation into which the Son of God became human.
Likewise, literary realism gives us the multilayeredness of humanity and the rich intrahistorical movements underlying history; therefore, we can, through the novel, come to a better understanding of what Balthasar calls the “context of mankind’s entire history” (*Seeing the Form* 29). This better appreciation for the context of humanity’s entire history will, because of the incarnation, also give us a better understanding what exactly was taken on by divinity in the incarnation. Therefore we will be in a better position to see the form of Christ’s beauty in the world because we will know better the situation into which Christ was incarnated. Since we will be better able to perceive the beauty of Christ, we will be more enraptured by that beauty and more thoroughly transformed into the *alter Christus*.

5. Balthasar and Lynch

Lynch’s project, like that of Balthasar and Auerbach, is incarnational in its approach. Lynch takes Christ “for the completely definite, for the Man who, in taking on our human nature…took on every inch of it (save sin) in all its density” (*Christ* 5). This puts Lynch theologically alongside both Auerbach and Balthasar. All three speak of the incarnation as an event of great depth in which God as man takes on all dimensions of humankind in its historical and social richness. If Auerbach strengthens Balthasar’s theology of incarnation, then we might say that Lynch provides support for Balthasar’s two-fold theory of aesthetics—theology of vision and theology of rapture. Lynch and Balthasar are concerned with both the honing of our ability to look at reality and see evidence of Christ’s incarnation in the world and our being enraptured and transformed by divinity. Through the concept of the analogical imagination, Lynch shows how the beauty of Christ and the beauty of the world are related and thus can help us to better see
Christ in the world. More than just training us to see reality for what it is, the analogical imagination also shows us how we are plunged upward into transcendent divinity.

Lynch claims his model for the analogical imagination is the life of Christ where Christ, as son of the Father, “represents an ideal point at which the imagination can relax the strain” (Christ 26) of being pulled simultaneously towards finite reality and transcendence. Christology, in particular the incarnation, is his model in this regard since “Christ moved down into all the realities of man to get to His father” (Christ 23). Christ, in his incarnation, demonstrates the way in which a properly analogical imagination works when encountering the finite, limited, uniqueness of humanity. In the incarnation Christ takes on all of humanity’s finitude, limitedness, and uniqueness, and in doing so finds a way back to the Father. This is the way the analogical imagination works—encountering reality so as to make a transcendent insight. Since the analogical imagination is based on Christ’s own life, this imagination can be used to come into contact with God through Christ.

Both men strike similar tones when critiquing the regnant literary/theological cultures of their times. Balthasar rightfully complains that “works of art can die as a result of being looked at by too many dull eyes, and even the radiance of holiness can, in a way, become blunted when it encounters nothing but hollow indifference” (Seeing the Form 23). Lynch argues that wrongheaded approaches to literature “avoid the question of that true and fundamental relevancy of the literary organism to reality without which the student is perfectly entitled to his boredom or lack or orientation” (Christ 3). Using the capacity for analogical imagining will put literature back “in its rightful relation with the human and the real” (Christ 1) in much the same way that Balthasar’s concept of a
capacity to see the form of Christ in the world will put theology in proper relationship with the beautiful, the good, the true and Being itself. Lynch and Balthasar both want to find a way forward that will challenge the current culture’s ennui with Christ and literature’s ability to put us in contact with the transcendent.

Both men would agree that “reality is not block to insight” (Christ 252) insofar as the foundation of all reality is the historical act of the incarnation and the subsequent life, death, and resurrection of Christ. One must have the habitus to read reality, as one might read a poem or a novel, for evidence of God’s presence in the world through Christ. For both men, an encounter with reality will lead us to God. In Balthasar’s theo-logic, beauty draws us closer to the good so that we may affirm the truth or the real. While Lynch does not make use of the category of the beautiful, he employs a similar theo-logic. Works of art that are created with the analogical imagination can draw us towards a “Christic point.” Lynch’s theo-logic looks like this: if Christ is at the center of the theological imagination then,

we can keep penetrating more and more deeply into the detail of [Christ], who is penetrating the detail of life as a way to life, and let the other side of the picture—the dream, the divine, the unlimited, the beauty—take care of itself. (Christ 26).

