DIVINE RECKONINGS IN PROFANE SPACES:
TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL DRAMATURGY FOR THEATRE

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ST MARY’S COLLEGE

INSTITUTE FOR THEOLOGY,
IMAGINATION & THE ARTS

DIVINE RECKONINGS IN PROFANE SPACES:
TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL DRAMATURGY FOR THEATRE

A THESIS SUBMITTED BY

IVAN P. MORILLO KHOVACS

TO THE FACULTY OF DIVINITY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ST ANDREWS, SCOTLAND
ADVENT 2006
Declarations

(i) I, Ivan Khovacs, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 100,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

(ii) I was admitted as a research student in September 2000 and as a candidate for the degree of PhD in Theology in May 2001; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2000 and 2006.

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Abstract

If from God's perspective 'all the world's a stage', theology invites one to think and act according to the view afforded from this height. To speak theologically of a 'world stage' as many contemporary theologians have done has required rethinking the Church's long-established antagonism towards the stage. Of late, theology has opened up academic exchange with the drama's understanding of 'the great theatre of the world'. Hans Urs von Balthasar's *theo-drama* in particular has given Christians a means for entering into discussion with dramatic forms. Contemporary theological engagements with 'drama', however, have been limited to its most literary/metaphorical aspects; less attention has been paid to the potentialities in theology's exchange with the performance aesthetics of live theatre. Pressed to its logical ends, however, von Balthasar's idea of a 'theological dramatics' and its advances made in contemporary theology, suggest the need for sustained engagement with other modes of dramaturgy, including performance theory and the stage. *This thesis attempts to instantiate this theological engagement through an aesthetic understanding of contemporary secular theatrical performance.*
Dedication

To those who have inspired me in the pursuit of theology and the theatre, among whom are

Prof. Simon Williams, University of California, Santa Barbara
Dr. Loren Wilkinson, Regent College, Vancouver BC
Rev. Prof. Trevor Hart, University of St Andrews, Scotland

Et aux frères de l’ordre de St Jean-Baptiste de la Salle qui m’apprirent le verbe de Dieu et enchantèrent ma jeune âme de son drame incarné.

Theatrum facti sumus mundo et angelis et hominibus.
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The investment represented in this work is personal as well as reflective of a community of colleagues, friends and family who all have added to its value.

Professor Simon Williams, now chair of the Drama department at the University of California, Santa Barbara, engendered in me respect for the theatre, taught me to pay attention to the spaces between the words, and encouraged me, like his hero Peer Gynt, to be enough, and to follow my own vision in the arts.

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Prof. Jeremy Begbie played a vital role in my trek to Scotland to bring this thesis into concrete form. His lectures at Regent College in 1998 provided a viable focus for an emerging desire to integrate my formal work in the theatre and theological study. His method and clarity have been instructive; his passion, edifying.

The St Andrews American Scholarship Foundation financed a significant portion of my time spent on this project. Their investment made it possible for me to believe that, in the end, this thesis would be worth the effort; it also gave my wife confidence that God had gone ahead of us in preparing the way for our years in St Andrews.

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Finally, it remains for me to acknowledge the fact that this work has been made possible through the faithful, hope-filled and loving support of my wife, Julie.
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INTRODUCTION

I. TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL DRAMATURGY

Theo-drama cannot be defined: it can only be approached from various angles; all the more so because, as we have said, God himself who escapes all our attempts to define him, appears on stage at the centre of the dramatic action.¹

The burden of this thesis is to instantiate a theological engagement with theatre.

Doing this requires giving some account as to why theologically the Church has held the theatre in contempt, and why this has been a detriment to theology’s own understanding of life under God. I give this account by adopting Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theo-drama, i.e., his ‘discovery’ of theology’s vital investment in the ‘theatre of the world’ metaphor. The world-theatre metaphor belongs to the theatre. Both theology and theatre, however, attempt to raise the ‘theo-logical person’ / ‘audience participant’ to a perspective on the world above that which is normally afforded them by their boundedness in the world’s materiality. In doing this, both spheres propose that to be human is to act as a dramatis persona. Theology’s sharing in the world-theatre, therefore, means that, at least in this particular way, theatre is kin to theology.

Specifically, the idea of living in the world as God’s world entails taking a perspective inhering in God’s own purview. To act in this way, as Christians are biblically enjoined to do, is to take a dramatic perspective on life and on one’s own

place in it. If from God’s perspective ‘all the world’s a stage’, theology invites one
to think and act according to the view afforded from this height. The theatre, in its
turn, promises no less than to place the spectator at the centre of the world-stage by
giving him a perspective from above the scenic stage.

The fact that Shakespeare’s pithy appeal to the world-theatre originates in the
dynamics of a theatrical act (As You Like It, II.ii), articulates powerfully the fact that
in the theatre, the stage itself ‘acts’ as the world; the whole world, visible and unseen,
is made present upon the playing stage. Shakespeare’s Globe theatre – the name
already connoting the expanse of the metaphor – left no one in doubt that to set foot
on its grounds was to be transposed from one’s particular role in the theatre of the
world to the status of “actor” in the world of the theatre: totus mundus agit
histrionem. The part which Shakespeare gave to his acting audience was that of
observer participant, viewing the action from the perspective of the gods who
‘connive at us’ such that ‘we may do any thing extempore’.  

These initial suggestions as to the liveness of the theology/theatre dialogue
should suffice at this point to establish why this thesis concerns itself with a
dramaturgy for enacting a dialogue between theology and the theatre.

2.  FOR THEATRE

I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A
man walks across this empty space whilst someone
else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for
an act of theatre to be engaged.

With these words, theatre director Peter Brook voiced for the twentieth-century stage
the one thing holding together the various forms which theatre had taken since the
end of the previous era.  

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2 This articulation of the world-theatre bears significantly in theological approaches to the theatre and
will help to nuance various arguments below. As You Like It, William Shakespeare, Shakespeare:
3 The Winter’s Tale, Ibid., IV.iv, 694-695.
5 I.e., after the Realisms of Ibsen (1828-1906) and Tchekhov (1860-1904).
everything, mediates in action relations between humans (actor/audience), the world (stage/space) and action (text/performance).

This could not have been obvious to dramatic traditions which understood theatre intellectually, that is as mere extension of the written word (i.e., the literary drama), or which plied their craft principally for commercial enterprise (e.g., the mass appeal of the musical hall). The literary theatre is that in which after the curtain is drawn on the stage, what remains with an audience is a message which may just as easily have been gleaned from reading the play in print. On the other hand, though the commercial theatre has always occupied an important place in the history of the stage, its primary concerns are to appeal widely and profitably, hence it measures success by its take at the box office. These two are not the only extremes in theatre, but they represent the range of distortions from which Brook attempted to salvage theatre for our time.

In fact, what Brook managed to do with his bare-essentials definition of the stage was to command the attention of theatrical movements in the modern era and insist that theatre had always been a matter of exploring reality by putting word into action. This dynamic of word turned into action defined, for Brook, the ‘vital’, ‘immediate’, ‘performative’ essence of the stage.

Theology may be understood as the Church’s thinking after God, given the dramatic nature of God’s self-presentation as the Word made flesh. It is therefore remarkable to the theologian that, historically, theatre’s apprenticeship to the word in action has escaped the grasp of the Church in its theological engagements with the arts. It is not surprising that the visual arts and music, given their immediate appeal to the religious imagination, have a serious theological tradition in the Church, much of it reflected in the contemporary theology and arts dialogue. Even the ambiguously termed ‘fifth

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6 Classed in his thought as Deadly (mired in literary clichés), Holy (militating towards supposed archaic roots in ritual), Rough (equally adamant, though to experiment with dramatic action per se); all of these, he says, have built into them the makings of their own undoing.

7 He therefore defined his own practice as that of Vital Theatre.

art’ has received of late extensive theological attention in both popularly accessible and serious academic works.\(^9\) However, theology’s attempt to give interpretation to God’s word and its action (i.e., divine speech-act in creation, Incarnation, transformation, etc.),\(^10\) has failed to elicit concomitant interest in theatre’s distinctly performative dynamics of word in action.

Theatre’s very propensity towards the enfleshment of word through the live act, in fact, has repeatedly generated censorship from the side of the Church. Perhaps it is the actor’s unapologetic exploration of the world through her body which has caused theologians to blushingly avert their attention towards interests less obviously rooted in the flesh. Be that as it may, Christians have consistently dismissed theatrical ‘play’ from the serious business of doing theology. In this regard, the representational nature of live theatre has been considered an affront to the Church’s presentation of the world as the theatre of God’s glory (moreover, to the particularity of the Word made present in sacrament). Theology itself, however, is borne by the aesthetics of performance. It develops not in isolated reflection, but in worship song, the embodied practices of praying and preaching, sacred feasting, the drama of liturgy, and so on. Nevertheless, historically, theology has been unable to engage theatre with anything other than misapprehension and proscription. Nevertheless, both the performative dimensions of Christian theology, and the Church’s dismissal of theatre from its programme must be placed in perspective of the biblical notion that as Christians, we are actors who perform according to the pattern of Christ as the principal Actor in the theatre of the world. The Bible is clear and unapologetic on this point. Scripture insists that Christians are made actors following in the pattern of Christ: ὑμεῖς μιμηται ἐγενήθητε τοῦ κυρίου;\(^11\) it reiterates, moreover, that on the

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world stage, we play as God’s players; we become his minstrels—γίνεσθε οὖν μιμηταί τοῦ θεοῦ.  

2. ‘Theo-Drama’ and the secular theatre

Tensions between Christianity and the theatre have of late taken a turn unprecedented in the history of the Church. To my mind the contemporary interest in the implications of theatre for theology are rooted in the fact that only since the rise of a thoroughly secularized stage in the twentieth century does the stage cease to threaten the specificity of Christianity. Ironically, dramaturgies unique to our era which, as Artaud has put it, are ‘all done with God’ signal a new era in Christianity’s relation to the stage. For the first time, theatre may be approached and appreciated precisely for its rooting in the secularity of flesh, voice, movement, gest; of lights, painted backdrops, of an invisible ‘fourth wall’; of ‘as if’ propositions; but finally, for imaginatively holding the world ‘but as the world’.

It should be no surprise, then, that theatre groups have formed with the mission to articulate theological questions in apprenticeship to the aesthetics of the secular stage. The idea that theological concerns might be voiced through the secular stage, however, has failed to make an impact on the formal study of theology. In fact, theologians who have approached theatre in any meaningful sense have done so in the limited interest of applying to theology dramatic metaphors drawn from the stage.

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12 Ephesians 5.1. Ibid.
13 It is no exaggeration to say that in the whole history of theatre, playwrights from Aristophanes to Zola, from Shakespeare to Shelley, could presume to assimilate into their plays a world-view afforded by the gods and/or God.
15 The Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare, Act I.i.
16 An abridged representation of professional theatres in the UK motivated by Christian commitment to artistic integrity would include Saltmine Theatre, Riding Lights Theatre, Unity Christian Theatre, Riverside School of Performing Arts; in North America, Acacia Theater (Milwaukee), Lamb’s Players Theater (San Diego), Tap Root Theatre (Seattle), Pacific Theatre (Vancouver, Canada), Tapestry Theatre (Portland, OR), Covenant Players (UK/US).
This trend begins with von Balthasar’s *Theo-Drama* which, as we shall see, develops a ‘theological dramatic theory’ entirely on the basis of theatrical metaphors and their outlay for theology. Von Balthasar’s theo-drama speaks of Christ as the principal Actor in the theatre of the world. Ben Quash summarizes the crux of this *theodramatic* idea in saying that

Von Balthasar explicitly chose categories drawn from drama in his attempt to give expression to the truth that all Christian theology tries to articulate – the truth of God’s interest and involvement in the world – …thereby [making] a defining claim about the dramatic character of the Christian revelation, and the dramatic response that it demands. This theo-dramatic perspective on believers as actors in a drama authored in God’s creative act, characterized in the person of Jesus, and given voice in the life of the church, inspires much contemporary theology.\(^1\)

Among those who have found theatrical metaphors necessary to their articulation of theology is Karl Barth who speaks of the possibility for humans to perform meaningfully in ‘the *Gloria Dei* and its *theatrum*’.\(^2\) Frederick Buechner emphasizes this dramatic dimension in his exposition of the tragic, comedic and surprising character of the Gospels; Donald MacKinnon acknowledges more explicitly the importance of a ‘theodramatic’ perspective, especially in understanding evil and tragedy;\(^3\) for John Zizioulas, the picture of ‘persons in communion’ which the Greek drama could only promise its audience, Christianity fulfils in its framing of community and personhood in God.\(^4\) Orthodox theologian John McGuckin, for his part, focuses theodrama on the book of Revelation, bringing clarity to the summation of all things as a divine theatre of justice.\(^5\)

Pressed to its logical ends, however, von Balthasar’s idea of a ‘theological dramatics’ and its advances made in contemporary theology, suggest the need for sustained engagement with other modes of dramaturgy, including performance

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18 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961); IV.3.i: 137-152.
theory and the stage. The task of my thesis is also, then, to propose an aesthetic (i.e., scenic) understanding of secular theatrical performance.

4. Dramatic perspective (re-)defined

For the purposes of this thesis, I will define drama—in relation to, but as distinct from theatre—in a technical sense intended to bring theology (both as an academic and practical endeavour) into play with theories and practices of the stage. In this thesis, then, drama / dramatization describes a situation in which a word/thought/action affords one a perspective on the world which is not one’s own. This definition of drama should be understood both

- as a vicarious perspective adopted (if temporarily) as our own, and
- in terms of participatory action in the light of the newly gained perspective

By this account, the dramatic situation invites one to consider life through a borrowed perspective and to therefore go and think/speak/act in the world. The dramatic event, to put it forcefully, requires us to see the world from the point of view of another and to act as we would if this perspective were our own. A dramatizing perspective, that is, entails seeing the world through the eyes of another as if they were our own, and acting responsibly to the world given the particularity of that vantage point.

The relevance of this technical definition of drama for the theological/dramaturgical engagement lies specifically in adding to the human perspective that which is gained by a perspective originating in divine action.22 This definition of the dramatic act has one particular advantage for our study: it does away with the problematic implications of the typical (Aristotelian)23 understanding of drama as conflict.

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22 For the sake of clarity, it is best to assert that non-humans are not capable of such dramatized action.
23 On this, see Chapter 3 below, as well as Augusto Boal’s alternative in Chapter 5.
From a purely theatrical perspective, drama is typically defined in terms of conflict; it is posited in a relation of
\[ A \text{ wants } B, \text{ but } C \text{ stands in the way}. \]

At this point A has at least three choices to make:

1) \( A \) confronts \( C \) in pursuit of \( B \)
2) \( A \) evades \( C \) (finds a new way) to get to \( B \)
3) \( A \) avoids \( C \) and abandons quest for \( B \)

The first two choices are the only ones that entail drama: a conflict arises which forces A to choose a particular course of action. The final choice, in which A encounters C but changes his mind and decides that he can get on without B, denies conflict altogether and is therefore patently undramatic according to the paradigm.

Richard Schechner’s theory of ‘performance’ has created a new paradigm of human action from which we can extrapolate a theory of the dramatic that does not depend on conflict per se. For Schechner, performance is action done in the interest of a goal which has an identifiable investment on an action continuum spanning thus:

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24 In which A is an acting person while B may represent any goal and C a person or circumstance that would force A to make a choice about C concerning his desire for B.

25 The echoes with Peter Brook’s account of the stage above should be obvious. This is the mechanics of the theatrical tradition of the European West; clearly, there are others. Eric Bentley corroborates this view of theatre’s ‘distinction between art and life’ as A impersonates B while C look on. My view that theatre may be a locus for theological reflection is not in conflict with this aspect of the stage (though I show in Chapter 3 that Augustine’s Christian narrative inverts the Aristotelian idea of dramatic inevitability). I value the stage primarily, as I have said, for affording an audience a perspective on the world, as it were, from above. Eric Bentley, The life of the drama (London: Methuen), p. 150, cited in Ronaldo Morelos, ‘Symbols and power in theatre of the oppressed’ (Queensland University of Technology, 1999).

26 In this paradigm, the possibility that A wants B and finds it without a C to intervene denies conflict from the outset and is therefore undramatic in principle. The other possibility, ostensibly undramatic, is that A in confronting C changes his mind about B. This can be dramatic, though only by virtue of the tables changing: if A wants C, some B needs to stand in between.

27 For our purposes, the simplest way to define Schechner’s work is to say that, as a theatre practitioner and student of anthropology, his interest is to bridge the distance between theatre’s ‘as if’ reality and ritual’s access to reality ‘as is’ with a theory of human behaviour. Cf. especially, Richard Schechner, Between theatre and anthropology (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).
To the extent that A has goal B, whatever conflicts the intervention of a C might represent, the fact remains that the performative result will be displaced somewhere along the continuum (in effect, as are the actions of C).

My theo-logically orientated understanding of the dramatic situation as taking a ‘bi-focal’ perspective, as it were, though limited to the issues treated in this thesis, clearly has broader appeal to emerging understandings of theatre and the dramatic outside the strict confines of conflict relations.28

As I do not present further defence for my dramatic definition in the body of the thesis, it bears providing at least one illustration of my non-conflictual, bi-focal, perspective-taking understanding of the dramatic.

A man and a woman talking in a café is not dramatic; his proposing marriage to her is. The traditional (Aristotelian) definition and mine agree on this point; we disagree on the reasons. The traditional model of the dramatic would have it that the marriage proposal scenario is dramatic because a situation of conflict is created: (A) wants to marry (B), but is at the mercy of her will/decision (C). The drama here is to do with the question ‘will she or won’t she?’ My technical definition of the dramatizing event as perspective-taking suggests, in our scenario, that proposition (P) invites (B) to take a perspective extended to her by (A). The bi-focal perspective she is asked to take is effectively that of ‘life together’. Clearly, this does not deny the concomitant condition of conflict arising in the traditional view of the dramatic. The conflicting relations arising in the dramatizing perspective, however, are less relevant to my positive move towards a dramaturgy in which both theology and theatre meet in ‘the theatre of the world’ metaphor and the unique perspective afforded therein.

This brings us to a definition of theatre. As I spend the bulk of the final chapter uncovering a theological understanding of theatre’s secularity, for now I shall simply define the staging of drama with the formula:

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28 We will expand our extrapolation from Schechner’s theory of performance in Chapter 5.

29 Clearly, shifting the scene to the woman’s point of view raises other conflicts.
Dramatic representation is the performance of an action by way of some other action.\textsuperscript{30}

5. **Presentation of the Thesis**

The logic particular to the presentation of this thesis needs to be noted in advance. The thesis is presented in seven sections including this **INTRODUCTION**, five **CHAPTERS**, and a **CONCLUDING CODA**. The chapters themselves are arranged as three major chapters with two shorter chapters in between; three acts and two **entr’actes**, as it were. Having laid out the aims and reasons for my thesis in this **INTRODUCTORY** section—

Ch. 1, our opening act expands on the *Theo-Drama* above, provides a critique of von Balthasar’s incursion into theatre, and interacts with recent attempts to develop the idea of a theological dramatics. From this, we shall conclude by appropriating the theo-drama and establishing the need for its interaction with performance theories of the stage.

