Introduction

G. K. Chesterton, in a show of disgust at the sight of a row of telegraph poles, once pronounced, "A straight line is always ugly. Beauty is always crooked." What Chesterton overstates is true; beauty is not contained within the uniform or the symmetrical—the merely neat—but branches out in unexpected ways like a tree. Christianity recognizes this truth in its attribution of beauty to God; beauty is primarily located within the divine life, which is unconstrained by principles such as "straightness" or "uniformity." God's life, at least in its expression towards creatures, is rich with grace, and grace is neither straight nor proportionate—it is gratuitous and untamed.

This book aims to discuss beauty from a theological vantage point. In the following pages, I will argue for a theological aesthetic derived from Christian doctrine. Theology has its own tools for the aesthetic task that rely on the revelation of God to fill out the content of a christological, and therefore Trinitarian, ontology—a metaphysics—that opens a space for reflection on beauty. This method differs slightly from other approaches to theological aesthetics but does not compete with them. The voices of Hans Urs von Balthasar[1] and Jacques Maritain[2] sustain much of contemporary

1. Especially Hans Urs von Balthasar, TGL.
2. Especially Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism: With Other Essays*, trans. J. F. Scanlan (London: Sheed and Ward, 1946).

theological aesthetics, and both make use of the concept of analogy to give purchase to aesthetic claims. Within the Protestant compass, certain Reformed theologies turn to the resources of neo-Calvinism to construct a natural theology subordinate to common grace. Other theologians such as David Bentley Hart argue that without a particular kind of analogy—the *analogia entis*, or "analogy of being"—theological aesthetics is impossible.

I aim to show that the Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson makes use of a Lutheran-Cyrillian Christology modified by a Barthian doctrine of election to outline a revisionary metaphysic in which we can speak of the beauty of God and the beauty of creation. Jenson wants to subordinate theological reflection on beauty to revelation[3] by asking the perennial question, "What is it to be?" Like Karl Barth, he finds the answer in the self-introduction of God. If God is beautiful and the only knowledge we can possess of God comes through revelation, then the only possible knowledge of the beauty of God is received through the revelation of God in Christ. In terms of creaturely beauty, Jenson argues that the doctrine of election clearly asserts that creatures have their being as participants in the life of Christ. How, then, does beauty manifest itself in the creaturely realm? Jenson sympathizes with the strain of the Western tradition that considers beauty to be a transcendental of being, but for Jenson, this position arises out of the doctrine of election. He modifies the tradition by revising his conception of *being* christologically. To consider beauty as a transcendental is to consider it convertible not with sublime being but with Jesus of Nazareth. The participation of creatures in being, then, is not a participation in substance but a

3. Jenson questions the usefulness of the distinction between "natural" and "revealed" theologies because he denies that there is an a-historical "natural knowledge" of God apart from the self-disclosure of God in history. If it is true that we can understand something of God from our observation of the world, this must be a function of divine revelation and not an innate, created capacity that can be exercised in distinction from the story of the Gospel. Jenson, ST, 1:6–7

participation in the life and history of Jesus. In the same way, the beauty of creatures arises not from their openness to the divine but from their inclusion in the life and fate of this particular person, the incarnate Son of God.

As outlined in the preceding paragraph, this project takes an unapologetically theological approach, but a word should be added about its relation to antecedent philosophical and traditional thinking on beauty and aesthetics. First, the domain of aesthetics can no longer be considered self-evident. Broadly employed, the term *aesthetics* once rang clear with the idea of the beautiful. Though itself a modern concept, its span has been reduced.[4] The revision began as early as Kant, for whom aesthetic judgments do not bear on an object but rather on the subject making them, usually with universal validity. In Hegel, aesthetics is limited to the sphere of art. Whereas Kant's sublime is enamored with the terror and danger of the natural world, what Hegel called "aesthetics" might be better described as a philosophy of art. This reductionism carries over into the contemporary world to the extent that most twentieth-century aesthetics speak only about art, often with little consideration of beauty.