While it might seem that Lynch discounts the concept of beauty, I would argue that he and Balthasar have a similar notion but call it two different things. Balthasar’s beauty is Lynch’s “detail.” Lynch’s finite detail in reality works in the same way as does Balthasar’s concept of beauty. An encounter with the limited, finite reality of humanity can draw us up into an encounter with the transcendent. In fact, finite reality, if we have the capacity for the analogical imagination, guides us towards the transcendent in much
the same that beauty reaches out towards us, drawing us ever closer to the good and Being itself.

Of course, Balthasar’s concept of beauty is not exactly the same thing as Lynch’s concept of the finite aspect of reality. Perhaps it is better to say that beauty cannot be encountered except through the real world and that real world is limited and definite. Balthasar’s concept of beauty contains within it Lynch’s insistence upon the possibilities for encountering the divine in the definite, finite world. There is an objective standard in Balthasar’s concept of beauty (the revelation in Christ), and Lynch points us in the direction to find that standard: the limited, finite nature of reality. The limited nature of reality smacks us in the face in much the same way that Balthasar’s concept of beauty awes and overwhelms us.

Both men, in their own way, have plumbed the depths of the relationship between divinity and the created world. Their projects aim to reconnect the link that has been dulled by too many disinterested eyes through an exploration of how our contact with the beautiful and the finite works to help us reach and be reached by the transcendent divinity. Both men imply that there is a habitus (Balthasar) or attitude (Lynch) necessary for making possible this dynamic encounter with beauty/reality. Lynch searches for “an ideal attitude for the imagination in relations to the finite” (Christ 25). Balthasar writes that the human spirit is trained “in an act and a habitus which will become perfect faith” (Seeing 125). Lynch’s attitude is closely related to Balthasar’s habitus. Balthasar’s habitus has the advantage of connoting dynamic action on the part of the person, while “attitude” does not quite capture that level of activity. Nonetheless the two men are speaking about more or less the same thing. Both Lynch’s ‘attitude’ and Balthasar’s
‘habitus’ require a certain amount of trusting freedom on the part of the person. In other words, a degree of faith is necessary as one embarks on the human spirit’s journey towards God.

This is how reading novels can actually prepare us for the journey of the human spirit. Among other things, reading literary realism requires us to trust that the details will add up to more than their parts. When reading enraptures us, we are being prepared and trained for being enraptured by divinity in all its worldly manifestations. But more than merely serving as examples of how divinity relates to creation, novels actually participate in the plan of salvation by virtue of their foundation in literary realism—the most incarnational of all genres.

6. Conclusion

Perhaps it is true that Balthasar never outgrew his literary snobbishness. In his large work on the novelist Bernanos, he claims there are “no heirs” to “the flourishing of Catholic literature, which blossomed…during the first half of the twentieth century” (Bernanos 17). After “Bloy, Peguy, Claudel, and Bernanos” (17) there is, in the mind of Balthasar, no more Catholic literature. Perhaps it is also true that Balthasar was overly concerned with identifying great works of art, with the creation of a small canon of truly good art. He admits that his early interest in German philology centered around finding “a work of art that becomes incomparable within its own genre” (“Theology” 63). Maybe his list of great works of art is conditioned too much by his own literary tastes, thus resulting in a very small canon of approved works of art. Nicholas Boyle is correct in saying that Balthasar should have been more interested in “modern realistic prose” for “the fullness of its depiction of a world so interesting to God that He sent His Son to
redeem it” (“Art” 108). However, comparing the insights of Auerbach and Lynch with those of Balthasar has shown that, had it not been for his snobbishness, Balthasar might have turned more quickly towards modern realistic prose. He might not have abandoned the field altogether after his treatment of Bernanos.

The projects of the three men, Balthasar, Auerbach and Lynch, intersect at the doctrine of the incarnation. Auerbach and Lynch can help to remove the cultural blinders from Balthasar, and his disciples. Auerbach and Lynch show that it is possible to widen the field of inquiry beyond that of the rarified world of the classic. The three thinkers, taken together, give us a better way to read modern realistic prose.
Works Cited


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