Ch. 2 is our first **entr’acte**. Insofar as Tertullian’s famous invective against the shows (*De spectaculis*) represents early Christianity’s most extant reflection on its encounter with the theatre, I show that the meeting could not have been less infelicitous. This is owing to 1) the debauched state of the theatre in Tertullian’s day, and 2) his goals to think through the Christian’s witness in the secular sphere **theologically**. The fact that Tertullian’s attack on the theatre is theological (and not simply moralistic, for example, as was the case with the pagan critics) reinforces my insistence that Christian engagement with the secular theatre should be theological, though in my case, with the benefit of taking a theatrical perspective on theatre (hence, understanding what theatre is and is not **from the inside**).

Ch. 3 is the middle act. The middle act is always the most difficult to sit through; it demands more patience from the audience, and this one is no exception. Here, I neutralize Augustine’s legendary attack on the theatre by taking a critical sample from his narrative in the *Confessions* and showing that reading it against the background of classical patterns of the dramatic (i.e., the Aristotelian tragedy) evinces a dramatic structure holding together the Augustinian narrative and theological goals in the *Confessions*. I suggest that this is reflective of the specific kind of narrative Augustine undertakes, namely one in which God is the principal player. Augustine’s antitheatrical stance, therefore, is superseded by the inherently theo-dramatic shape of his narrative.

Ch. 4 This second **entr’acte** brings us in contact with the 17\textsuperscript{th} c. dramatist Calderon de la Barca and his enactment on the secular stage of God’s dramatizing perspective on the world. The fact that Calderon’s theological drama played outside the church walls

\textsuperscript{30} An audience’s perspective is implicit in my definition.
using secular theatrical aesthetics shows a positive theatre/Church interaction. Because his theatre works strictly on the assumption of a Christian culture as background, however, his dramaturgy cannot speak legibly to the secular theatre of today.

Ch. 5 The third act in this project tackles a problem inherent to Christian interaction with theatre—i.e., its presumed origins in Dionysiac ritual and questions raised *viz.* Christian forms of representation. I also show, however, that though deeply rooted in the historic conflicts between Church and stage, given the present state of the secular stage, the problem of ritual and the theatre is immaterial to theology’s engagement with the stage.

§ Coda The concluding section brings us around to the question of how theology might interact with the secular drama of our day. I do this drawing from the theological-theatrical/dramatic interaction in the previous chapters a set of questions relative to a theological dramaturgy for the theatre. To do this, I draw to a close a critical example proposed previously which demonstrates that the earliest use of drama in the Church (10th c.) was secular/theatrical and not liturgical/sacramental because it worked as any other theatre by way of ‘as if’ propositions and not, as does the liturgy, by ‘as is’ propositions.

These following chapter descriptions should make clear the logical continuity in the arrangement of the principal chapters—

1. The need for a theo-drama
2. Theological opposition of the drama
3. Overcoming opposition to the theatre theologically
4. The theatre’s acceptance into the theological sphere
5. Towards a theological approach to the secular theatre

We move on, therefore, towards instantiating a theological engagement with the drama through an aesthetic understanding of theatrical performance.
The change that takes place at Easter is as abrupt as it is organic. God, desiring to reconcile the world to himself (and hence himself to the world), acts dramatically in the Son’s Cross and Resurrection. [...] The dramatic interplay between God and the world is enacted in the temporal acts of the concrete Christ-event and its consequences: it cannot be reduced to philosophical or timelessly abstract principles.¹

1  **HANS URS VON BALTHASAR’S THEO-DRAma: TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL DRAMATURGY FOR THE THEATRE**

I.  **THEO-DRAma: A SMALL STONE IN THE GRAND MOSAIC OF REvelATION**

1.  **The drama of theology: epic, lyric and dramatic**

   Von Balthasar’s theological triptych, including *The Glory of the Lord, Theo-Drama*, and *Theo-Logic*¹ is the result of his early years of frustration with the neo-scholastic trend of ‘Rationalistic theology’ which, in his view, ‘treats God and his grace like some component that can be manipulated by human thought’.² The Church, von Balthasar felt, had also been let down by theologies which try to overcome the removed perspective of logical rationalism by over emphasizing the immanence of God in the life of the believer. Borrowing from Hegel for his understanding of the dramatic,³ Balthasar identified these theological orientations as *epic* and *lyric* respectively, deeming both insufficiently dramatic to be true to ‘God’s radical initiative on the world’s behalf’⁴ in his self-dramatization in Christ. Neither stance, in the end, can make sense of the living witness of the Spirit and of the universal mission of the Church.

   Ben Quash, one of the most committed exponents of the *Theo-Drama* outside the Catholic sphere, explains why for von Balthasar only a dramatic perspective could fully account for both the historicity of revelation as well as its ongoing manifestation in the work of theology; Von Balthasar, he says,

   is aiming to write a deeply scholarly theology yet at the same time one fully in touch with lived Christian life—an aim unusual in the modern period. Whilst theology shares with other branches of learning a demand for academic discipline and the full use of the powers of the mind, Balthasar is clear that the

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subject matter of theology remains, first and last, the God who calls human beings into a more than merely intellectual relationship with him; the God who shapes people for his work; a personal God; the living God of the Bible and of faith. The theologian stands where apostles and saints have stood; where all Christians stand when they acknowledge themselves to be creatures addressed by God who made them for himself. To listen to this God is to come to a realization that he has work for each person to do.  

1.1.1a Epic stance

If in drama, the epic perspective corresponds to the telling of past events as events past and accomplished, in theology ‘its concerns are often with the careful appropriation of the historical and textual traditions about God’s action, and their redescription in terms of some kind of abiding “universal significance.”’ This is the perspective used by the Chorus in Greek drama ‘which comments on the tragedy from a detached perspective; it clarifies to us the audience the significance of the events as they happen.’ The epic perspective requires a reporter’s removed objectivity in order to make sense of the brute fact of the drama. Much of theology, von Balthasar fears, is seduced by the unininvolved objectivity of this perspective which ‘is usually too “distanced” from the events to be helpful as an exclusive guide’ through the events. An epic stance, moreover, resists the pressure which Christian revelation brings to bear on our understanding of “the transitory world on its pilgrim path.” In this regard, Balthasar, the former Jesuit, is wary of ““narrative theology” in the way it gravitates towards the (Lutheran) sola scriptura principle… [w]here the norm is no longer revealed action but [rather] its mirroring in Scripture”. The danger here is that ‘epic-narrative theology—accredited by the distanced attitude of the reporter—will quite logically assume the role of judge over the events and their actualization’. The divine drama realized in Jesus Christ, however, if it is to draw

6 Quash, ‘Teology of drama’, p. 296, italics added.
7 Ibid., p. 294.
10 Though von Balthasar adds that the two are ultimately inseparable “[f]or Scripture mirrors the drama and can only be understood in reference to it; it is part of the drama.” Balthasar, TD II, p. 58.
11 Nichols, p. 50.
‘all truth and objectivity into itself’, and become ‘the norm of every real and possible drama’ must necessarily frustrate the epic stance for, ultimately, there is no outer standpoint ‘from which we could observe and portray events as if we were uninvolved narrators of an epic.’

1.1.1b Lyric mode

The lyric mode, on the other hand, capitalizes on the interpretive images that bridge dramatic text to stage presentation. While the epic moment adopts an objectifying distance from the dramatic event, the lyric theatre evinces a dialogue between the spectator and actor through the images projected from the stage. Lyric spectators and playwrights, in fact, conceive of the stage as a diorama for moving images. This image-led dialogue has a certain degree of primacy in the dramatic presentation; drama, in the end, intends to move the actor/audience in some sense towards self-disclosure. The aesthetics of performance representation, however, can become distorted by such personal identification with the action portrayal as to lose sight of the phenomenological whole; for example, in failing to distinguish the actor from the images projected in the performance of the dramatic character. The theatre exhibits this in a range of styles including ‘realism’ (Ibsen, Shaw, Tchekhov) in its attempts to recreate on the stage the world ‘as is’, or in ‘naturalism’ which images the stage after man’s innermost thought/subconscious (Stringer, Wedekind, Pirandello).

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12 Balthasar, TD II, p. 58.
13 Nichols, p. 55.
14 Ibid.
15 Ben Quash’s exposition on this point is both helpful while also revealing something of the origins in von Balthasar’s understanding of the dramatic: ‘The lyric voice’, he writes, ‘is that which moves the action through images (text and presentation)’. ‘The lyric voice stands at the opposite pole from the epic. Hegel has described lyric as the genre of the self-contemplating mind ‘that instead of proceeding to action remains alone with itself as inwardness’. Its telos, Hegel has said, is “the self-expression of the subjective life.”’

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16 The German dramaturg Bertolt Brecht militated against lyricism on the stage with an Epic theatre. He introduced into his Epische Theater ‘distantiation’ techniques (Verfremdungseffekt) designed to make evident to an audience that the theatre is, above all, “theatre” and the actor a person before he is a “character”. These ‘alienation’ techniques include having actors mingle with the crowd at intermission, lighting the stage in harsh, non-natural angles; using music to deliver the message of the text rather than to lift the stage above its earthly moorings (as in Wagner). Cf. Bertolt Brecht, ‘A short organum for the theatre’, in Brecht on theatre: the development of an aesthetic (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).
For von Balthasar, theologies that reveal the lyric tendency are led by images of God as an enlarged projection of humanity; so, for example, of God undergoing creaturely pain as in Process Theology\textsuperscript{17} or of God on the Cross as an act of solidarity with the suffering creature. Theological lyricism initiates dialogue with God and in so doing betrays ‘an exaggerated self-importance, on the part of creaturely freedom’; and, indeed, its hubris.\textsuperscript{18} Lyricism compels thinking which fashions the content and form of theology through the dialogic mode; and they imagine, von Balthasar writes, that in initiating dialogue, ‘it is man who has drawn God into a momentous drama and made him consider’ its implications.\textsuperscript{19}

If the epic mode leads to a detached form of theological discourse about God in which God is a third person He (or he), then the lyric mode generates identification with God as dialogue partner; in its extreme manifestation, God becomes the Thou analogous to the believer’s self-involving “I”.\textsuperscript{20} This is perhaps most vividly exemplified by the spirituality of the Ignatian Exercises\textsuperscript{21} in which one moves about within scenic moments of the Christ event, \textsuperscript{22} “re-calling” its images so as to invigorate the spiritual imagination.\textsuperscript{23} By awakening the past event through memory, reflection and insight, Ignatian lyricism works to “bring it alive to such a degree that the ‘will’ can draw consequences from it… just as if the event itself were here and now.”\textsuperscript{24} The primacy of ‘subjective consciousness’ in the lyric mode, however, makes of the dialogue ‘an opportunity for giving expression to [it]self’.\textsuperscript{25} Dialogue, to be sure, is essential to the Christian response to revelation; however, as von Balthasar’s reiterates,

\begin{itemize}
  \item[\textsuperscript{17}] Von Balthasar’s theo-drama at once “excludes from God all intramundane experience and suffering” and, at the same time presupposes “that the possibility of such experience and suffering—up to and including its christological and trinitarian implications—is grounded in God.” Nichols, p. 166.
  \item[\textsuperscript{18}] Balthasar, \textit{TD IV}, pp. 326, 7.
  \item[\textsuperscript{19}] Ibid., p. 327.
  \item[\textsuperscript{20}] Nichols, p. 50.
  \item[\textsuperscript{21}] Quash, ‘Theology of drama’, p. 297.
  \item[\textsuperscript{22}] To a lesser extent, and, therefore, less convinced, Balthasar also cites Kierkegaard’s concept of “simultaneity”. Cf. Balthasar, \textit{TD I}, p. 113, Balthasar, \textit{TD IV}, p. 393.
  \item[\textsuperscript{23}] Nichols, p. 51.
  \item[\textsuperscript{24}] Ibid. Cf. Balthasar, \textit{TD II}, p. 55.
  \item[\textsuperscript{25}] Quash, ‘Theology of drama’, p. 198.
\end{itemize}
[‘dialogue’] is not its only category; and as a category it is inadequate to express the action taking place between God and the world, Christ and the Church, the Church and the world, man and his fellow man, in all its dramatic proportions. There can be no drama without dialogue… *But the action is not reducible to dialogue*…

Hence, while clearly the self-expressive mode of the lyric is essential for apprehending and being apprehended by the dramatic moment, ‘it is not the lyric moment alone and undifferentiated’ which accounts for the whole of the dramatic event.²⁷

1.1.1c  **Dramatic event**

Ironically, as does the epic, the lyric stance betrays an excessively external perspective; theologically, because both fail to see the event of divine revelation from the perspective of the revealing Self. Both extremes, in the end, are incomplete for giving account of God’s self-authoring action in the theatre of Salvation. Insofar as theology originates from and attends to divine action, however, what may be said of the lyric may also be said of the epic, the former exacting for itself the subjectivity of faith and the latter demanding dispassionate appeal to reason. For von Balthasar, however, the lack of drama in imagining God entirely according to one’s devotional inscape is matched in the epic’s systematic flattening of the theological landscape—in his words,

In the world of mythology, there used to be a kind of confused theodramatic dimension; today, however, after having undergone the process of philosophical reflection, it exists only in Christianity… But even in Christianity, it is important that the truth of revelation should not be watered down in a “lyrical” direction—“spirituality”—or dissolved in an “epic” direction—“theology”…. No (“epic”) horizon can embrace the totality of free actors in all their mutual confrontations; yet their encounters do not create a multiplicity of independent dramas but are yoked together in a single, total drama that encompasses all the individual interactions. This is because all encounters between man and God are included in the drama of Christ. The latter not only supplies the play’s content but actually opens up the acting area in the first place.²⁸

By this account, in contrast to the epic and lyric stances, the drama of God in Christ – unlike any other Weltanschauung – angles the human perspective towards theological and, as such, dramatic implications.\(^{29}\) This theological drama, moreover, is defined by the fact that ‘God himself who escapes all our attempts to define him, appears on stage at the centre of the dramatic action’.\(^{30}\) In Christianity, therefore, the theatre of Salvation, if it is to mean anything at all, cannot be any less eventful than divine self-giving to humanity in Christ. Consequently, both scholastic derogation of the theologian’s faithful involvement in his or her subject to hand (i.e., God), and stamping of human images onto God are consumed by the possibility of transforming participation in the theological theatre.

1.1.1d Pressing towards a theo-dramatic horizon

Von Balthasar sees himself as doing theology in a time when theology has little to say to the world and only that much more to the Church: ‘[T]he voice of the Christian witness no longer penetrates the noise of the world of machines, and, to confuse the picture, many a non-Christian plays a role that is really intended for the Christian.’\(^{31}\) His answer is not, however, to do theology according to the machinations of the world, but to bring back the Church to its Incarnational origins: to re-dramatize before a watching world (and for the sake of her own faith) the action that makes the Church distinctively Christian. Christian faith, after all, is not defined by its history of intellect (Geistesgeschichte), either in collected doctrines or as systematization of religious thought. Christianity, as the meta-theatre in which is accounted the total diversity of the human story, is not given in a compendium of disembodied words but is dramatically embodied as the Word of God ‘played out’ in Jesus. From this Word, particular words—spiritual laws, ethical commands, moral principles, religious language, divine analogies, etc.—obtain their meaning.

\(^{29}\) For von Balthasar, the only significant sense in which ‘even the simplest actor in the human tragedy somehow possesses’ Weltanschauung is as an apercus made available in the internal/external manifestations of divine, trinitarian action. Ibid., p. 75.

\(^{30}\) Von Balthasar’s fuller treatment of epic and lyrical typologies is found in Balthasar, TD II, pp. 53-62.

\(^{31}\) Balthasar, TD I, p. 122.
1.1.1e Christian particularity

As von Balthasar surveys the state of theology in his day, he concludes that Christianity, ‘[w]ithout realizing it [sic] has betrayed the incarnate, crucified and risen Word of God to the Greek logos… and has transformed it into an ahistorical “doctrine’’. For him, the heresy of insisting on ‘static’ theological categories ‘no longer nourished by the drama of revelation’ is not just that it turns out a dogmatics that ‘looks more like an instruction manual for fencing or wrestling’. The real danger is in perpetuating inferior performance in the theological theatre (for instance, upstaging the high point of the bodily Resurrection with concerns more reflective of a contemporary scientism). Apart from the centrality of the Christ-event, however, memorialized in sacrament and re-enacted by the Christian’s participation in its redemptive power in the world, Word-become-flesh, von Balthasar fears, runs every risk of being reduced to a matter of mere words.

Nevertheless, the risk of reducing Christ to dogmatic statement is always present. Too often, the Church’s thinking about God (theology) dismembers doctrine from its lived out forms. Christian confession and action are not always correspondent, and sometimes the gap is rather wide. For this reason, von Balthasar suspects that the propensity to give assent to the Gospel primarily in word (and here it is of little use to differentiate between Catholic and Protestant confession) only serves to reinforce the margin that separates the verb from the act. Whether this could explain the Church’s lack of (theologically informed) engagement with theatre which, by any account, is not primarily about dramatic language but about dramatic action is a matter for speculation. Nor does it make much difference for Von Balthasar whether we could locate a particular time in history when (a ‘lived out’, ‘performed’) theology became ‘almost entirely stifled by the systematization of the scholastics’. On the other hand, he is conscious that the idea of a theological dramatics is anticipated by occasions when drama was overtly appropriated for theological ends (roughly from the 10th to the 16th centuries), to ‘continue the work of a theology that was alive in

32 Ibid., p. 31, 33.
33 Ibid., p. 127.
34 Ibid., pp. 19-20.
35 Ibid., p. 113.
patristic preaching and in the frescoes and icons of the Easter Church’. Without rehearsing the on-again, off-again relationship of theatre and Church, it is clear that theology’s appeal to drama is not merely ‘recasting theology into a new shape previously foreign to it’ but is itself called from within the particularity of the Word in action.

1.1.1f Dramatic theology

To be clear, von Balthasar’s appeal to drama originates in theology itself. His Theo-Drama foregrounds the Christian conflict between Absolute freedom and finite, creaturely freedom, a conflict intensified at the point of the Incarnation, as the dramatic element inherent to theology. He considers the pathos of the human condition: created humanity, incapable of ‘abandoning the search for a complete meaning to their lives’, but because humans cannot attain a perspective outside themselves, they are equally incapable of satisfying the impulse towards solution: ‘what is at stake in the tragedy of the human person is the issue as to whether finite spirit’s infinite capacity can ever be fulfilled’. The hubris native to mankind, then, is that while only divine self-emptying can fill the human heart, in the fallen world, the sui generis logic of divine Love is utterly incoherent. And yet, when God makes himself recognizably Man in order to win the creature from the lapsus of self-fulfilment, man recoils in favour of the familiarity of its historic condition, thus absolutizing the nature of the contingent. Humanity, that is, errs in asserting rather undramatically that the human condition is all there is. Religion itself attempts to ‘say what man is and why he exists, in relation to the world, on the one hand, and to be absolute, on the other’. Yet while the world’s religions may represent humanity’s anticipatory longing for resolution, they necessarily ‘resist the answer that God, in sovereign freedom, provides in the person of Jesus Christ.’ Thus, in Trinitarian sovereignty (in loving obedience, Christ does it), God becomes man and acts ‘as created freedom’; and it is in this event of ‘God’s becoming man and the

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., p. 125.
38 Nichols, p. 145.
39 Ibid., p. 50.
40 Balthasar, TD IV, p. 122.
41 Ibid., p. 318.
redemptive action of this humanised God on the world’s behalf… [that] the theodramatic plot really thickens’. For God does not play the world drama alone and indifferently to his creature but, as von Balthasar puts it inimitably,

[God] makes room for man to join in the acting. In other words: when God, acting in Jesus Christ, utters, expresses himself, his language must… become intelligible through the divine Spirit, who teaches [creaturely] hearts to listen and to speak so that they can utter a word in reply. […] And only through the Spirit of God in man, who explodes his narrow, anthropocentric horizon of interpretation and causes him to adopt God’s standpoint, can man understand this language; only thus can there be an “adequate response” to God’s self-disclosure, a response which, because it is adequate, is in turn the “express word of the event of God”.  