Three senses of aesthetics remain alive in contemporary theological aesthetics: art, beauty, and sensuous experience. Much theological attention has been directed towards the arts in recent years, and the term *theological aesthetics* is used mainly to describe the interdisciplinary study of theology and the arts. Aesthetic experience receives less attention and is difficult to analyze because many of the dominant interpretations struggle to distinguish themselves from experience in general.[5] However, the great parent of modern

4. *Aesthetics* emerged as a scientific term to describe the perception of beauty in eighteenth-century Germany.
5. Noël Carroll argues that the best account of aesthetic experience is the "Content-Oriented Approach," which defines experience according to the types of objects that are experienced.

theological aesthetics reserved the term for beauty.[6] Hans Urs von Balthasar took theological aesthetics to be an essential task of Christian theology to construct a dogmatic account of beauty; his fifteen-volume "trilogy" on the transcendentals dedicated seven volumes to the beautiful, five to the good, and three to the true. Such an account could not be composed solely on the back of philosophical history, for at the point where philosophical conceptions of beauty touch Christian theology, "there can be no question of a univocal transposition and application of categories."[7] Von Balthasar was not advocating withdrawal from secular authorities and ideas but rather the priority of theological ideas and the primacy of God's revelation. Where this ordering is reversed we may find an aesthetic theology but not a theological aesthetics.[8] Commenting on Barth's brief pronouncements on beauty, von Balthasar writes that "a biblical-theological aesthetics . . . cannot orient itself upon any general ('metaphysical') concept of beauty, but must obtain its idea of beauty from God's unique self-disclosure in Christ."[9] This task, and this task only, von Balthasar calls a "theological aesthetics," the central task of which is the consideration of beauty arising from the data of revelation in Jesus. A theology that relies too heavily on philosophical aesthetics or "extra-theological categories" might more properly be called an "aesthetic" theology. However, the meaning of theological aesthetics has shifted in the relatively short time since von Balthasar's

Within this approach, aesthetic experience is the experience of art. But the problem of "experience in general" remains live. Carroll is working within the modern tradition that limits the aesthetic to art. The argument in this thesis is less invested in distinguishing between the pleasurable experience of eating and that of beholding a symphony. Noël Carroll, "Aesthetic Experience: A question of Content," in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kieran (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 69–97.

6. Balthasar did maintain a distinction between "beauty" and "glory," which will be outlined below.
7. Balthasar, TGL, I:119.
8. Ibid., I:79–117.
9. Ibid., VII:22.

Herrlichkeit was published, and it now includes projects that borrow heavily from aesthetics for the purposes of theology. For example, Jeremy Begbie's important project of theology *through* the arts aims to uncover the theological potential of the arts—particularly music.[10] He carefully makes use of musical insights to recast theology so that the Christian intellectual tradition is richer for the encounter. While Begbie is committed to interpreting all aesthetic data according to a triune understanding of God, his scope is more encompassing: he allows music's unique language and knowledge to inform theology. Von Balthasar might very well have considered this to be an "aesthetic" theology. However, the kind of theological work undertaken by Begbie does not entail the subordination of theology to aesthetic theories. Instead, he teases out the ways in which music might contribute to theology while allowing theological tradition to retain its autonomy.

Beauty

Of the three senses of aesthetics listed above, my interest here lies with beauty. In this book, I attempt a theological construction of beauty derived from the theology of Robert Jenson. At times, the project will borrow from the domain of aesthetics and the arts, but it will do so on the basis of *fides quaerens intellectum*.[11] That is, every engagement with aesthetic theory or aesthetic observations will be guided by theological questions. To differentiate this task from the kind of interdisciplinary work pursued by others, I have employed

10. See Jeremy S. Begbie, *Theology, Music, and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
11. This is not to suggest that there is an essential unity between beauty and the arts. Much modern art eschews the notion of beauty. However, both beauty and art are aspects of aesthetics, and, at times, intersect. This thesis will turn to the arts when they render aesthetic insights that illuminate the discussion of beauty.

the term *dogmatic aesthetics*.[12] Jenson often identifies his approach to theology as that of *revisionary metaphysics*—the attempt to take faith's most basic utterances and "hammer them against the metaphysical structure of traditional theology, until they make more systematic difference than heretofore."[13] Dogmatic aesthetics, as I intend to practice it here, specifically applies this task to theological reflection on beauty and the metaphysics that undergirds such reflection.