Thinking along with von Balthasar when he puts to himself the question ‘Why did the word become flesh?’ we are confronted directly with the incomprehensibility of the act grounded in the kenosis of the Trinity. Trinity in itself, already dramatic in its co-inherence of Persons without dissolution of distinction, evinces drama on the world theatre through the inversion of the Son’s processio, his move towards the Father becoming his missio to the world, thus embracing the world stage even in its ‘ultimate darkness’. The liberality of divine action in and for the world, however, is arrested at every turn when it encounters the ‘calculating, cautious self-preservation’ from the other actors with whom Christ now shares the stage. Two story lines, then, or in Balthasarian terms, ‘catholicisms’, forever onward become the primary conflict in the theological drama.

This conflict will not be resolved by some facile (and undramatic) assumption of finite freedom into the Absolute. The resolution wrought by the Incarnation is not, after all, ‘an event that came straight down from heaven but rather the culmination of

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42 *TD I*, 118; cited in Nichols, pp. 28, 29.
43 *TDII*, 91.
44 Balthasar, *TD II*, p. 64.
45 Though, von Balthasar adds, ‘[i]n fact, since all is obedience, he is moving toward the Father through his utter estrangement, but for the present he must not be allowed to know this.’ Balthasar, *TD IV*, p. 351.
46 Nichols, p. 166.
God’s covenant history with mankind…. The dramatic climax in Christ is preceded by the history of God’s long-suffering and towards an end which can be true to the whole story. The resolution to the conflict between Absolute and finite will have to be arrived at through the interplay between unredeemed human freedom and the *gratia sola* that ‘recklessly squanders’ the Son for the sake of human redemption. A dramatic theology, therefore, will “ex-communicate” everything that opposes *communio* between divine and human freedom, and “incommunicate” everything that promotes it. If theatre, therefore, in the immediacy of the live performance can promote something of the world’s existence in purview of the divine (thus overcoming epic distance from or lyric interpretation of the action) then *theology cannot but seek to understand how best to bring theatre’s moving vision into theological employ.*

Thus arises our task, which is to draw an instrumentarium, a range of resources, from the drama of existence which can then be of service to a Christian theory of theo-drama in which the ‘natural’ drama of existence (between the Absolute and the relative) is consummated in the ‘supernatural’ drama between the God of Jesus Christ and mankind.

**1.1.1g Theatre ‘from above’**

Von Balthasar suspects, however, that ours is an era of static categories, lacking ‘the urgency which informs that “waiting” of which the gospel speaks’. He rues that ‘No theological textbook has found it worthwhile to refer to the names of Shakespeare or Calderón’, not because theology could be derived directly from either dramatist, but because their dramaturgy abhors lack of perspective in relativistic thought. (Though they show this in vastly different ways, both Shakespeare and Calderón engage the ‘theatre of the world’ for a public which is Christian in a particular sense.) The Church’s interaction with music, the visual arts

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48 Ibid., p. 317.
49 Ibid., p. 318.
50 Nichols, p. 59.
52 Ibid., p. 38.
53 Ibid., p. 125.
54 There is no claim here that either dramatist is writing ‘Christian drama’, only that they write for a Christian public. My phrasing avoids the historical problem of interpreting Shakespeare in light of a perceived theological thrust. In the case of Calderón, however, this cannot be avoided because his
and literature, to one degree or another have left their mark on theological thinking. The same may not be said even of periods in history when theatre has had some part in presenting Christian faith to the world.

Looking back as a theologian at the thousands of attempts made since medieval times to present the dramatic content of Christian revelation on the stage, one cannot say that these efforts were in vain or that they produced nothing of theological consequence. On the other hand, it can be said without exaggeration that none of this has had a fruitful influence on systematic theology.\(^5\)

Von Balthasar fears that without the immediacy of ‘perspective’ emerging from the revelatory drama of God in Christ, Christianity is easily domesticated to co-exist with a pantheon of belief systems, none of which have any claim over the other. Hopeful to reinstit in theology the dramatic immediacy of the Gospel, he claims the drama as ‘a legitimate instrument in the pursuit of self-knowledge and the elucidation of Being’.\(^6\)

In saying that ‘Truth is always meant as something to be performed and can only be understood as such’,\(^7\) von Balthasar comes close to a description of theatre’s truthful approach in the performance. He is not far from the playwright Thornton Wilder who captured in the most ephemeral of moments something of theatre’s seeking after truth. In his play *Our Town* (1938), Wilder tried to show the stage as life bared to its truthful essence; to do this, he created a STAGE MANAGER character who both takes part in the play and speaks directly to the audience. Wilder created a theatre that dissolved the pretence of a ‘fourth wall’ separating the action from the spectator in traditional drama.\(^8\) Wilder’s audience did not sit through the drama theatre only makes sense as a drama with an overtly theological agenda. In Chapter 4 below, I treat the question of the Calderonian stage and its presupposition of a Christian theatre of the world.


\(^6\) Ibid., p. 86.

\(^7\) Ibid., p. 121.

\(^8\) This traditional mode of drama is best seen in what is called the ‘well-made-play’, a reference to theatre which works primarily through the convention (i.e., accepted contrivance) that the play is a self-enclosed world. This is achieved through a tightly scripted plot, its action developing causally from one exposition to another. The ‘pièce bien faite’ as developed by Eugène Scribe (1791-1861) became associated with the comedies of Johann Nestroy (1801-1862, ‘the Austrian Shakespeare’), a tradition taken up with varying degrees of commitment by the majority of 20th century dramatists as diverse as Henrik Ibsen, G.B. Shaw, Oscar Wilde, J.B. Priestley, Noël Coward, Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Miller, and David Mamet.
watching as if through a ‘keyhole’; they became *dramatis personae* in their own right and, in fact, learned that it was for them that the play had been scripted.⁵⁹

### 1.I.1h The theatre of the world

The theologian cannot but appreciate that drama affords the audience-participant an overarching perspective originating with the “Stage Manager”. ‘Man is placed on the world stage without having been consulted’, von Balthasar writes, and ‘it is not the sphinx’s “what is man?” but the question “Who am I” that the actor must answer, whether he wishes to or not’.⁶⁰ This assumption of a ‘theatre of the world’ was already known to the stage of antiquity. Aristotle in particular conceived of drama as the most truthful of life’s representational forms (though in his terms theatre was most serious in showing the inevitability of the tragic). Marcus Aurelius, in a series of ‘matters addressed to himself’,⁶¹ added to the Aristotelian view that the aesthetic stage lifts the spectator to the grander perspective on the theatre of life. The Stoic thinker did this partly by downplaying the comedy’s aim for immediate gratification—e.g., laughter elicited through ‘mere realism and empty technique’—something which in his view failed to elicit the longer-term goal of a world-theatre which is ‘to remind us what can happen [in life], and that it happens inevitably’.⁶² On the other side of theatre as a mode of entertainment is the dramatization of life’s overarching spectacle. Theatre therefore engages life most meaningfully in mirroring what it means for man to play on the world-stage, instructing the soul with so plain an exposition of truth that ‘It stares at you in the face’.⁶³

Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* brings to light the theatre’s dramatizing perspective on humanity in its exploration of the ordinary lives of a small population in New England. Always at play with its audience as with life,⁶⁴ the play shows the

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⁵⁹ For a description of the *Our Town* in relation to a theo-dramatic perspective, see APPENDIX A below.


⁶¹ Conventionally titled *Meditations*.


⁶³ Ibid., XI.7.

⁶⁴ This is a fact which von Balthasar acknowledges in saying that ‘[Thornton Wilder] completely clears the stage… to carry out his “experiment with life” together with the audience’. However, von
ultimate seriousness in theatre’s rise towards a clearer perspective on life; this is captured in the play during a pithy exchange between two school children:

REBECCA
I never told you about that letter Jane Crofut got from her minister when she was sick. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope the address was like this: It said: Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover’s Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America.

GEORGE
What’s funny about that?

REBECCA
But listen, it’s not finished: the United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God—that’s what it said on the envelope.

GEORGE
What do you know!

REBECCA
And the postman brought it just the same.65

If the particular eloquence of the drama is in voicing questions which are only evident given a perspective ‘from above’, it also lends itself to the action-bound articulation of truth known in the theological drama of ‘the Word made flesh’. The most abstract theatrical concepts must ultimately be expressed as media occupying real time and space. The dynamics of words given life in action, marking out for this purpose a light and sound environment, the actor’s embodied personification of character, these are all manifestations of the dramatic moment which, apprehended by the senses and projected on the backdrop of the imagination, becomes the event we call the theatre. We have in theology, on the other hand, God’s presence as Jesus

Balthasar raises the point only to cast doubt on its significance by granting greater importance to what he says is Wilder’s doing away with “the two pillars of the classical drama, the “great personality”, and the “significant action.”” Minor though it seems, von Balthasar’s reading of Wilder’s Our Town reveals an instance in a larger pattern of recoil from the dynamics of drama as a performed art—thus as engaging into its action a live audience—choosing instead to submit theatre to the critique of the literary genre. This becomes especially clear in von Balthasar’s abstraction from the climactic scene between the Stage Manager and Emily of a literary/philosophical metaphor for theology, albeit in a perfectly defensible manner.

It is true that, with his Stage Manager, Wilder is accentuating a very particular world-view; that is not important here, however, but rather the particularly successful way he shows the interplay of time’s horizontal and vertical dimensions. The horizontal has genuine tension only within the accompanying vertical dimension. It is the vertical that makes the horizontal into an irreversible movement and gives the decisions that are made within it both meaning (Sinn) and direction (Sinn).

In his exposition of Our Town, the relation of the theatrical audience to the play’s action is, for von Balthasar, entirely negotiable. Hence, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, in the end, the play’s ideas on the page are more important to von Balthasar than the onstage interpretation. Balthasar, TD I, p. 351-52, cf. 83, 300, 376.

the man, at once an exposition of the hiatus between God and humanity, and in this Truth incarnate, revelation of ‘the nerve of the Christian drama’.

To the extent that theology makes possible human reflection from within this incarnate perspective, it becomes possible for the theatre, in mediating word and flesh in action, to attend truthfully to life as it appears from above.

The Christian is instructed to ‘‘do the truth in love’’ (aletheuein en agape [Eph 4.15]) not only in order to perceive the truth of the good but, equally, in order to embody it increasingly in the world’. Embodying truth, showing-forth the Gospel story in the flesh is the role which the Christian plays in God’s salvation drama. Von Balthasar’s awareness is that the drama’s embodiment of truth ‘from within a particular horizon of faith and consciousness’ brings theatre into direct contact with theology. This does not imply a Christian horizon looming behind the drama; it does, however, bear the implication that theatre requires an audience’s belief that, together with the actor interpreting the drama, they participate in a truthful staging of life. However partial, embryonic or obscure the dramatist’s attempts, moreover, he writes believing that the play, given its light of day on stage, is itself a realization of life while it is lived ‘every, every minute’ (cf. APPENDIX A). Hence, the question is asked by the director, the first interpreter of the playwright’s work, “in what way is this play speaking truth?—and how?” The answer is always the same: through actors investing their characters with heart and mind; with a crew of interpreters—designers, costumers, technicians—who perform their part in the drama in communion with the audience-participant who comes ‘to have the event of his own existence set before him in a clarifying form, in an attempt to understand himself better’.

2. Theological dramatics: divine analogies from profane spaces

Theatre, as a resource for theological inquiry, is a small stone in the mosaic of revelation. In this transposition of von Balthasar’s analogy is expressed succinctly the Theo-Drama’s view that theatre is not an end in itself but is useful as source of

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66 Reinhold Schneider, Rechenschaft (Johannes Verlag, 1951), 23-26; Balthasar, TD I, p. 120.
67 Ibid., p. 20.
68 Ibid., p. 118.
69 Ibid., p. 249.
theologically dramatic analogies. The Balthasarian approach is most concerned with rendering action-bound analogies to overcome the rigidity of systematic approaches to theology. Von Balthasar knows, of course, no a priori justification that would make self-evident a coming together of theology and the dramatic (even theatre’s supposed beginnings in religion are of little use here). He is well aware that the history of the stage and the Church, at best characterised by mutual suspicion, is not on his side; certainly not if he is to establish legitimate ground on which to draw divine analogies from profane spaces.

Given the history of antagonism between theatre and Church, it would be justified to dismiss the possibility of a revealing dialogue between the dramatist and the theologian. What, after all, could the secular have to say to the divine? ‘What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?’ It is not history, however, which makes evident the need for a theological dramaturgy. The theological exchange with the dramatic will have to be established on different grounds, and probably on what historically has been terra incognita to theologian and dramatist alike. Here again, von Balthasar leads our way through relatively unexplored territory, showing that theology itself provides a dramatizing perspective on God’s interaction with his creature and the consequent possibility for responsible human action. The uncomfortable history preceding von Balthasar’s theological dramatic theory must be faced, however, in order to dismiss definitively the perception that theatre and theology are inherently contradictory.

1.1.2a The primordial view

On the threshing floors of a prehistoric agrarian society, in a gathering of women winnowing grain and telling stories to relieve the tedium of their day, one from among the group known to veer into exaggeration unexpectedly slides into an imitative gesture of another woman in the circle and elicits laughter from the others. The following day, at the group’s request, she repeats the gesture to similar

70 Cf. discussion in Chapter 5.
72 Theatre phenomenologist Burt States noted the threshing floor as suggestive of the communal circle around which the dramatic event takes place, providing, therefore, a speculative alternative to disputed versions of theatre’s origins in religious Dionysiac ritual (see below, Chapter 5). Bert O.
effect—thus is born the ὑποκριτής: one who responds in gest, hence the actor.\textsuperscript{73} Or, perhaps the primordial theatrical moment began among the men, as they sat around an evening fire recounting the day’s hunt. Suddenly, a beast sprung into their circle striking fear into the hearts of the hunters: but it was one of their own who in an unprecedented impulse ‘costumed’ himself in an animal hide to re-enact the part of the felled beast. The story thus dramatized became ritually incorporated into their celebrations after each hunt.

Both scenarios are, of course, romanticised accounts of a story of beginnings which no amount of archaeological or anthropological excavation can unearth. Whatever the beginnings of the theatre, however, and whether sacred or profane, from its classical incarnation in the Greek chorus to Beckett’s minimalist tragedies, from Shakespeare’s literary drama to Andrew Lloyd Webber’s latest musical offering; whether in Wagner’s totalising aesthetics or Brecht’s operatic populism, theatre, as a phenomenal consummation of space, actor and action, has always cast misgivings on the legitimacy of its form.

\textbf{1.1.2b Initial objections}

It is not in the Church, in fact, that we find some of the earliest protest against theatrical representation but in the ancient world of Plato who regards the stage as fraudulent because of its engagement in ‘illusory’ \textit{mimesis}, hence as tertiary to reality’s already secondary imitation of a more noble and immutable performance in the heavens.\textsuperscript{74} It is a theological critique of theatre which is said to subvert our norm or canon for speech and poetry about the gods—that they are neither wizards in shape-shifting nor do they mislead us by falsehoods in words or deed…. Then, though there are many other things that we praise in Homer, this we will not applaud, …nor shall we approve of Aeschylus….\textsuperscript{75}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[73] In antiquity, the term is established neutrally in reference to the dramatic interpreter whose skill is primarily in rhetoric. Cf. multiple examples in Plato’s \textit{Republic}, and in Aristotle’s \textit{Poetics}, \textit{Rhetoric} and \textit{Politics}. Also Demosthenes (4\textsuperscript{th} c. BCE), \textit{Speeches}, XI-XX.18.21; and Epictetus, \textit{Works} (IV.VII.5.06). In the New Testament, it is used in the negative sense of one who is duplicitous in intent: e.g., Matthew 6.2, 6.16, 22.18, 22.48, 23.14, 23.15, 23.29; Mark, 7.6; Luke 12.56.
\item[74] Balthasar, \textit{TD I}, p. 89.
\end{footnotes}
For Plato, the dramatist exercises life-likeness on stage as an affront to the ordered image of the *polis* which the gods (at their most noble) impart on earthly affairs;\(^76\) thus, he writes of the dramatist, that ‘we shall be wroth with him [and] refuse him a chorus’.\(^77\) In this view, life’s less-than-perfect ‘rehearsal’ on the aesthetic stage is but Promethean conspiracy concerning, as von Balthasar puts it, only one ‘who secretly longs to escape from finitude’.\(^78\)

[For Plato,] the playwrights, with their ability to create illusions beyond the realm of good and evil, are led astray, along with the actors who perform their roles, into childish games (*paidia*) unworthy of human beings. Genuine order in the *polis*, as well as a corresponding education (*paideia*), should be based solely on the imitation of what is immutably good and true; only in this way can man become a “divine marionette [to] his best interest.”\(^79\)

Hence, insofar as the early Christians critique the theatre for its alleged propensity to rob the Gospels, and later, the liturgy, of their right to portray the divine drama, they are simply adding their voice of protest to an already existing chorus of conscientious objectors.\(^80\)

In the end, the Church, asserting its unique voicing of the truth of God as he is in Christ, was suspicious of theatre as a vehicle for portraying this Gospel truth. Whatever its continuities as a religious tradition, the beginnings of the Church, with its understanding that the drama of the Cross and Resurrection projects indelibly the image of Christ onto the world, also signalled radical departure from mythical versions of what constitutes the world drama. The unexpected newness of a ‘Christ-event’ in God’s soteriological drama could not therefore accommodate theatrical practice which originated and developed around ancient myth and pagan ritual. It was simply a case of not putting new wine into old wine skins.

[T]he biblical and Christian history of salvation was such a totally new beginning over against the mythical theatre that it was simply impossible to effect a transposition and assimilation, at least in the early stages. The mystery of God’s stepping into the world had to be clearly distinguished from

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\(^{76}\) Balthasar, *TD I*, p. 89, fn. 9.

\(^{77}\) Plato, II.283.e

\(^{78}\) Balthasar, *TD I*, p. 110.

\(^{79}\) Ibid., p. 90.

\(^{80}\) Ibid.
everything mythological [even if to a future Church] drama’s mythical themes could be seen as prefiguring and pointing toward the one true drama.81

If the proclamation of the Church was to sound radically different from what had preceded it, therefore, attempts to reconcile the classical stage and Christianity would inevitably appear as compromising the Gospel’s new attestation of the world drama. Moreover, in the ensuing few centuries, the drama of liturgy, the ‘true drama’ in which God encounters man, cannot but impose a view of theatre either as a lesser medium for presenting the Christian drama or as a presenter of lesser dramas. Von Balthasar’s perspicuity on this point bears hearing:

[S]acrament—understood as a real “representation”, effecting what it represents—and its perfected truth in concrete human life, lies at the root of all the problems involved in Christian theatre. […] What [sacrament] brings forth is both more and less than itself, and this means that the theatre [‘since it is only the visible presentation’] necessarily becomes a critique of the Church[,] …whereas the Church must necessarily be suspicious of the theatre.82

The question arises, however, what exactly is this theatre which early Christianity finds anathema?

3. Theatre spectacle and the Christian era

Whether we side with von Balthasar and conclude that the Church was premature in its condemnation of a practice that has come down to us as a legitimate (and essentially secular) art form, or whether we think that the Church and theatre in their initial contact were defined inevitably by irreconcilable differences, von Balthasar’s idea of a ‘theatre of the world’ articulated in theological terms is an attempt to break through Christian antipathy, disinterest and ambiguity historically shown to the theatre and its notions of the dramatic.83

It is an approach not entirely without precedent. Biblically, even if we ignore the tradition of the prophets or the divine courtroom drama in Job, the Synoptics

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81 Ibid., pp. 91-92. In Chapter 4, we will see that even in the case of Calderon’s staging of myths as possible foreshadowers of the revelation that was to be fulfilled in Christ there was a deliberate attempt to subvert their theological orientation in favour of a Christian version of existence. Cf. Timothy Ambrose, ‘Versions of Christian truth in Calderon’s Orpheus autos’ in, A star-crossed Golden Age: Calderón and the Spanish comedia, ed. Frederick Alfred De Armas (London, Associated University Presses, 1998).
82 Ibid., p. 93, original emphasis with intercalation of ellipsed phrase.
83 Ibid., p. 89.
themselves set the tone for a dramatic reading of the life of Christ and the *imitatio* that this evinces in the life of the believer. The writers of the Epistles do their part insofar as ‘they know that their only chance of being objective is by being profoundly involved in the event they are describing’ (thus their emphasis on the drama of spiritual warfare, for example, a theme intensified in full in Revelation). The Apostle Paul, himself apprehended by God’s dramatic revelation on the road to Damascus, proves theo-dramatic when he writes a letter and, in it, testifies with his whole life of the truth of revelation, putting God’s action at the centre but including himself…; he pulls out all the stops of his existence in order to convince those to whom he is writing that they too are drawn into this action just as much as he is.

Von Balthasar also finds occasional support in theologians of an earlier Church who venture into writing in the style that reflects the dramatic quality of the Christian story. To this tradition that includes facets of Irenaeus, Ignatius Loyola and Anselm, and argued most notably, Augustine’s battle of two cities, von Balthasar adds the lesser known German Evangelical Markus Barth and Swedish Lutheran historian Gustaf Aulên who ‘defended his adoption of a theodramatic approach [sic] without the name’; as well as a tradition of writers as Milton, Dante, Dostoevsky, Bunyan whose appeal to a theo-dramatic perspective is also evident in C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien’s mythopoesis. All these, as Aidan Nichols has argued, ‘testify that theo-drama’s “speculative development” is Christian enough.’ None of this, however, obviates the fact that theological understanding of theatre is most conspicuous for its absence, bringing us, therefore, to face the preponderance of Christian sentiment.

### 1.1.3a Theatrical scandal

Taking into consideration the theatre’s inauspicious beginnings such that ‘even pagan authors criticized the theatre’s pernicious influence on morals,’

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85 Ibid.
Balthasar lets ‘the rigger Tertullian’\textsuperscript{88} cast the first stone on behalf of the Church. In his \emph{De Spectaculis} (Concerning Plays, c. A.D. 198), it is not only the obscene content of the Roman theatre that offends Tertullian, taking exception to ‘Gladiatorial games and the dismembering of human beings by wild animals reveal[ing] the demonic origin of the ‘offerings for the dead’ with their human sacrifices’.\textsuperscript{89} His arguments\textsuperscript{90} show equal suspicion of the \textit{nature} of dramatic performance in which the arousal of strong emotions rivals a Christian ethic of peaceful conduct; to say nothing of actors “acting” in disguise,\textsuperscript{91} for ‘In the Gospel the Lord says, I am the Truth unveiled, not I am the ‘costumed’ truth’. To those attracted to the stage, therefore, Tertullian commends the biblical drama in which unbelief is overcome by faith, and death by Resurrection, adding in a celebrated passage that the drama of the Coliseum draws crowds who wish to see the shedding of blood, but ‘if it is blood you wish to see, you have the blood of Christ’.\textsuperscript{93} The Gospel drama, says Tertullian, demonstrating early Christian appropriation of the theatrical metaphor, is to provide the superior alternative to the pagan spectacles of the day.\textsuperscript{94} This allegorical understanding of the Christian drama would not see fruition until the medieval period when Honorius of Autun (early 12\textsuperscript{th} c.), two centuries after dramatic tropes had appeared in the Eucharistic liturgy, takes it up in direct relation to the Eucharistic liturgy. He writes that in the Mass, the priest, ‘our

\textsuperscript{88} Balthasar, \textit{TD I}, p. 93.

\textsuperscript{89} And ‘dedicated as they are to Venus and Bacchus’, Ibid., p. 94.

\textsuperscript{90} Although Cross considers Tertullian’s arguments to have been ‘more thoroughly developed by Cyprian [3rd c.] and Chrysostom [4th c.]’, it may be argued that the force of \textit{De Spectaculis} as a single piece of writing dedicated to alienating theatre from any possibility of Christian consideration has been more influential historically. For this reason, in Chapter 2, I provide exposition of the theological thrust in Tertullian’s treatise, partly to legitimate the invective against a corrupt Roman stage, and partly to establish the need to overcome prejudice \textit{theologically}. Frank Leslie Cross, \textit{Oxford dictionary of the Christian church} 3rd. ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 507 ff., henceforth, ODCC.

\textsuperscript{91} Balthasar, \textit{TD I}, p. 94.

\textsuperscript{92} ‘In evangelio Dominus, “ego sum,” inquit, “veritas.” Non dixit, “ego sum consuetude.”’


\textsuperscript{94} Von Balthasar fails to note that Tertullian engages in a sort of theological dramatics, the emotive range of which is captured particularly vividly in Turcan’s translation; e.g., ‘Et bientôt, quel spectacle que l’arrivée du Seigneur, désormais incontestable, majestueux, triomphant! Oh, l’exultation des anges! Oh, la gloire des saints qui ressuscitent! Oh, l’avènement du règne des justes! Oh, la Jérusalem nouvelle!’ This is the perspective from which I will provide an exposition of Tertullian’s invective against the theatre in Chapter 2. Turcan, pp. 317-19.
poet tragedian makes present the fight of Christ in his gestures, teaching Christian people in the theatre of the Church the victory of his redemption’.  

No such insight is available to the second century theologian, however, and his allegorical use of theatre to exalt the Christian drama does not prevent the profane theatre from propensity towards the vulgar (in Tertullian’s terms, courting the ‘ravings’ and ‘madness’ of emotion). The Emperor Elagabalus, for example, ‘ordered that sex acts in mimes be real, not simulated, and … Dominitian allowed an actual crucifixion to conclude a mime’. That the on-stage ridiculing of Christians and their sacraments was common fare on the stage, ‘only intensified the hostility;’ it also reinforced the profane status of the theatrical profession such that the actor came to be deemed ‘persona inhonestas’. In the Roman period itself, under Pretorian law, actors had been considered no better than dishonourably discharged soldiers and pimps. The social marginalization of theatre professionals extended through the Constantinian era when Christian moral standards were tentatively applied throughout, and did nothing for the future of the profession vis-à-vis the Church. Under Church law, well into the twelfth century, actors (and other ‘vagrant wanderers’) were excluded from the sacraments and ‘told that they could not hope for eternal salvation’. As late as the seventeenth century, the dramatic person was derided as mere scandalizer, as was the case of Molière whose deathbed requests for last rites were repeatedly refused (and when a willing prelate was eventually found, he was to arrive much too late).

### 1.1.3b Christian ambiguity

Anecdotai as it is, the case of Molière illustrates the Church’s historical uncertainty about what to do with the dramatist. Some examples of synodical

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96 Balthasar, TD I, p. 94.
98 Ibid., p. 1112.
99 Balthasar, TD I, p. 98.
100 Ibid., p. 95.
101 Ibid., p. 99.
102 Ibid., p. 103.
proclamations further punctuate the Church’s opposition to the theatrical profession despite occasional gestures in favour of the conversion of actors and playwrights. In 314, at Arles, actors are given access to the Church provided they leave their trade; attempts to return to it are punished by expulsion.103 The same is mandated by the Apostolic Constitutions which extend their strictures to Olympic runners, dancers and anyone ‘addicted to the madness of the theatre’,104 thus echoing the views of Augustine who himself had once been smitten by theatre.105 Carthage, in 399, is more lenient and provides for entrance into the Church so long as one can abstain from the theatre ‘at least for a time’ though attendance on Sundays or feast days are still excommunicable offences.106 In the fifth century, ‘all performers in mimes’ were excommunicated while the sixth century saw the closing of the theatres.107 In 813, Charlemagne ratifies a Church prohibition on bishops and clerics from attending plays. Similar moves typify the centuries that follow right through the Reformation when Calvinists and Lutherans take up the cause against the stage (though Calvin himself appears to have favored the staging of Biblical stories for didactic purposes).108

Although in the late middle ages acting troupes were able to form ‘guilds of a kind… and often formed Church-based brotherhoods’ as a way into the Church and out of their infamy109 ‘[t]he attitude of the medieval Church toward stage plays in general was not wholly consistent, and individual instances of intolerance can be found…’110 Significantly, in the tenth century we see two examples of Christian representation in the theatre, namely from the Saxon nun Hrosvitha, who ‘wrote a number of edifying “comedies”, and the English monk Ethelwold with his “mime and dialogue” presentations of the resurrection of Christ “to be performed in Church during or after

103 Ibid., p. 97.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
108 Something that would be repeated at various times in Britain well into the 19th century. See, Ferguson, ed., p. 112.
110 Balthasar, TD I, p. 100.
111 Cross, p. 507.
the liturgical rites.” However, it is not until theatre begins to enjoy the patronage of the nobility, thereby evolving along the lines of middle-class sensibilities, that the stage starts to gain legitimacy in society. The Elizabethan theatre is therefore made possible, so are the Restoration stage and Victorian drama though never without its share of controversy and adverse reactions from the Church.

It is in light of this history that Von Balthasar gathers his rhetoric in a pointed critique of the Church whose long-established enmity toward the stage makes possible a Bishop Bossuet who in 1694 ‘pulled out all the stops of dogmatics, moral theology, Church history, scholasticism, patristics and even Plato and Aristotle to show that going to the theatre was incompatible with the Christian life’. Attitudes such as Bossuet’s (and his ‘great ecclesiastical contemporaries… hardly thought and spoke differently’), confirm the suspicion that the Church has been prevented from ever really entering into fruitful dialogue with theology. It is a parting of ways to which von Balthasar adds a postscript that reads like an epitaph:

Here, for the last time, the Church spoke on the basis of an unbroken, but also unreflected and uncritically accepted, tradition. Even in its origins, this tradition was a strange, timebound amalgam of Christian awareness, Hellenistic ethics and Roman social order. [But as] we have seen throughout the whole tragic story, it was fundamentally illogical…

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111 Ibid. Von Balthasar considers her six plays ‘dramatic legends’ to distinguish them from the earlier (Plautus and Terence) pedagogical or ‘learned drama’, see Balthasar, TD I, p. 109.


113 Cf. Ibid., p. 101.

114 The fact that theatre in its present form continues to be an overwhelmingly conventional institution, owing to its economic need to appeal to the middle class, remains as backdrop to the discussion. Space constraints prevent showing this, but it may be observed from the fact that most plays on offer on the East End or Broadway at any one time (even when excluding Shakespeare and popular musicals) are plays which have been in performance for two or more decades. The point is that theological approach to theatre cannot be obvious to the established theatre which thrives on commercially tested formulas and abhors change.

115 Maximes et refléctions sur la comédie, Balthasar, TD I, p. 103-104.

116 Ibid., p. 104.

117 Though theatre is never completely ‘released from its ecclesiastical connection’. Cross, p. 507.

118 Balthasar, TD I, p. 104, my emphasis. In this light, contemporary Christian ambiguity on theatre can be striking. For example, the successful remounting of the ‘rock-opera’ Jesus Christ Superstar in 2000, in contrast to the controversy it had generated during the 1971/1973 (UK/US) production, elicited positive commentary from Catholic critics but hardly any from Protestant counterparts. Here, we can take on von Balthasar’s nagging query: ‘Has the Church ever become reconciled, inwardly, with the theatre?’ Or, is it the case that, like Molière’s death-side confessor, an attempt towards a
4. The world theatre metaphor

Although historically, theatre has made only a nominal impact on theology, it is at the level of the ‘world theatre’ metaphor that the two find common ground; and it is there that theology can recover the necessary dramatic dimension foregone in other theological streams. We have shown that there is nothing obvious in bringing the human instinct for play-acting life’s action in vivo into dialogue with divine action to which Scripture bears witness. Nevertheless, there is a striking fittingness in the theatrical metaphor for engaging with a Christian theology that begins with God’s opening act of creation, is complicated by mankind’s hubris and subsequent fall, is complicated further with God’s promise for redemption, unfolds in faithful witness to his chosen Israel, climaxes in God’s dramatic action in Jesus and his entrance unto the world stage, is followed by the denouement of the Spirit-filled Church, and looks toward an imminent ‘the end’, when the final curtain is brought down with the return of Christ as a deus ex machina—Ἰδοὺ ἔρχεται μετὰ τῶν νεφελῶν—to set creation and mankind in their renewed relationship to the triune God (Eph 1.10).

The stage, whether classical or contemporary, has been most vividly expressed as a metaphor for the world, in the idea that ‘the world’s a stage and each must play a part’, as the popular lyric would have it. This metaphorical appraisal of existence

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119 The implications of ὑβρίς for a theological-dramatics are articulated in Ch. 3. For now, it may be understood as squandering of self arising from pride of strength or from passion. † In Greek tragedy the hero’s hubris brought him in conflict with the gods and caused his downfall; see Martin Esslin, ed., Illustrated encyclopaedia of world theatre, trans. Estella Schmid (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), p. 143. † Henry Stuart Jones, A Greek-English lexicon: a new edition revised and augmented throughout, ed. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 1841.

120 ‘Look, he is coming with the clouds!’ (Rev. 1.7) 

121 Reprised in Are You Lonesome Tonight (words and music by Roy Turk and Lou Handman. Recorded April 4, 1960, RCA studios, Nashville) from Shakespeare’s
is evident in literature from Shakespeare’s self-conscious addresses to the audience,122 to Calderón de la Barca’s ‘The Great Theatre of the World’ which borrows the idea from the classical drama (cf. Chapter 4). The world theatre metaphor is so commonplace that its significance is easily overlooked. Nonetheless, it finds its way into contemporary Christian use where it affords a phenomenological perspective on worship.123 Theological excursions into the ‘drama of salvation’ exploit the metaphor to equal effect.124 Theological investment in the metaphor may still be ambiguous: ancillary in ordering our thinking about life as an Authored

‘All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.’ (As You Like It, Act II. Scene VII)

122 The ‘aside’ being a deliberate breaking of the stage’s ‘fourth wall’ so as to dramatically involve the world outside in the performance. Moreover, Shakespeare’s many appeals to the ‘theatre of the world’ metaphor in his plays already anticipate the modern theatre’s dismissal of rigid boundaries between stage and ‘reality’. This allows the permutation that while in the drama the whole of the stage is the world, in life, the whole of the world is a stage. We have, therefore,

‘I hold the world but as the world...
A stage where every man must play a part,
And mine a sad one’.
(The Merchant of Venice: Act I. Scene I)

‘Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more...’
(Macbeth, Act V. Scene V)

123 Contemporary titles on the subject include M. Horton, A better way: rediscovering the drama of God-centered worship (2002), though the concept had already been voiced in the 1970s by Lawrence Waddy, cf. The Bible as drama, in a series of ninety bible narratives presented as stage dramas, as well as Drama in worship (Paulist Press, 1975 and 1978 respectively). The idea that worship is a liturgical drama and therefore may incorporate theatrical play is furthermore asserted in publications for practical theology, a sampling of which would include the following: J. Burton, Worship innovations: easy Bible drama (2001); C. Cloninger, Drama for worship: contemporary sketches for opening hearts to God (1999); M. Earey, Worship as drama (1997); J. and A. Parker, Drama for worship: dramatic readings for the Church year (1996-1998). See also Verne Meyer, ‘The unfolding drama: our worship has always included dramatic elements’, Reformed Worship 17, Spring 1990, pp. 14-15. The enthusiasm, though, is not universal; cf. two cautionary essays on the use of drama in worship: S. Gonzalez, The regulative principle and drama in worship (1995); also J. Schuurman, ‘The Gospel’s the Thing: Don’t turn your worship over to a good actor (liturgical drama guidelines)’ in Reformed Worship, no 28 (Je 1993), p. 22-24.

124 Everything from McKay’s most modest of pamphlet formats to Haughton’s exhortation to Christian discipleship have made use of the dramatic analogy, almost without exception used to propose conflicting relations. Schwager, for example, in a serious exegetical study, adopted the dramatic metaphor as a mediating term between theology and its potential conflict with the experience of faith, explaining that drama is something which we know from life and may be used to organise theological thinking. Ludwig, underscoring shifts in contemporary understanding of the faith, traces current conflicts to early debates on theological knowledge derived from rational effort and that made evident to the creature in the light of revelation. My point is that all of these assume (correctly) that conflict is the mark of the dramatic, though without questioning whether the metaphor does justice to the work of theology. Cf. John William McKay, The drama of salvation: what is the Bible all about? (Horham: Way of the Spirit, c.1994). Rosemary Haughton, The drama of salvation (London/New York: S.P.C.K./Seabury Press, 1976 [1975]). R Schwager, Jesus in the drama of salvation: towards a biblical doctrine of Redemption, vol. 51 (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1999). Nita Ludwig, ‘The drama of salvation: an essay on conflict, crisis and the search for meaning in Christianity’, Epiphany 1, no. 3 (Spring 1981): 43-53.
oeuvre, yes; but what else? However commonplace it might seem, it is on the basis of this world stage metaphor, organic to the Western canon, that Hans Urs von Balthasar begins to forge his theo-dramatic foundations.

1.1.4a ‘No theatre/ No world’

The world’s a theater, the earth a stage,
Which God and nature doth with actors fill:
Kings have their entrance in due equipage,
And some there parts play well, and others ill.
The best no better are (in this theater),
Where every humor’s fitted in his kinde;
This a true subject acts, and that a traytor,
The first applauded, and the last confin’d;
This plays an honest man, and that a knave,
A gentle person this, and he a clowne,
One man is ragged, and another brave:
All men have parts, and each man acts his owne.
She a chaste lady acteth all her life;
A wanton curtezan another playes;
This covets marriage love, that nuptial strife;

Both in continual action spend their dayes:
Some citizens, some soldiers, borne to aduenter,
Sheepeheards, and sea-men. Then our play’s begun
When we are borne, and to the world first enter,
And all finde exits when their parts are done.
If then the world a theater present
As the roundnesse it appears most fit,
This a true subject acts, and that a traytor,
In which Jehove doth as spectator sit,
A gentle person this, and he a clowne,
And chief determiner to applaud the best,
One man is ragged, and another brave:
But by their evill actions doomes the rest
She a chaste lady acteth all her life;
To end disgrac’t, whilst others praise inherit;
A wanton curtezan another playes;
He that denyes then theaters should be
He may as well deny a world to me.

Though the exaggerated lyricism of Thomas Heywood’s verse may obscure the serious theological orientation the author indicates in a marginal note—i.e., that the theatre metaphor was ‘So compared by the Fathers’—his concluding meditation is straightforward: ‘No theatre/ No world’.