Given the focus on beauty in this book, it is tempting to attempt to offer a definition. In the classical West, the magic of numeracy pervaded all scientific thought; it determined that beauty was found in situations of perfect mathematical proportion. Harmony and symmetry arbitrated between the beautiful and the ugly. Edmund Burke critiques this tradition for its inability to account for the beauties and forms of nature: "Surely beauty is no idea belonging to mensuration; nor has it anything to do with calculation and geometry. . . . Turning our eyes to the vegetable creation, we find nothing so beautiful as flowers; but flowers are almost of every shape. . . . They are turned and fashioned into an infinite variety of forms."[14] Beauty turns out to be frustratingly difficult to define. In the most ambitious theological reflection on beauty in recent years, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, David Bentley Hart argues that the language of beauty is one of "imprecision (though one might prefer to say richness) . . . The word 'beauty' *indicates* nothing: neither exactly a quality, nor a property, nor a function, not even really a subjective reaction to an object or occurrence."[15] Yet, the concept

12. A dogmatic aesthetics could conceivably focus on one of the other senses of aesthetics, and I would argue that this is the kind of work undertaken by Begbie with regard to the musical arts.
13. Robert W. Jenson, "About Dialog, and the Church, and Some Bits of the Theological Biography of Robert W. Jenson," *Dialog* 11 (1969): 41.
14. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of the Sublime and Beautiful: And Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 131.
15. David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 16.

of beauty is indispensable to Christian theology. The language of beauty flows from Scripture and religious experience; the alluring nature of God's revelation in Christ can be described only through aesthetic language. Nonetheless, Hart rightly asserts that a definition of beauty is impossible. Having disavowed the possibility of defining beauty, a theology of beauty then has the task of offering what Hart calls "a 'thematics' of the beautiful."[16] Jenson also bypasses the opportunity to offer a definition of beauty—in part because of the daunting size of the task, but primarily because a definition of beauty is unnecessary—and instead pursues the questions: "What realities are beautiful? Where is beauty found?"[17] For Jenson and Hart, beauty is objective in that it involves an object. Hart's argument that the word *beauty* signifies "nothing" expels the phantasmic from aesthetics: there is no isolatable "thing" that can be called beauty. Good theological reasoning affirms this reticence to define beauty, particularly for a dogmatic aesthetics. Beauty, if predicable of God, cannot be captured by human concepts or language. Just as in dogmatics the word *God* is not defined except in relation to revelation, so (for theology) the only definition that can be offered concerning beauty necessarily involves the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The task of dogmatic aesthetics allows Christian doctrine to direct its enquiry. It does not secure a definition of beauty since it claims that the heart of beauty is divine and beyond definition. Dogmatic aesthetics does, however, attempt to see what difference Christian claims such as "Jesus is Lord" and "these three are one" make to our understanding of beauty and created forms. It undertakes this task by occasionally drawing on the arts and the philosophy of art—not because art and beauty are necessarily interconnected but because

16. Ibid., 17.
17. Robert W. Jenson, "Beauty," in *Essays in Theology of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 147.

they frequently intersect. Within the task of dogmatic aesthetics, art, aesthetic experience, and beauty become part of faith's quest for understanding.

Analogia Entis

Von Balthasar divided theological aesthetics into two aspects: beauty and glory. He then set the two in an analogical relation: "Earthly beauty always appears limited in a finite being or through a harmonious coordination of finite entities, while God, viewed as the absolute Being and as infinite reality—both aspects of the sole Eternal Life—shines in other, all-transcending and all-pervading indivisible glory."[18] Beauty is the aesthetic aspect of created being; glory is the manifestation of the love of God in the world through Christ. Beauty is discovered through subjective perception; glory comes only through the self-revelation of God. Aesthetics, for von Balthasar, represents "something properly theological, namely . . . the reception, perceived with the eyes of faith, of the self-interpreting glory of the sovereignly free love of God."[19] At the heart of this aesthetic bifurcation between glory and beauty is the fundamental difference between God and creatures. According to von Balthasar, *glory* is regarded as the more important concept, for it performs a ruling and guiding role in its relation to beauty. Though the creaturely senses are most finely tuned to the perception of the beauties of the world, they do not have the capacity to uncover divine glory. If, however, glory and beauty are analogous, it becomes possible to perceive something of the glory of God. Yet, the analogy at work here does not consist solely of language. Von Balthasar argues that

18. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Earthly Beauty and Divine Glory," *Communio* 10:3 (1983): 203.
19. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 11.