From one generation to the next, thinkers of the Western European tradition have seen the world as the grand stage on which plays out what Balzac called La comédie humaine. Nuanced differently in each era, concordant with dominant philosophical or religious metanarratives, the metaphor has been perpetuated for its capacity to account for the dramatic nature of existence. Marcus Aurelius spoke of “An empty pageant; a stage play… puppets, jerking on their strings—that is life,” to which he immediately added the prescription for honourable action therein: “In the midst of it all you must take your stand, good-temperedly and without disdain, yet


126 Von Balthasar also points to the development of the theatrical metaphor in Asian philosophy; for example, as in The Bhagavad Gita (18,61) where we read: ‘God dwells in the heart of all beings, Arjuna!/ And his power of wonder moves all things—puppets in a play of shadow’ (tr. J. Mascaro; Penguin, 2000). Balthasar, TD I, p. 137.

127 Ibid., p. 135.
always aware that a man’s worth is no greater than the worth of his ambitions.”\textsuperscript{128}

Whether from the perspective of theology we can regard Aurelius’ Stoicism\textsuperscript{129} as “dramatic” or as a flat determinism\textsuperscript{130} is not in question, merely that his philosophy cannot refrain from appeal to the theatrical metaphor; so we read in his dialogue with the soul on the death of the Roman:

You’ve lived as a citizen in a great city. Five years or a hundred—what’s the difference? The laws make no distinction. And to be sent away from it, not by tyrant or a dishonest judge, but by Nature, who first invited you in—why is that so terrible? Like the impresario ringing down the curtain on an actor [who pleads]: “But I’ve only gotten through three acts…!” Yes. This will be a drama in three acts, the length fixed by the power that directed your creation, and now directs your dissolution. Neither was yours to determine. So make your exit with grace—the same grace shown to you.\textsuperscript{131}

Plato, despite his disdain for the stage, considered the end to which all must come in death suggesting that it be accepted as the time when the borrowed props with which the soul chose to enter the play of existence must be handed back and left for another.\textsuperscript{132} In Plato’s Republic, the role that each soul plays on earth originates in the free choosing, before birth, of the various parts made available to play.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{128} Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, VII.3, cited in Ibid., p. 143.

\textsuperscript{129} “What is it you want? To keep on breathing? …thinking? Which of them seems worth having? But if you can do without them all, then continue to follow the logos, and God. To the end. To prize those other things—to grieve because death deprives us of them—is an obstacle”. Aurelius, XII.31, p. 169.

\textsuperscript{130} Indeed, he claims the opposite: that Christian responsiveness to Salvation from a Deus ex machina trivializes the soul’s tragic mode (death, dissolution, loss) into mere ‘dramatics’: ‘The resolute soul: Resolute in separation from the body. And then in dissolution or fragmentation—or continuity. But the resolution has to be the result of its own decision, not just in response to outside forces like the Christians. It has to be considered and serious, persuasive to other people. Without dramatics.’ Ibid., XI.3, p. 148, with shift of original emphasis.

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., XII, 36. p. 170.

\textsuperscript{132} Balthasar, TD I, p. 148.

\textsuperscript{133} Von Balthasar points to the dramatic metaphor used by Plato for whom “those souls which come straight from ‘heaven’ seize the outwardly most glamorous roles, ‘while those who came from earth had suffered themselves and seen others suffer and were not so hasty in their choice’; As with Marcus Aurelius’ Stoicism, however, it may be argued, that the deterministic orientation in Plato’s view of the lot which falls to each soul is rather undramatic, seen here in the continuation of the relevant passage:

For which reason also there was an interchange of good and evil for most of the souls, as well as because of the chances of the lot. Yet if… the lot of his choice did not fall out among the [evil], we may venture to affirm… that not only will he be happy here but that the path of his journey thither and the return to this world will not be underground and rough but smooth and through the heavens. For he said that it was a sight worth seeing to observe how the several souls selected their lives.
Epictetus, extends the metaphor by allowing for the Author of the drama to distribute the roles:

The poet gives you your part and you must play it, whether it is short or long. If he wants you to play a beggar, act the part skilfully… Your task is only to play well the part you have been given; the choosing of it belongs to someone else.\textsuperscript{134}

Plotinus too accepts this gloss of one’s fate in the universe emphasizing the irony that for existence to achieve balance, the constituent parts of the drama ‘must be unequal and graded if they are to form the most beautiful universe’.\textsuperscript{135} Not everyone may be a king. As does the Greek tragedy, the theatrical metaphor makes necessary beggars, visionaries, philosophers and servants alike to round out life’s comedy. What matters to the philosopher is the overall aesthetics, the look of the ‘production’ as a whole where the unquestioned performances of the exalted and the lowly reinforce the givenness (and, therefore, the inevitability) of life’s telos.

The Bible, in its own way, conceives of the world’s theatron, through the tension ‘between enjoyment on the one hand and grim seriousness on the other’, von Balthasar points out, that is, ‘in a fight for life and death’.\textsuperscript{136} We have this from the Psalmist’s ‘the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it’ (24.1), to Job’s tragi-comic dramatization of the struggle between humanity with itself and with God, a performance interpretation of life which would follow down through the ages.\textsuperscript{137} The story is played back in Gethsemane when Jesus exclaims in agony: ‘Father, if you are

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\textsuperscript{134} Balthasar, \textit{TD I}, p. 141.

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., p. 146.

\textsuperscript{136} See also von Balthasar’s commentary on the human struggle to escape particularity and finitude in footnote 78 above, a conflict borne in the struggle to adopt one’s \textit{particular} role in the \textit{universe}:

Everyone experiences the strange dichotomy between the core of his person (which is not immediately accessible to him) and the role he plays for himself and for society. He is hemmed in by this role and would often wish to break out of it, but he simply cannot; precisely because he is a person, he is \textit{this} particular individual and will always have a \textit{particular} mode of manifestation.

\textsuperscript{137} See specially, the section on ‘Christianity’ in ‘The Idea of the “World Stage”’, Ibid., pp. 151-55.
willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done’ (Luke 22.42); a dramatic tension resolved, though without dissolving particularity, in Resurrection.\textsuperscript{138}

The Epistles take up the metaphor with an important variation on the theme of suffering for now it is the believer who, having witnessed (or been witnessed to about) Christ’s drama, becomes an imitator of the master Thespian. Paul, therefore, reminds the faithful that ‘We have become [a] spectacle (\textit{theatron}) to the world, to angels and to men (I Cor 4.9)’.\textsuperscript{139} Equally, the writer to the Hebrews uses the analogy to expound an ethic for Christian fellowship: ‘But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened [baptism], you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed [\textit{theatrizomenoi}] to abuse and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated’ (Heb 10.32-34).\textsuperscript{140} For von Balthasar, moreover, whatever the Greeks might have done with their understanding of the world as a cosmic stage, in Christian terms ‘the various layers of pre-Christian theatre could easily be rendered transparent, enabling a Christian reality to shine through’\textsuperscript{141}

\textbf{1.1.4b Dramatic option}

There are, of course, real problems in adopting the theatrical metaphor as universal interpreter. Deriving pleasure in spectating the tragedy, the inevitably affective response to the theatrical act, should raise the possibility of an inherent voyeurism in the art. Marcus Aurelius inverts the problem but preserves the predicament in cautioning that since in the tragedy, drama pain and suffering ‘move us to pleasure on the stage, we have no right to be aggrieved by their occurrence on the larger stage of reality.’\textsuperscript{142} Plato, also abjuring the ‘histrionics’ of suffering,

\textsuperscript{138} The very idea that vicarious participation in another’s tragedy can produce pleasure will give some reason enough to view the theatre with contempt. A troubling component of the Jobean and Christic scenarios (if they can be compared at all), is that the Author does not merely script the drama (marked by torture and human loss) but is also its prime spectator. Shakespeare tackles the problem memorably in \textit{Lear}, IV.1, ‘As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport’. That the Author might derive pleasure from seeing his actors suffer the strain of the performance cannot be overlooked as a source of perplex questioning. Cf. von Balthasar’s view of the problem in Ibid., p. 151-52.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., pp. 136-37.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., p. 154.
\textsuperscript{141} Though von Balthasar is probably overly optimistic that Christians might have reached an understanding of theatre even in the early period of the Church. Ibid., p. 155.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., p. 137, citing Claudius Aurelius, Meditations, XI.6.
derides the spectator who ‘sobs and moans and acts as if mad when men perform their play on that stage which is the entire earth’.¹⁴³ For Plato, it is not the soul but ‘the outer shadow of the human being’ which engages in such ‘idle sport’ as the theatre.¹⁴⁴ By the same token, he remains aloof to suffering inherent in life’s journey for, as we saw, it is not God who gives out the roles but rather the soul which chooses, so ‘The fault lies, not with God, but with the soul that makes the choice’.¹⁴⁵ The world theatre metaphor under the command of the Greek philosopher effects a distance between the dramatic spectator and the action. Both the comedy (in which laughter marks the turns of good fortune) and the tragedy elicit from an audience an emotional response (e.g., joy, sympathy), yet there is no indication that the response can transfer to ‘real life’ scenarios. Thornton Wilder challenges his audience to rise to the theatre’s overarching perspective and thereby value the particularity of the moment that holds together life’s mosaic, but this might not be received.¹⁴⁶ Stated rhetorically, the play might open a door to truth, but will the spectator walk through it (the dramatic option), find comfort in the distance between act and mere “act” (the epic stance), or revel in the possibility but only for the duration of the play (the lyric moment)?

Keeping in mind these potential problems, von Balthasar helps us to appreciate that even in its appropriation of the theatrical analogy, the Church has consistently missed its opportunity to integrate it into a Trinitarian theology, to which we would respond that this has also meant that the Church has failed to understand the theatre. Even Luther, von Balthasar contends, violated the metaphor by trying to find too neat a continuity between the authorial God and the actions of the players. His talk of ‘masquerade’ creates more problems than it solves (Tertullian’s words come back to haunt him: ‘…the Lord did not say I am the masked one’¹⁴⁷). If, indeed, according to Luther, ‘All creatures are God’s masks and mummery,’ then so is human history

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 148.
¹⁴⁴ Ibid.
¹⁴⁵ *The Republic*, 620e, cited in Ibid., p. 145.
¹⁴⁶ Von Balthasar’s phrasing—that the drama asks the spectator ‘to fashion his life along the lines indicated by the play’s solution’—rather misses the way in which the play fashions the lines. Ibid., p. 264, my italics.
¹⁴⁷ Cf. 1, fn. 92 above.
itself, as are the secular authorities whether they wield the sword for good or ill.\textsuperscript{148} His view on the God-givenness of the powers of this world is sustained by his interpretation of Christ’s descent into hell as the ultimate ‘disguise’ which justifies any other guise so that we hardly recognize him when, ‘instead of the mask, God… clothe[s] himself with armour’.\textsuperscript{149}

Von Balthasar cannot even find a theo-dramatic colleague in the Baroque period of his beloved dramatist Calderón de la Barca.\textsuperscript{150} Christianity of the Spanish Golden Age integrated the drama as much as any period in history would. For von Balthasar, however, the Baroque stage read in the analogy of the ‘theatre of the world’ a literal mandate and went on to theatricalize ‘staged-life as real life’; it interpreted the life of the stage as a true and direct reflection of existence, or even as an idealised, more pristine presentation of life.\textsuperscript{151} This Christianised form of drama lent itself to a \textit{theologia naturalis}, something that had rarely been ‘built into Christian theology as intimately as here’.\textsuperscript{152}

1.1.4c \textit{At play within the play}

From the point of view of a theological approach to theatre, von Balthasar’s (reluctant) dismissal of Calderón is debatable, and in fact, the Spanish dramatist will prove to be theodramatic precisely to the extent that his Christian drama comprehends the aesthetics of secular theatre (see Chapter 4 below). Nevertheless, von Balthasar’s critique that Calderon’s version of the theo-drama did not illuminate significantly Christian theology remains a valid one. That said, for von Balthasar, the modern period fares equally poorly as a guide to significant exchange between theology and theatre. We have already explored reasons why the Church saw no future in the theatre. The move was not unilateral, however, and theatre too saw the need to venture into ideas to feed its own aesthetic ends and ask questions which the sciences and humanities had made necessary—namely, the possibility of godless existence.

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., p. 159, fn. 18.
\textsuperscript{150} Though from the point of view of a theological approach to theatre, Calderón proves theodramatic precisely to the extent that his Christian drama uses the aesthetics of the secular stage; see Chapter 3 below.
\textsuperscript{151} Balthasar, \textit{TD I}, p. 168.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., p. 169.
The age of ‘modern drama’ (roughly speaking, from Ibsen onwards) ushered in the theatrical age in which God could no longer be simply assumed, either ‘on stage’ or ‘behind the scenes’. This is the theatre in which overarching metaphors end up in Beckett’s trashcans.\(^{153}\) If the theatre of the world analogy has any relevance to this contemporary stage, it is on the basis of an impersonal cosmology with no guarantees of yesterday’s transcendence. The case might seem overblown but is rather well attested by dramatists who hail this era for its unshackling of the theatre from even a modicum of Christian convention and sees the realisation of a pluriform stage. Anything from the sentimental resolution in the American musical to Brecht’s theatre of political struggle (sustained by a Marxist world view) and Boal’s ‘theatre of the poor’ is a distinct possibility. ‘Does this mean that the original ‘world theatre’ notion, familiar to the ancient world and to Christianity, is simply obsolete?’ von Balthasar asks.\(^{154}\) Our No! must be given with guarded optimism, guarded because the Church’s lack of understanding of theatre means that today’s theatre functions in near-absolute isolation from its influence. Yet, von Balthasar is the first to remind us that though ‘the modern world is shapeless[,] the task of art is to create shape, concrete form’.\(^{155}\) He sustains his optimism with the thought that of the major trends in contemporary drama, none have been able to completely overcome the need for a theological drama:

From now on the stage will be dominated by the sociologico-psychological drama on the one hand and the utopian-absurd drama on the other—two forms of the same thing. Each of them lacks that dimension which can make the “world theatre” an arcane symbol of existence in its totality. Psychology and sociology stick to intramundane causalities and motivations; they assume that changed social conditions will eliminate tragedy or that the problem of existence can be solved by embracing the proper social “role”—and similar superficialities. The entire metaphysical question of life’s meaning is simply dropped. Conversely, the so-called “theatre of the absurd” goes on asking the

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\(^{153}\) The phrase is von Balthasar’s, speaking of the modern stage:

If meaninglessness, considered as a mode of action, has the last word, it annihilates itself and ends in Beckett’s garbage cans. The alleged absolute freedom which can play the part of both God and the devil (Sartre) dissolves in pure ennui. The attitude of revolt (Camus) is absurd if it is absolutized, since, in order to survive, it must always presuppose whatever it is negating and thus entangles itself in the fatal contradictions…. Ibid., p. 75.

\(^{154}\) Ibid., p. 214.

\(^{155}\) Ibid., p. 448.
question, to the exclusion of everything else, with the result that the empty question gobbles up all immanent dramatic action.\footnote{156}

We need not adopt von Balthasar’s wholesale dismissal of twentieth-century theatrical trends and their bearing on Christian thought (indeed, we take them up in Ch. 5). Implicit in von Balthasar’s answer, however, is the question we have anticipated all along: if a need still exists for the outworking of mankind’s conflicts on stage, is the Church to become ‘reconciled, inwardly, with the theatre’?\footnote{157} Certainly, it cannot happen by any crude paring of unequals. It is not the case that theology and theatre are simply two modes of interpretive action with overlapping axes. For example, theatre director Robert Lepage, attempting to explain theatre’s liveness as bringing an audience into play along the grain of its ‘vertical manner’ (his words), in the same sentence communicates the ambiguity in forcing a neat correspondence: theatre, he says, ‘is to do with putting the audience in contact with the gods, whatever that means. That’s where theatre comes from’.\footnote{158} Theology, if it is to do with the God-given in any sense, cannot be absorbed into the implied agnosticism in much of contemporary theatre. There is, however, much unexplored space between theology’s account of divine/human action and the actantial metaphor which is the stage. If, as von Balthasar suspects, the use of the world theatre metaphor necessarily implies a metaphysical dimension,\footnote{159} there is every reason to hope that theologically, we could understand the theatre for what it actually is: life’s metaphor in action, an illumination of the play within the play; that ‘our play “plays” in his play’.\footnote{160}

In this light, it is possible for the contemporary version of the historic friction between Church and stage to upset old assumptions and dismiss uniformed prejudices, so to shape the whole of the theological-dramatic enquiry into forms more concrete than have been possible thus far. As drama presses towards a ‘horizon of meaning’,\footnote{161} theology’s interpretive light illuminates the contours of that horizon.

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{156}{Ibid., p. 213-14.}
\item \footnote{157}{Ibid., p. 109.}
\item \footnote{158}{Maria M. Delgado and Paul Heritage, \textit{In contact with the gods?: directors talk theatre} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 143, my emphasis.}
\item \footnote{159}{Balthasar, \textit{TD I}, p. 214.}
\item \footnote{160}{Ibid., pp. 19-20.}
\item \footnote{161}{Ibid., p. 265.}
\end{itemize}
For at what point in history has revelation, for example, been a category in drama, even though the most enduring value of the theatre is its ability to ‘interject itself into the concrete world that unites both actor and spectator’? We have seen that theology’s account of humanity’s implication in divine action has borrowed from the one art form that imitates life’s action in the medium of human action. Herein emerges the reversal of von Balthasar’s epitaph on the Christian approach to theatre and consequently our own hope for a veritably theological understanding of the stage.

[For] in our attempt to provide dramatic resources for the use of theology we chose the theatre of the world because it contains, concentratedly and most abundantly—both widely scattered and in precise detail—the elements which, drawn from the dramatic process itself, facilitate a religious and ultimately theological interpretation of existence.…

II. THEOLOGY’S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE STAGE

1. Towards a performative theological dramatics

So far we have established von Balthasar’s use of drama as analogue for God’s incarnate action in the world—its reasoning originating in God’s self-personification as Christ and in the concrete, live witness which is the Church enlivened by the continual inspiration of his Spirit—as well as the ways in which his theodrama opens the way to Christian interaction with the drama. The contention in our thesis that pressing theatre towards theological ends demands a deeper understanding of the theatrical phenomenon than even von Balthasar has made evident suggests that theological exchange with theatre merits greater consideration by theologians and dramatists alike.

1.II.1a Live theatre

The mere exploitation of theatre with the aim of enriching the language of the Church would frustrate the real value of engaging theatre theologically. For his part, von Balthasar is clear that his primary interest in theatre is its literary wealth,
that is, theatre as a source of metaphors with which to furnish theology with images (in his terms, ‘categories’) faithful to the nature of divine/human action to which it bears witness. He summarizes forthrightly his purpose in the first volume of the Theo-Drama (‘Prolegomena’):

to study the phenomenon of the theatre—as a metaphor that is closely bound up with life’s reality—in order to gather materials (including both form and content) yielding categories and modes of expression for our central venture.165

For our part, we have tried to show that theatre entails, above anything, the live enfleshment of the word. What distinguishes theatre as an art-form from its literary setting in the dramatic genre is, in fact, the live presence of the actor on the stage and of the actor-participant before the stage. The erudite von Balthasar is not unaware of this aspect of the theatre. Inasmuch as has been possible, therefore, we have relied on the Balthasarian sensitivity to theatre’s manifestation as event to make the case for theology’s interaction with the stage. Nevertheless, in abstracting from the theatre ‘categories’, von Balthasar clearly underestimates the theatrical orientation in his own theo-dramatic venture. Whether von Balthasar, in the end, undercuts the drama of theology is not presently in question. This much Quash166 has argued, criticising von Balthasar’s advocacy of “indifference” as a Christian virtue for its failure ‘to honour the full, ‘poetic’ capacity of saintly subjects’, and equally his ‘attempt to delineate (in the midst of history) an acting area which is to all intents and purposes untouched by history’ (hence, subordinating ‘history itself… to a timeless structure’).167 Our interest in the Theo-Drama is in generating a theoretical basis for theology’s approach to theatre as theatre. To that extent, it is fair to say that von Balthasar undermines the drama of theatre as art in performance; that he “freezes”168 the action of the play into an ideal picture of its literal script untouched by the messy business of performance interpretation. Here again, von Balthasar outlines his approach to theatre most succinctly:

165 Balthasar, TD II, p. 17.
166 Leaning on Rowan Williams. See specially ‘Von Balthasar’s double indemnity against drama’, Quash, Theology and the drama of history, pp. 93-95.
167 Ibid.
168 Borrowing the term from Quash/Williams. Ibid.
The reader will hardly need reassuring: …the world of the theatre will only provide us with a set of resources which, *after they have been thoroughly modified*, can be used later in theology.\(^{169}\)

Theological commitment to the theatre, however, can only be dramatic to the extent that the theologian learns to hear the multiplicity of the dramatic voice in the moment of performance and is moved by the immediacy of its action; when the theologian feels the loss of theatre’s evanescent moments and abides in the presence of its images. *In the end, we will have done no more than urge that theology’s engagement with the stage, whatever its origins and motivations, treat the theatre as a three dimensional, unrepeatable performance event, not merely as a literary resource.* To that end, von Balthasar’s own reluctance to take on the liveness of theatrical phenomenon, preferring instead to abstract from the wealth of dramatic literature formal categories for his theological project, comes under suspicion from the theatre itself. It demands from theology a more substantial understanding of the stage from within its particularity among the arts as the art of action.

1.II.1b Performative/actantial theatre

The suspicion that in enlisting theatrical analogues to structure his theology along aesthetic lines von Balthasar sidelines performance interpretation and its inherence in theatre is borne out in the accumulated instances in which he makes clear that dramatic theory and its phenomenological realization as theatre ‘will be of use only if we realize that, in employing them, we need to complement them and go beyond them’.\(^{170}\)

This is just the sort of seemingly marginal aside that, in fact, reinforces our critique that von Balthasar’s theatre is merely an occasion for rendering a more interesting dogmatics: adopting a dramatic style and form but not its content. Though perhaps it is the form he misses in dealing with the theatre: Von Balthasar accepts the essence of what makes the dramatic (i.e. the obstacle of freedom or the conflict of will\(^{171}\)) yet pays scant attention to *performance* as the medium in which theatre achieves the dramatic moment.

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\(^{169}\) Balthasar, *TD II*, p. 11.

\(^{170}\) Ibid., p. 11, my italics.

\(^{171}\) Ibid., pp. 38, 62-63. ‘The confrontation between divine and human freedom has reached a unique intensity; the contest between the two has moved into the centre—the really dramatic centre stage—of
At minimum, this tendency undermines, as we have said, the theatrical angle in theology’s appropriation of the dramatic mode. His Damoclean ‘question mark over even the most interesting dramatic categories, a question mark that must apply, ultimately, to every attempt to present this unique reality [i.e. theology] in the forms of speech,’ points back to von Balthasar himself. The question reoriented thus casts doubt on his commitment to the theatre as a theological player (in the end, can we really speak of a Balthasarian theological drama, or of a dramatic theology, or is it simply theology by any other name?). In the end, we are still left asking, how might we stage a theological drama, and to what end?

2. Theology and performance interpretation

The present concern that theology and, with or through theatre be done with some fluency and commitment to the art of the theatre brings us next to two theologians who have attempted their own theo-dramatic approaches. Kevin Vanhoozer and Shannon Craigo-Snell, owing their understanding of the theodramatic to von Balthasar’s work, show a great sensitivity to the theatricality in the Christian’s embodied interpretation of the biblical script. Their awareness that ‘[w]hat the text loses in significative power in the theatre it gains in corporeal presence’, as the arc between text and performance has been described, brings the idea of a theological dramatics that much closer to a phenomenological presence on stage, effectively applying von Balthasar’s theological principles in ways anticipated but never realized in his own work. The close attention they pay to the corporeal/actantial situation of the stage means that their theo-dramatic excursions remain faithful to the particularities of theatrical phenomenon while providing implications for Christian theology.


172 Balthasar, TD II, p. 17.
173 States, p. 29.
174 Anticipated in the sense that, even as he writes, von Balthasar is very much aware that an attempt at reforming scholastic theology through a fruitful encounter with the drama is a novum, though as Nichols reminds us, ‘like any well-founded development in the act of faith’s reflection on itself, by no means a wholly unheralded one’. Nichols, p. 49.
1.II.2a The word in action

Kevin Vanhoozer, who quite explicitly takes his lead from Balthasar’s *Theodrama*, sees an obvious parallel between dramatic interpretation and the biblical emphasis on hearing and doing the Word.\(^{175}\) For ‘Scripture not only conveys the content of the gospel but is itself caught up in the economy of the gospel, as the means by which God draws others into his communicative action’. In suggesting that Scripture requires interpretation through performance, Vanhoozer is appealing to the theatrical (and seemingly self-evident) principle that plays (with rare exceptions) are written for performance. By analogy, in the life of the believer, Scripture can only be meaningful when it animates the person to perform his or her life with ‘creative fidelity’ to the text.\(^{176}\) ‘The word of God,’ says Vanhoozer, ‘is something to be spoken, something to be done’,\(^{177}\) demanding, therefore, nothing less than participatory action.\(^{178}\) The performatve aspect of the Christian faith may not be particularly new to theology and has been taken up from various angles.\(^{179}\) Vanhoozer’s particular contribution is to identify communicative action as the epistemic basis for pairing dramatic performance and theological interpretation.

For Vanhoozer, theology has to do ‘with God in self-communicative action (incarnation) and with Scripture as God’s self-communicative act (inspiration).’\(^{180}\) Relying on d’Aubignac’s dictum that *Parler c’est agir*,\(^{181}\) Vanhoozer understands Scripture not as a text unto which meaning is ascribed by the reader, or from which

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\(^{176}\) Ibid., p. 132.


\(^{178}\) Vanhoozer, *Drama of doctrine*, p. 80.


meaning may be abstracted by unscrupulous interpreters. Insofar as Scripture is taken to be the Word of God, it must be seen as evidence of divine action longing to be given shape in time and space. It is not merely the case that the Bible recounts God’s actions in the world, that ‘it is something said about something done’, but that Scripture itself is God’s communicative act in the world. In this sense, Vanhoozer agrees with von Balthasar for whom

…Scripture mirrors the drama [of salvation] and can only be understood in reference to it; it is part of the drama. It does not stand at some observation post outside revelation. And insofar as it is part of a greater whole, it points beyond itself to its content, and its content is pneuma, which is always more than the gramma, the letter.

In this light, Vanhoozer sees Scripture not only as relating divine action (narrative) but as one of its very forms (drama)—he sees in Scripture God’s action in the world transmitted through story that invites the reader to become a participant in the cosmic character of its plot. Revelation, in this view, is entirely God’s communicative initiative to which we ‘can only respond, and hence ‘understand,’ through action on [our] part’. Vanhoozer’s original proposal that ‘Divine communicative action [is] embedded in the canonical texts’ obscured his drive towards a hermeneutic of action interpretation (because ‘embedding’ hardly implies the need for realisation ad extra). Further interaction with theories of performance has enabled him to better appreciate that it is in doing the word that the interpretive community, the Church, realises the Scripture’s meaning. Vanhoozer writes that ‘God as the divine playwright… employs the voices of the human authors of Scripture in the service of his theo-drama’, and that in this sense ‘Scripture not only calls for subsequent performance but is itself a divine performance, a mode of divine communicative action’. Because the believer is one who has been spoken

182 Ibid., p. 46.
183 Ibid., p. 63.
184 Balthasar, TD II, p. 58. Moreover, says von Balthasar, ‘The great unwritten acts of God and Jesus are also part of the drama of world salvation.’
185 Vanhoozer, Drama of doctrine, p. 277.
187 Vanhoozer, Drama of doctrine, see specially pp. 165-176.
188 Ibid., p. 177.
189 Ibid., p. 176.
to, therefore, in ‘the critical point of the theo-drama’, he is charged with responsibility for action: for human action in the light of divine action.\(^{190}\) It is ‘the whole people of God’, therefore, led by Scripture’s faithful interpretation of God’s action, who are ‘responsible for participating in and continuing the action’.\(^{191}\) Vanhoozer’s directing Christians to the text as the source for our interpretation through performance – in his words, as ‘the final criterion for the church’s communicative action’ – outlines the dramatic element in his approach.\(^{192}\)

Vanhoozer relies on the actantial aspects of the theatrical metaphor to communicate his hermeneutic that knowledge of the word comes by doing the word: he speaks of the need for believers to take up ‘an apprenticeship to the biblical texts’.\(^{193}\) Biblical readers, theologians by vocation and laity alike, have to be ‘apprentices… who are willing to live as well as to look “along the text,” according to the Scriptures [insofar as] the biblical interpreter is not an autonomous knower but an apprentice to biblical literature’.\(^{194}\) Similarly, in theatre, learning in apprenticeship to a text is the structural basis for performance interpretation. On the Jacobean stage, for instance,

Shakespeare and his peers created their wonders in the sole expectation that they would appear on stage, not on the printed page, and we owe it to them to try and identify as closely as we can just what such creators expected their written texts to be turned into on the stages of their time.\(^{195}\)

In the translation of text from the page to the stage, actors, directors and designers read along the text not only for the truth in the text (i.e., the word) but also for how one might arrive at an authentic performance of truth on stage (i.e., word in action). For the dramatist, the fact of the playscript as a communicative act fraught with meaning goes without saying, as does the fact that not only the text but also the actions implied ‘between the lines’ mean. It is not merely, therefore, that

\(^{190}\) See specially his citation of John Webster, Ibid., p. 224.

\(^{191}\) Ibid., p. 404.

\(^{192}\) Vanhoozer, ‘Voice of the actor’, p. 85. For Vanhoozer Sola scriptura only makes sense as a consequence of the Spirit of God recognized in Christ alone as the final criterion for its canonicity. See Vanhoozer, Drama of doctrine, p. 197, 202.


\(^{194}\) Vanhoozer, ‘Voice of the actor’, p. 85.

\(^{195}\) Andrew Gurr, ‘Doors at the globe: the gulf between page and stage’, Theatre notebook 55, no. 2 (January 2001): 59-71, p. 59, my emphasis.
playwrights have something to say (i.e., that plays ‘mean’) but that they seek to say this through particular form—that plays mean, that is, in performance. This performance happens as an interpretive process when dramatists put ink to paper, as producers envision the possibility of an interpretive whole; as designers give shape to space, light and sound in service of dramatic action; as directors elicit truth through their chosen medium: the actor. The actor, for her part, takes up the playscript and commits body and voice to performance under the conviction that the author’s communicative act makes necessary an incarnate equal. Actors, apprentice themselves to the text, paying attention to ‘the way the words go... to the circumstantia litteratum’ to use Vanhoozer’s guideline for the theologian. Theological interpretation of God’s communicative agency originates, to be sure, in Trinitarian self-communicative action, yet the creaturely-authored script, after its own manner, bears the vestiges of meaning, and as such gather its dramatis personae into a matrix of meaningful relations.

1.II.2b Speech act

Communicative action theory, however, can only get us so far in explaining how dramatic performance illuminates the theological path. In locating us within the reach of the divine action of the text, the speech-act concept tells us that speech (and, implicitly, text) communicates. That, however, still leaves the mediation of the action unexplained. Speech-act, in other words, is good at telling us that a clock tells time, but it is not so good at showing us the relationship between the mechanism and temporality. What, then, do play performances communicate? It cannot be that what they have to communicate is the text of the play (anymore than the clock communicates numbered segments on a face), if that were the case, it would not be obvious why plays should be performed at all: for as Stanislavsky reminded his actors, the play is for performance, ‘anyone can read the text at home’. The fact that we read as well as act out plays, however, says that the stage production is more than mere repetition of the text, albeit illustrated in costume, props and

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196 In this way, the Scripture shows the Church ‘how to go on[, specifically,] how to go on following Christ’. Vanhoozer, Drama of doctrine, p. 148, original italics.
197 Ibid., p. 31.
198 Although, in some sense, it does that too.
199 Vanhoozer, ‘Voice of the actor’, p. 95, citing Stanislavsky.
choreographed with movement. The correspondence between playscripts and the performances they generate on stage, in fact, defies a neat, one-to-one transposition from the page to the stage. In theatrical performance, as we have suggested, much may be said in the spaces between the lines to denote the non-verbal characterisation of the word in action. This is illustrated with helpful clarity in a theatrical anecdote cited in a scholarly discussion on performance interpretation:

During a production of *Hamlet*... Hamlet, played by Kevin Kline, sits against a column with a book on his lap while Polonius stands besides him. Polonius has tried to engage Hamlet in a discussion, and Hamlet has brushed him off. Polonius bids Hamlet “Fare you well, my Lord,” and exits behind the column. Hamlet mutters bitterly to himself, “These tedious old fools!” Instantly, Polonius’s head pops back around the column. Hamlet looks up, gives a forced smile, and points to an open page in his book, as if to say, “I was just reading the book aloud to myself.” Polonius smiles and disappears again.20

None of the action played in this scene is actually indicated in Shakespeare’s text. The choices work in performance, however, given this production’s interpretation of the drama, and in light of Kline’s embodied personification of Hamlet.201 This ‘between the lines’ quality of performance interpretation drives the action at least as much as the text itself. The point is eloquently made by Peter Brook when he says that “There is one possibility that belongs uniquely to the theatre, and that is the possibility of entering into the arena that lies in between the words, in the tiny spaces between the words”.202 If communicative action is to do with the words, then dramatic action is to do with what happens in the spaces between words.203 Submitting the performance phenomenon primarily to the scrutiny of a speech-act theory, therefore, runs the risk of obfuscating action made possible by the empty spaces.

An undue emphasis on the communicative action of the play, moreover, makes it all too tempting to transcend the performance in order to get at what the author really

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201 And given, as Saltz points out, that ‘...the business plays up to Kevin Kline’s strength as a comedian’. Ibid., p. 302.
wants to say by way of the play—to go behind the performance and tease out some meaning which can then be submitted to public evaluation. It risks construing the dramatic performance as an instrument for saying—e.g., as the playwright’s mouthpiece—thereby missing the ‘thing itself’ which involves players and their audiences in the life of the drama. To be sure, the play performance bears meaning mediated in word and there is a certain primacy in the text’s originary relation to the action. Nevertheless, the stress on meaning as the hallmark of the drama devalues the performance as an occasion for presenting a certain message that might be communicated just as easily through some other verbal means. There is more to the drama, however, than some message that can be distilled in propositional fashion. The unique possibility corresponding to theatre is its draw on the complete faculties of live actors and their audiences.\footnote{204}{In saying this we come close to following McLuhan’s well-worn aphorism that ‘the medium is the message’, but part of my argument is precisely that form, in the dramatic presentation, has theological purchase that has not been sufficiently understood.}

A question then arises whether the communicative act theory espoused by Vanhoozer relies on a privileged role of cognition as the locus where, once the curtain is drawn and costumes are hung, one has to decipher and ‘make sense’ of what has been communicated in the performance. Vanhoozer speaks of what remains with an audience following the performance as ‘the play’s central image or idea, the essence of what it had to say…’\footnote{205}{Vanhoozer, ‘Voice of the actor’, p. 102, my emphasis.} But surely, though it is true that a play will communicate some central meaning, and that its imprint is made on the imagination largely through textual utterance and reception,\footnote{206}{Although in saying this, we have already compromised the ‘purity’ of text, so to speak, by putting it through the rigours of audition: auditors are hearers not readers of the word.} we cannot ignore that this is interpreted for an audience in the aesthetics of live-action. Whether we understand performance interpretation as happening primarily through identification (as in Tchekhov, Ibsen), semiotics (Eco, Pavis), political effect (Piscator, Boal), or the Brechtian Gestus,\footnote{207}{A useful term in the analysis of Brecht’s plays […] is Gestus (untranslatable: attitude as shown in the signs we use in communicating with others). At its widest this means the basic attitude which informs any particular transaction between people. The transaction can be a whole work of art presented to a public, a conversation, a single speech considered as an independent component of a conversation. Gestus concentrates on interactions between people. […] Theatre aims to communicate from stage to audience a demonstration of social facts, so the basic gestus of theatre is} to name just a few possibilities, live-action is at least a
phenomenon of incommunication that makes audience and actors alike player-participants of the drama. In whatever sense the notion of suspension of disbelief might inform the theatrical act, cognitive faculties clearly do not cease to be engaged in the appreciation of the dramatic moment. Nonetheless, the body and its senses are invested in a dramatic performance not only so that it may communicate to us but precisely because we expect the performance to communicate in the sensorial experience of the event—as an incommunication of acting persons and not just as cognitive transmission of a central message or core idea. If there is anything to Shakespeare’s maxim that ‘the play is the thing’, the pull toward propositional renderings of what that thing is should be tempered by a more sophisticated statement of the drama’s incommunicative power.

3. The theo-dramatic rehearsal

Speech-act theory is attractive to the theologian who pays attention to ‘the way the words go’, that is, to text and its meaning. In understanding the dynamics of performance interpretation, however, the speech-act leaves us wanting for greater dimension, something of the sort evident when using performance as a paradigm for the faithful interpretation of the Gospel in vivo. Vanhoozer’s reliance on speech-act theory, for example, leads him to locate the drama’s purpose and meaning—‘the moment of greatest suspense, the moment of truth’—in the interpretive moment generated by the text in the performance of the text. In fact, at what point ‘interpretation’ occurs in the theatrical process is a matter of open debate in the


208 Here, I do not denote the extent to which the audience is a participant in the drama, nor how much of the drama depends on its meaningful reception. My point is, nonetheless, that audiences are actors in their own right, though, of course, their role is shaped by the particular aesthetics of style, genre and so forth.

209 When deploying this term, I have in mind something like what takes place at communion where the text is scant (‘This is the body... this is the blood... given and shed for you. Take and eat.’) yet demands physical, psychological and affective participation on the part of its ‘actors’, and in doing so brings us into relationship with the actualised presence of God in Christ as well as to the surrounding community of believers, the ‘cloud of witnesses’, past and present, who partake in this holy drama.

210 Partly because speech-act can tell us that to speak is to act, but it does not make sense of the fact that to act is not necessarily to speak, thus leaving the relation between word and deed in a state of ambiguity.

211 Vanhoozer, Drama of doctrine, p. 224.
philosophy of drama.\footnote{Very helpfully taken up by Noël Carrol in dialogue with Saltz, see above.} For our purposes, the fallout of the argument seems to be that any single performance of text cannot be properly considered an interpretation of a play but is rather a single ‘token’ of a more encompassing ‘type’ we know as ‘the play production’. To equate the performance with interpretation per se leaves us to contend with a multiplicity of interpretations of the same script when a play is given more than one performance.\footnote{This, at least is the view which Saltz defends and which I find compelling from the standpoint of the theatrical experience. ‘Hence, the proposal that “performances interpret plays” cannot explain what constitutes the relationship between a play and its performances, since it presupposes that relationship’. Ibid., p. 301. The discrepancy (or ‘hiatus’, to use Balthasar’s word, Balthasar, TD I, p. 112.) between page and stage is bridged by the interpretive phenomenon of the production and its corresponding rehearsal. In the process of interpretation, therefore, one may make performance choices which are not specifically called for in the text but nevertheless remain faithful and nourishing to the script.} It is far more useful, then, to see the interpretive act as happening throughout the process of the play production. Set and lighting design, what costume is given to the actor playing Hamlet and how he delivers his lines, for example, are all decisions that fall under the interpretation of who Hamlet is and how he is given life on stage. If we are to avoid a facile use of the theatrical metaphor, therefore, we would do well to pay close attention to these particulars of performance and play interpretation. To that end, we turn to the theo-dramatic approach of Shannon Craigo-Snell who alights on the theatrical rehearsal as the interpretive event where we can best situate our performative-theological conceptions.\footnote{Although she does not make direct reference to von Balthasar’s Theo-Drama, it should become apparent that Craigo-Snell’s able handling of a theodramatic hermeneutic nevertheless bears the marks of his influence.}

\textbf{1.II.3a Command performance}

In her essay ‘Command Performance: Rethinking Performance Interpretation in the Context of Divine Discourse’, Craigo-Snell tackles Nicholas Wolterstorff’s authorial-discourse preference for interpreting the God who speaks, touching along the way on Hans Frei’s narrative theological focus and the structure of story as the place where meaning is to be located. Craigo-Snell argues for a performance interpretative model which, like Vanhoozer’s, begins with the explanatory speech-act theory,\footnote{Shannon Craigo-Snell, ‘Command performance: rethinking performance interpretation in the context of divine discourse’, Modern Theology 16, no. 4 (October 2000): 475-94.} but overcomes the weaknesses outlined above with a more nuanced
articulation of the theatrical phenomenon. Picking up Wolterstorff’s point (derived from musical interpretation) that “Interpretation occurs in the space between a score’s specifications and its realisations”, Craigo-Snell focuses her theological energies on the play’s rehearsal process as her analogue for interpreting the biblical text in action. Her concern is to confront Wolterstorff’s apprehension and subsequent dismissal of performance interpretation as being ultimately unable to make truth claims about the authorial intent behind a text (i.e., “The performance interpreter doesn’t claim to have found out what the author said.”). Craigo-Snell observes that Wolterstorff’s position would have ‘The end results of a performance interpretation [...] judged as correct if they obey by the specifications of the score or text’. Furthermore, that ‘The criterion of correctness encompasses a great number of interpretations, which are deemed good or bad on the basis of value for the community rather than on the basis of making accurate truth claims about what the discoursor said.’

To revisit our example from Kevin Kline’s performance of Hamlet, Kline would not claim to have found a more authentic interpretation of the scene with Polonius (than has been achieved heretofore), nor to have discovered Shakespeare’s original intent for playing the ‘beat’ generated in the line, ‘These tedious old fools!’ His is simply a character moment, Wolterstorff might say, which works well for that particular community of theatrical interpreters. Craigo-Snell, however, traces Wolterstorff’s early dismissal of performance interpretation to a narrow understanding of the relationship between performance and text, or to keep to his original analogy, musical performance and score. The musical score, Wolterstorff says, is “a set of guidelines for producing a musical performance,” noting that “no matter how detailed, however, scores always come far short of specifying the resolution of all the issues that must be faced if the score is to be ‘realised.’” Not far beneath this hermeneutic is the problematic suggestion that the score (or script) is somehow incomplete and requires further ‘resolution’ of its issues in performance. Craigo-Snell, to her credit, avoids this implication by placing the biblical text and the

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216 Ibid., p. 476, quoting Wolterstorff.
217 Ibid., p. 478.
218 For Wolterstorff, who is not merely observing but prescribing, this is fundamentally why performance interpretation “is not relevant” to his purposes in Divine Discourse’. Ibid.
219 Ibid., p. 481.
playscript side by side to show that although both are complete works in themselves, they nevertheless call for an in-the-flesh realisation that can stand faithfully alongside the text. She also conceives of this enfleshed realisation as taking place not only at the moment of performance but largely through personal commitment to the process of the play’s rehearsal. Wolterstorff, for his part, rightly observes that the interpretation process occupies the space between page and stage. What Craigo-Snell is able to appreciate more fully is the space occupied by the rehearsal in the interpretive act to which Wolterstorff calls attention. Interpretation is therefore not left up to the performance but happens rather in a process of research and discovery, of guesses where one has not arrived at a final understanding, of learning to make choices in keeping with one’s role.

1.II.3b Theological rehearsal

In the end, the city of God may indeed be given so that one might arrive in pilgrimage (to paraphrase John Dixon’s aphorism), so that for the pilgrim, the journey is as important as the destination. In this regard, one’s role in Christ, as much as it is given, nonetheless requires apprenticeship for learning to ‘put on Christ’ and ‘walk properly’, as the epistle tells us. In the end, only a lifetime’s rehearsal will determine the quality of the performance as a whole. This, in short, is the theology in rehearsal to which Craigo-Snell draws our attention in her exploration of the dramatic analogy. For her, the activities that make up the rehearsal process are ‘not merely the results of an understanding that comes from [a priori] interpretation’. In the rehearsal, it is not the case that the actor moves on stage because he understands Hamlet to be such and thus in advance: he takes to the stage precisely in order to gain insight into his role. Hamlet, therefore, takes shape and becomes animate on stage as the actor materializes the text in rehearsal. Consequently, the

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220 Ibid. On this point, cf. Nelson Goodman’s distinction between autographic and allographic works of art, the latter referring to those which necessitate performance interpretation. For a helpful description, see Bailin, pp. 68-69.


222 ‘For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ’ (Gal. 3.27); ‘Let us walk properly... put on the Lord Jesus Christ...’ (Romans 13.13, 14), ESV.
way we come to know Hamlet in performance is to do with the way we have come to know him in the physical characterisation of the rehearsal process.223

We learn theology in some way analogous to the theatrical rehearsal; in the very process and proceeds of ‘fleshing out’ our faith. Craigo-Snell puts it more prosaically: ‘We teach our children to sing “Jesus Loves Me,”’ she writes, ‘not as an affirmation of something they know, but as a way for them to know it’.224 Rehearsals are characterised by their faltering performances where lines are dropped and actors fail to stay in character or lose the plot, only to be brought back into scene by the prompt of the director. This is all part of the process, however, and faithful to the concern for rendering truthful interpretations of the text. Adding to this the ‘guidelines of a tradition’, a cast and crew engage in performance interpretation as a way of rendering an embodiment of the text.225

Taking the performance of rehearsal as our metaphor sheds some light on the temporal location of the Christian between Scripture and the eschatological performance yet to come. To say that the situation of the Christian is an ongoing rehearsal which anticipates eschatological performance does not amount to a flattening out of the drama of history; but it has everything to do with recognition that what we do here and now fills out the sense in which performance means something in theological terms. It is highly valuing of the time and space on which we are given to play our part, as well as of the incarnate means by which we are given to learn the part on the world stage. The embodied performance interpretation called for by the biblical play, in fact, far from involving us in abstracting meaning from the story, ‘leads to and is continued in an embodied performance: the event of worship and of life’.226

223 Craigo-Snell, p. 481.
224 Ibid., p. 482.
225 The primacy of the body (and its senses) as agent of performance interpretation is explored in actor Diane Borsato’s essentially text-less theatrical pieces ‘staged’ in situ on the streets of Montreal. In two such performances, Touching 1,000 People and Describing/Recognizing the Taste of Love (1999), Borsato cast herself as artistic amateur; in her terms, as actor and lover, not unlike what von Balthasar has in mind for the theologian’s continual self-giving to God in the theological task. Diane Borsato, ‘Sleeping with cake: and other affairs of the heart’, TDR: The Drama Review 45, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 59-67.
226 Craigo-Snell, p. 482.
Wolterstorff’s reticence is appropriate for pointing out that putting the text through rehearsal and performance may not result in ‘verbal truth claims about what the discoursor says’. Nevertheless if ‘the fullness of meaning is located at the point where the narrative of the script and the life of the community become the same story in the event of performance’, then a theo-dramatic hermeneutic can show something of the telic sense of the Gospel through faithful rehearsal of praxis in the world. Theological-dramatic framework of interpretation therefore assumes Wolterstorff’s preference for authorial-discourse while retaining ‘an appreciation for both authorial-discourse interpretation and performance interpretation by identifying discourse interpretation as one aspect within the larger performative process.’

1.II.3c Towards a theological theatre

Our search for an interpretive medium at once faithful to theology and to its theatrical analogue has led us to the play rehearsal and performance as paradigms for the embodiment of text. Prompted by von Balthasar who develops a theo-dramatic answer to epic theological approaches and their aloof objectification of God, as well as to the subjectivity of the lyrical encounter with Scripture, we looked for a hermeneutic internal to God’s performance in the world and to man’s consequent responsibility. To this end, we turned to Kevin Vanhoozer and Shannon Craigo-Snell for a demonstration of their performative approach to theology. Vanhoozer identified his version of theo-drama namely with the linguistic epistemology that to speak is to act; he considered how the speech-text of Scripture comes to life in performance interpretation. His move, however, was seen to bypass nuanced articulations of dramatic interpretation in favour of performance as the telic element in the play-act; it was also shown to be overly reliant on the cognition of meaning inherent to speech theory. Craigo-Snell, for her part, proved to be a more attentive apprentice of the theo-drama by locating performance interpretation in the plurality of actions that make up the theatrical process. Her theological drama made itself at home in the already/not-yet quality of a performance in rehearsal – subject as it might be to faltering, correction, reinterpretation – all the while taking its meaning

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227 Ibid., p. 489.
228 Ibid.
229 Ibid.
from the knowledge that its authenticity is warranted by the possibility of an eschatological debut. In the end, both Vanhoozer’s adoption of performance interpretation (through speech-act theory external to the stage), and Craigo-Snell’s approach to theatre through the internal dynamics of the rehearsal have gone some way in testing the dramatic method and its validity for the business of theology.

It would be a failure of foresight, however, to not anticipate that all this theatre talk could also generate a more vigorous theological treatment of the theatre than has been possible thus far. Despite the theatre’s well-established history, much of it in contention with the church, it is in relative terms a new and developing phenomenon. In point of fact, the theatre to which Vanhoozer and Craigo-Snell refer, and much of what von Balthasar has in mind in Theo-Drama, is principally the stage of the last hundred or so years, a theatre which is defined, above all, by the appearance of the theatrical director towards the end of the 19th century. The contemporary idea that performance interpretation can help to make sense of the overall dramatic composition, does not apply to the theatre of antiquity, or to the Shakespearean stage. Moreover, there is little evidence that this recently evolved theatre which offers performance as the interpretive means to the meaning of the text has been given theological account as one of the small stones in the divine mosaic of revelation. This is not to say that Christians have not written for, performed in and even enjoyed the stage but to reiterate that the Church has seldom valued the theatre beyond its role as pedagogy, for portraying clearly definable biblical narratives or themes, for example.

Placed in this light, von Balthasar’s work represents a major shift in the theological perspective on theatre and warrants critique and revision in kind. One such theodramatic revision is found in an article by James K.A. Smith. Smith’s concern is to overcome Christian antagonism toward the stage originating in

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230 I am using director in the sense of the person with the artistic responsibility over the play’s production which, depending on national setting, may also be called ‘stage manager’, ‘producer’ or ‘régisseur’.


232 See my reference to Notker Balbulus’ motivation for scripting action in the liturgy, Chapter 5 below.

Augustine’s critique of theatre as detraction from divine formation of the soul. He does this by reworking the Augustinian critique of the theatre through Augustine’s own ‘affirmations concerning the goodness of creation and the centrality of the Incarnation.’ Citing Augustine’s intent in the Confessions to ‘move the reader’ towards the love of God, Smith sees an opening for a theological dramatics within Augustinian doctrine. For however much Augustine may have opposed theatrical representations and the images they project, to say nothing of the emotive pull they have for the proselyte writer, he nonetheless affectively engages his readers through a most dramatic and vividly imaged account of his struggles in the faith. In principle, for Augustine, theatrical imagery and the emotions they incite in the viewer are but mimetic tokens of reality, hence they are fraudulent detractions from reality. To counteract this view of ‘imagery’ in a redemptive theology, Smith makes a case for appreciating Augustine’s own emphasis on intentio in the Confessions. That is, Smith asks us to test Augustine’s disdain for entertaining imagery (and specially the moving images of the theatre) against his own form of ‘iconographic’ writing which is justified by the rationale that his use of ‘figures’ has love and knowledge of God as its chief end.

In this sense, Augustine’s own life is a drama which engages the ‘audience’ in a way that follows the ordo amoris: the staging of [sic] his story in the Confessions is not intended to be enjoyed as an end in itself but rather a means by which the reader’s heart is affectively moved to seek God.

Clearly, it makes a difference, Smith would say, whether theatre is intentionally turned outward towards God or whether it is allowed to fold in on itself (e.g., art for art). In the end, Smith somewhat misses the mark by urging a Christian understanding of dramatic performance exclusively as “animated iconography,” though the idea of moving icons is more suited to film aesthetics than to the stage. However, recalling the insight gained from Vanhoozer that the text is not in itself the

234 Ibid., p. 124.
235 ‘That the Confessions are intended to affectively ‘move’ the reader at all [sic] indicates that what is at stake is not being passionate per se, but rather what passions are stimulated and to what end’. Ibid., p. 134.
236 Chapter 3 below will treat this in full.
237 Smith, p. 126.
238 Ibid., pp. 124-25.
239 Ibid., p. 132.
end of the performance, and Craigo-Snell’s word that dramatic interpretation entails depth gained in the process of arriving at the performance, Smith is unique in suggesting that because theatre communicates through its images and does not intend imagery as an end in itself, the dramatic production ‘can have an iconic function which points the audience beyond the production to God’. Smith, therefore, raises the obvious question that ‘if the literary work of the Confessions can be redeemed by arousing passion to an alternative end (fruitio Dei), could we not see the same possibility for theatre…?’ Is it possible, that is, to conceive of a theatre whose images direct us towards greater knowledge and enjoyment of God?

Von Balthasar’s idea of a theological dramatics certainly begins by pointing us in the right direction, firstly, by overcoming a longstanding tradition of Christian suspicion of the theatre. His focus on the theological implications behind the world-theatre metaphor, moreover, shows the need for generating a theology which is dramatic (as he hopes to do) and, the better to render theology dramatic, leaves room for a dramaturgy which makes sense of theatre from the particularity of a Christian perspective. We have seen how those who have taken after von Balthasar’s novum demonstrate a theological-theatricality that creates greater understanding of interpretation in the theatrical tradition. They press, in their own way, for greater insight into theological-dramatic exchange, for to do otherwise would be to betray both the dramatic elements in theology and the theological possibilities for theatre implied therein.

The possibility for articulating a dramaturgy which is conversant with a Christian understanding of the world as God’s theatre, from our perspective, holds out sufficient promise to warrant forging ahead in this project. For us, however, the way forward requires a prolonged look back at the theological reasons why theatre has historically been excluded from Christian understanding about God and man’s role in his world. An authentic theological encounter with the theatre, moreover, requires delving incisively into theories of the stage. In the two chapters that follow, therefore, we continue exploring the pressure of a ‘world theatre’ evident on three specific instances of theological rejection/insight on theatre. In Chapter 2, we will see this in Tertullian’s 2nd century outright rejection of the dramatic. In Chapter 4, in

240 Ibid., pp. 132-33.
241 Ibid., p. 133.
Calderón de la Barca’s 17th century adoption of the secular stage to communicate a Christian vision. In Chapter 3, however, we will treat specifically the Augustinian stance to which Smith has alerted us, by subjecting it to critique of an Aristotelian understanding of the world stage in order to suggest that the theologian cannot but adopt into his vision some version of the world theatre. This in turn will generate enough impetus to pursue, in the final chapter, an attempt to articulate a theological understanding of theatre in its contemporary, secular state.
From the scriptural standpoint everything is always regarded from the point of view of God’s action—man’s action is drawn into the latter—and, however manifold and wide-ranging God’s action is, however much it may be beyond our grasp, it is at all events one single action… So my spiritual eye does not need any overview of the dramatic “shape”—which it cannot have in any case. It suffices to have evidence that God (in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit) is guiding the action; in this way it is also given evidence of the play’s unity…

1 Balthasar, *TD II*, p. 78.
2  CHRISTIANITY AND THE SECULAR STAGE: TERTULLIAN’S OPPOSITION TO THE THEATRE IN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

I.  DE SPECTACULI: TERTULLIAN’S INVECTIVE AGAINST THEATRE

1.  Theatre as theological realia

One of the most lasting perspectives on the theatre to have emerged in the history of the Church is that offered in Tertullian’s De Spectaculis. His invective against the stage has a particular role in our attempt to formulate a theological dramaturgy given its explicitly theological character. The fact that Tertullian’s interest in theatre is specifically theological reflects a world in which the stage is inevitably associated with religion, hence with imagery, ritual, and liturgical offices originating in pagan and mythical theologies.\(^1\) Contemporary theatre of the Western tradition, having evolved along literary and aesthetic goals and having no specific provenance in religion makes it difficult to appreciate this aspect of theatre and other forms of performance spectacle known to the ancient world. For the Christian theologian of the late second century, however, the common practice of offering theatrical shows and arena spectacles to deities was enough to incite an invective against dramatic “spectacle” in all its permutations. The sort of religious/theatrical syncretism which motivates Tertullian’s De Spectaculis (c. A.D. 198)\(^2\) may be appreciated analogously in modern day tauromachy. The exuberant delivery to the senses in the Spanish corrida could not be more anathema to Tertullian for whom dramatic spectacle excites in the viewer-participant an affective disposition towards the idolatria of the shows.

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\(^1\) Tertullian, John Chrysostom, Augustine and other early Christian thinkers lead us to believe that pagan religious practice, as a matter of observable fact, was essential to the theatrical event in ancient Rome. Academic research on specific evidence of performative overlap between pagan religions and theatrical shows, however, is surprisingly scant. Some help is found in Dupont whose investigation of the theatrical event in ancient Rome shows great sensitivity to religious aspects of performance, for example, in theatrical use of music and musical instruments adapted from their liturgical functions (pp. 19-23), or the role of liturgical scripts in inculcating through public performance Rome’s faith in its gods (pp. 147-155). Florence Dupont, L’acteur-roi: le théâtre dans la Rome antique, Collection Réalia (Belles Lettres, 2003).

\(^2\) As per Harnack’s literary chronology which situates the work in Tertullian’s pre-Montanist period. Adolph von Harnack, ‘Die Chronologie der altchristlichen Litteratur’, in Elibron Classics (Boston: Adamant Media Corporation, 2005 [1904]). Carlson takes this authoritatively and gives Tertullian’s dates as c.160-250.
Although in recent times performance of the bull-run\textsuperscript{3} has been seen as “ritual without religion”, the \textit{fiesta taurina}, occurring primarily in Ibero-American, traditionally Catholic cultures, generally begins with a mass invoking favour on the festivities and introduces a period when religiously-nuanced ritual and superstition are observed with special intensity on and around the performance arena. For instance, a matador typically enters the arena having performed reverential actions before an altar of a designated patron saint. These practices take their meaning within encompassing sets of Christianized beliefs and cultural gestures in such a way that the act which occurs in the arena cannot be dissociated from the religious influences surrounding it.\textsuperscript{4} Similarly, for Tertullian, dramatic performances in the Roman world, regardless of venue or form (arena combats just as well as mythical plays and fictional dramas), act as vehicles for theological ideas and their attendant symbols originating in religions that compete with the specificity of a Christian perspective.\textsuperscript{5}

This theological character of Tertullian’s critique of the stage has gone unrepresented in contemporary studies of attitudes towards theatre in the early part of Christian history. Typically, critics revile Tertullian for what they see as a rigorist’s unimaginative misapprehension of theatre. The critiques are typically based on the assumption that, had Tertullian been less capricious in temperament or more nuanced in his aesthetics, perhaps a Christian theatre such as appeared in the Church in the latter part of the tenth century could have been possible in Tertullian’s age. For Tertullian, however, theatre is a matter of idolatrous imaging interposing itself between the Christian mind and a godly imaging of the world. Perhaps for this reason, in his critique of the drama, Tertullian makes no appeal to the world-stage metaphor. Given the state of the theatre in Tertullian’s day, however, it is difficult to imagine that the theologian could have understood theatre as anything other than a
force opposing Christianity, morally, as bearer of imagery originating in pagan cult, and so forth.

2.I.1a  Blood and sand

If for the theologist there is sufficient offence in the religious overtures of theatrical performance, the affront to morality inherent in pagan spectacle merely reinforces the conviction that the Christian ought to have nothing to do with theatre. It is not necessary to elaborate the extent to which “blood and sand” performances would have elicited objection to spectacle even from those who did not resort to Christian theology for supporting principles. In this regard, Jonas Barish, in his history of antitheatrical conceit, rightly concedes Tertullian’s objection ‘[i]n the case of cruel and unnatural spectacles like the gladiatorial shows’. Christian or not, modern audiences might find themselves equally in agreement with much of Tertullian’s antitheatrical vehemence when considering the range of acts or their imagistic representation which fit the description of “live theatrical performance” in this period (e.g., live acts re-enacting Dionysian sparagmos and omophagia: ritual tearing asunder of bodies and consuming of flesh).

Caligula burning alive in the stadium an actor said to have spoken slightingly of the state, human victims torn apart by wild beasts, combats to the death between reluctant gladiators—these can hardly be classified as harmless sports or lawful diversions.6

Tertullian’s unbending opposition to theatre for its association with pagan religion and the violence of live acts in the coliseum incorporates an equally rigid stance against purely fictional drama, whether original or derived from myth, on grounds that representation of fiction implies some form of intentional deviation from truth. This latter aspect of Tertullian’s objection to the theatre effectively unites the religious and moral critiques to form a logic by which theatre, far from being mere ‘play’, is seen to engage life in some “realistic” sense. This aspect of Tertullian’s view of theatre, the suggestions that between the stage performance and life exists a link which is undeniably real (even if the link is expressed, as he supposes, exclusively as a negating image of reality) denotes the principal motivation for Tertullian’s theological engagement against the stage.

By this account, Tertullian seems to understand theatre as more than just “theatre”: theatre, he seems to say, is life played as its own obverse, truth made to contravene itself; it is the affirmation of reality’s negative to which belong the realm of demons and anything spiritually opposed to God. This ‘dramaturgical’ aspect of Tertullian’s *De Spectaculis*, insofar as it represents the most extant evidence of early Christian reflection on the theatre, is of special interest from the perspective of enabling positive interaction between theology and theatre. Inherent to Tertullian’s denial of theatre is the implication that theatre effects reality of a particular sort. Attributing to theatre such a grasp on reality, however, relies on some understanding that the dramatic stage exists in relation to the ‘theatre of the world’. It understands theatre, if only in a negative sense, as an act within the larger play of life; theatre, not only mirroring but actually inverting life’s image to pernicious effect. Moreover, given its associations with the religious sphere, in Tertullian’s critique, theatre is understood as a form of theological *realia*.

2.1.1b Theological realia

Marvin Carlson, speaking strictly from the side of secular theatre, identifies correctly three principal strands in Tertullian’s antitheatrical stance. First, there is an attempt to dismiss theatre from Christian practice through scriptural support. A related strategy then is deployed against theatre’s idolatrous concerns and its use of sacramental spaces. The critique is also raised that although God enjoins people to live in the peace of Christ, ‘the theatre stimulates frenzy and the passions, encouraging a loss of self-control’, in which light Tertullian writes that “[t]here is no spectacle without violent agitation of the soul.”

Interestingly, Carlson considers only the latter as dramaturgy relevant to the theatrical phenomenon. Jonas Barish, speaking also from the side of dramaturgy, agrees and places special emphasis on Tertullian’s refusal to distinguish between actual violence or sexual acts performed in the arena and acts performed as if real.

[F]rom all these, precisely, the element of make-believe is absent. The dismembered captive, the stricken gladiator, the incinerated actor… are truly dead, from which it follows that their “performance” is no performance at all, in the theatrical sense. […] Where there is real cruelty, actual torture, and death,

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7 ‘Roman and late classical theory’ in Carlson, pp. 22-30.
we are in some realm other than that of theatre. Yet this is precisely the distinction Tertullian refuses to countenance.8

Tertullian, we are reminded, ended his days as a heretic9 such that even aspects of his treatise which might otherwise elicit sympathy from the Christian reader have to come under the suspicion of his immersion in an asceticism that fell out of orthodoxy. Nevertheless, to understand Christian attitudes toward the theatre, not as history but in theological perspective, it is important to confront Tertullian’s objection that theatrical “realia” (for our purpose, understood as the manner and extent of theatre’s engagement with reality) necessarily opposes Christian thought.10

Nevertheless, insofar as Barish assumes that theatre may be distinguished from non-theatrical action in life through accepted (literary, social, ritualistic) conventions of feigning or make-believe, he interprets Tertullian’s De Spectaculis with uncharacteristic lack of critical depth as a ‘remarkable cleaving of life into absolute good and absolute evil, with no middle ground, no gradations admitted, and no complications allowed for’. It is true that, to the extent that stage buffoonery and the derisory exhibition of the Christians on the stage are both “performed” for public

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8 Barish, p. 48.
9 Barish points this out with reference to Tertullian’s seclusion in the Montanist camp, though only to cast Christian anti-theatrical attitudes in light of general proscription on pleasure, ascetic views of the body, and what Barish sees as the historical indictment against women in theatre. It is not hard to see, however, that for Barish, approaching the theatre from a theological perspective, or at least with a religious consciousness, is in itself problematic, presumably because, as his book traces in historical detail, it leads to moralist censure against the stage. Granting, however, that historically this has been indeed the case, part of the point of my thesis is that this need not be necessarily so, and particularly if we can show that theologically “drama” is central to how we understand God’s action in the world. See Ibid., p. 51.
10 Examples of which abound, though it is not always evident that his drive is specifically theological or that it seeks to inculcate what it means to act Christianly in the world. Tertullian complains, for instance, that ’at the shows [the audience] stand in the way. For they call the spaces between the seats going round the amphitheatre, and the passages which separate the people running down, ways. [And] the place in the curve where the matrons sit is called a chair’ (III.6). The rhetoric seems to focus irrationally on the impiousness of theatrical aisles and stalls, but is actually bringing to the reader’s attention, particularly one who has attended the theatre, biblical metaphors which should condition the Christian’s conduct in public. So, he adds, that while theatre may seem like a harmless entertainment option for Christians, ‘on the contrary, it holds, unblessed …he who has entered any council of wicked men, and has stood in any way of sinners, and has sat in any chair of scorners’ (III.7). The play on imagery from the first Psalm is obvious. What Barish sees as mere moralizing, therefore, when understood within the biblical perspective from which Tertullian operates, becomes more evidently (and problematically) theological.

entertainment,\textsuperscript{11} as are tragic drama and gladiatorial death, Tertullian distinguishes no gradations, morally or aesthetically, between stage and life. In fact, however, such distinctions, betraying questions of modern aesthetics, could not have been essential to ideas of ‘performance’ in the ancient world. Florence Dupont tackles this problem with the thesis that ‘spectacle’ in its broadest sense—hence encompassing theological ideas as well as the dramatic performance—was central to ancient Roman conception of the cosmos. Specifically, she reasons that theatre and temple aesthetics were dominated by broader (pagan) theological perspectives; sharp gradations between real act and play-act would therefore seem artificial to the Roman ‘spectator’ as both forms of action, though clearly in distinct manner, play into a world spectacle in which the gods act.\textsuperscript{12}

If we object to Tertullian’s antitheatre, therefore, particularly considering the theatre’s secularity in contemporary practice, it will have to be on grounds different from those advanced by Barish. For the clear gradation which Barish identifies between reality and aesthetic representation is far from self-evident. From the theodramatic standpoint, moreover, the very fact that Tertullian provides no categories to distinguish between “performance in reality” and “performance as reality” provides the occasion to consider the dramatizing event from a theological perspective.

\textbf{2.1.1c De Spectaculis}

Tertullian’s treatise on theatre documents some of the earliest theological opposition to the stage. \textit{De Spectaculis} is remarkable for the religious zeal, conveyed in no modest measure of bombast, with which the theologian deals a fatal blow to the theatre either as source for theological dialogue or as entertainment worthy of

\textsuperscript{11} Dupont makes the point that in second century Rome, the \textit{ludi scaenici} (e.g., comic mimes following the tragic shows) or the \textit{exodium}, an improvised transition between play performance and religious ritual at the games, as well as deriding the political order, also took specific aim at Christians and their beliefs. Dupont, p. 305.

\textsuperscript{12} See, ‘Une civilization du spectacle’ in Ibid., pp. 19-33. Dupont’s thesis is crucial in helping the modern critic understand why for the early Christians theatre’s link with religion seemed irredeemable. Her view is confirmed by Leyerle in a study of antitheatrical rhetoric in John Chrysostom’s homilies. Although the subtle distinction drawn between Tertullian’s views of pagan imagery and statuary in the theatre – as signs in themselves of theatre’s mendacity – and Chrysostom’s attributing to these additional satanic origin seems rather stretched (Tertullian makes much the same point in \textit{De Idolatria}), her work adds an important perspective to the subject of Christian antipathy to the theatre. See specially, ‘John Chrysostom’s View of Theatre’ in Blake Leyerle, \textit{Theatrical shows and ascetic lives: John Chrysostom’s attack on spiritual marriage} (London: University of California Press, 2001), 42-74.
Christian involvement. Tertullian’s antagonism is formulated initially as a theological position against pagan influences on theatre. Citing for support the theory that theatre has its origins in religion, Tertullian reasons against patronage of and devotion to pagan deities still evident in the dramatic stage, the circus, sporting tournaments and other dramatic spectacle of his day. ‘Regarding the origins of the theatre’, Tertullian writes, ‘as these are somewhat obscure and but little known to many among us, our investigations must go back to a remote antiquity, with no other resources than books of heathen literature’. The fact that Scripture itself does not address theatrical performance means that Tertullian relies on biblical teaching against idolatry and the worship of images in order to formulate a theological injunction against the stage.

Indeed, we read in De Spectaculis of every manner of deity, whether Greco-Roman or ‘immigrant from Asia’, association with which is said to exclude theatre from the life of the Christian. Theologically, Tertullian guides his readers toward a discipleship trained on God and his most concrete action in the person of Christ, the Crucifixion and Resurrection being the only “spectacle” on which the Christian eye should look. To this end, Tertullian employs an impressive cast of characters to demonize theatre for its purported pagan origins; a short sampling should serve to capture something of the fervour in his appeal against idolatry in theatre.

Theater is said to originate in

…the Ludi from Ludus, that is, from play, as they are called …because they ran about making sport … corresponding to festal days and temples, and objects of religious veneration. [Also in] the Liberalia… who clearly declared the glory of Father Bacchus.

The spectacles are equally indebted to ‘an equestrian deity, by the Greeks called Hippius, The Roman [gods] themselves; Mars, the Vestals, Romulus, Jupiter, Numa Pompilius who instituted competitions dedicated to Mars’. ‘Circe, and spectacle in honour of her father Sun; demons and spirits of evil’ are also implicated. Nor is theatre less evidently kindred to ‘Samothrace; the huge Obelisk, and Egyptian superstition; the demon-gathering Mater Magna, Euripus, Murcia (the goddess of love), …Castor and Pollux, to whom… horses were given by Mercury’ thus

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13 Except where indicated, my translations from Turcan’s Latin critical text: Turcan, V.1.
14 Ibid.
originating chariot races; to ‘Mother Earth, [and rites of] Spring….‘

Tertullian sets out in fact to demonstrate irrefutably ‘how many impure [deities] have taken possession of the stage!’ Underscoring that this represents theological opposition to Christianity, he concludes that baptized Christians should simply ‘have nothing to do with a sacred place which is [occupied] by such multitudes of diabolic spirits’.

For Tertullian, moreover, there is no sense in which Christian thinking may engage theatre constructively. The fact that Christians are known to give custom to the circus, farcical mimes, acrobatic displays, animal baiting shows, gladiatorial competitions and other manner of spectacle typical of the day, simply reinforces Tertullian’s disdain for theatre’s alterity to Christian witness through such forms of “show”. It would be all too easy, however, to dismiss De Spectaculis for its understanding of stage representation and reality by complaining, as Barish does, against

Tertullian’s literalness, his apparent inability to distinguish between play and nonplay[;] …that to act is to place oneself for a moment in an imaginary situation, to find satisfaction in changing one’s “setting”. […] For] Tertullian seems “incapable of play-acting,” or of understanding [that] play-acting means …to project oneself into imaginary situations, [which] is precisely one of the distinguishing marks of humanity.

Von Balthasar, for his part, did not fail to see in Tertullian an obtuse ‘rigorist’ whose presumed insight into absolute distinctions between good and evil get ahead of him when approaching the theatre; as has Daly, and again Barish whose broadest swipe dismisses Tertullian from the discussion altogether:

15 Excerpted from Tertullian, The shows, V-XI.
16 The original reads ‘circus’, though the principle is generalized to all staged performance. Ibid., VIII.7.
17 Ibid.
19 Balthasar, TD I, p. 93.
20 The point being that Tertullian’s critics are nearly unanimously united in their condemnation of him as a ‘rigorist’ but are less likely to show the standard against which his rigidity on the arts is being measured. Cahal B. Daly, Tertullian the puritan and his influence (Dublin: Four Courts Press Ltd., 1993).
Tertullian’s literalness seems to envisage a whole world peopled by [those who ‘cannot enter into a fictitious situation without converting it into a real one’], … a population of robots, for whom each and every aspect of life exists on the same level of blank seriousness as every other.21

Tertullian’s reputation as an unbending, finger-wagging dogmatist undoubtedly precedes him and is not altogether undeserved. However, in ‘reminding’ us of ‘Tertullian’s equation of the real crime with the feigned one’,22 Barish assumes the part of an ideal audience23 which, in his view, should derive from aesthetic distinctions drawn between theatre and life, the moral implications of issues which have historically presented problems for Christianity: death in the arena and the onstage representation of death, or sex acts actually performed onstage and ribald, sexually suggestive comedy,24 or, again, defamatory, satiric plays and the scandalizing of Christians for public entertainment.

Barish’s presumption, of course, betrays a particular view of the relation between morality and aesthetics and, principally, disregard for the religious consciousness from within which the issues may be considered. Clearly, this is the primary concern for Tertullian in the early Christian period. To that extent, Tertullian’s ‘rigorist’ stance towards the theatre needs to be addressed in the light of specific theological concerns and not exclusively in terms of its role in a longer history of antitheatrical prejudice so pervasive that, according to Barish,

We might almost be driven to conclude that we are confronting a visceral prejudice which precedes all reason and defeats all argument, a stubborn passion that can encompass the most grotesque contradictions and resist all logical accounting.25

Applying contemporary conceptions of theatrical aesthetics – a theatrical presumption emerging from the isolation of theatre primarily to the secular sphere –

21 Barish, p. 148, with ellipsed phrase from a previous passage rendering the full sense of the critique.
22 Ibid., p. 280.
23 Ideal, that is, relative to his approach which sidelines the theological focus; the fact that he claims to ‘propose no polemical thesis’ and is ‘not seek[ing] to explain the antitheatrical prejudice, but to explore the territory within which it operates’ simply explains that he takes no account of the religious features in the Roman landscape. Ibid., pp. 1-4.
24 Such as Lysistrata (Aristophanes, 411 BCE) in which Roman women, in a scheme to end the Peloponnesian War, agree to frustrate their soldier husbands’ sexual desire when they return home for respite, their priapism thus posing obvious occasion for burlesque in the performance.
25 Barish, p. 41.
to second and third century ideas about theatrical representation impedes a helpful analysis of material which, apart from its context, might seem irrational and patently unsophisticated in its understanding of the stage.\textsuperscript{26} If De Spectaculis represents the most significant theoretical reflection on theatre from the early Christian period, however, the theological setting of the work demands particular consideration as we try to understand Tertullian’s view of the stage. In the end, we too will have left behind Tertullian’s concern that theatre is irredeemably filled with idolatrous imagery and move on to a critique which takes into consideration theatre’s secularity as the starting point for the dialogue with Christianity. Insofar as our project attempts to bring theology to bear on our grasp of theatrical performance, moreover, the confrontation of Tertullian’s theological insistence that theatre is antithetical to Christianity is necessary.

\textbf{2.1.1d Conscientious objection}

The question arises, of course, as to what sort of theatre the early Christian dogmatician opposes. The fact that Tertullian spends great effort on ‘blood and sand’ spectacle seems to confirm that the shows in his day were dominated by the aesthetics of violent entertainment. For Tertullian, this aspect of second and third century dramatics therefore provides the most obvious opening to the problem of the theatre in Christian perspective. Some pagan writers had also weighed in on civility and the corruption of morals in societies tolerating dramatic entertainment through the violence of the games, or in drama enacted with no end other than pleasure in itself.

Cicero, for example—whom Augustine, two centuries after Tertullian, would cite in denouncing the theatre’s blending of stage reality with the fiction of polytheistic theologies—relates that in his day the civilized public rightfully held theatrical plays in contempt as it was evident that the stage had become wholly

\textsuperscript{26} In that vein, there is every reason to question assumptions dominating contemporary models in theatrical aesthetics, evident remarkably in Barish’s assertion that ‘For us, to witness a spectacle is to “receive” it only in the sense of attending to it, being absorbed, engrossed, perhaps delighted, possibly even moved by it’. This suggests minimally that audiences are not moved to see the world differently for having attended the performance, but are merely “moved” in a qualified and less than real sense. Could the contemporary Christian stage actor, however, really see her work in theatre as demanding any less of her faith than as a vocation (calling) to ‘man’s world’ whose redemption Christ accomplishes in his own flesh? Ibid., p. 45, my emphasis.
depraved. He adds in the same passage that civility demands “that all persons connected with [the theatre] should not only be deprived of the privileges of other citizens, but should even be removed from their tribes by sentence of the censors”. In his deprecation of theatre venues built at great public expense, furthermore, there is an implied critique of theatre’s hypocrisy in presenting suffering in the tragedies for public pleasure to the neglect of the needs of the citizenry, including its suffering poor:

On account of Pompey, I am embarrassed to criticize theatres… but the most learned men do not approve of them, as Panaetius himself says… and also Demetrius of Phalerum, who denounces Pericles, the foremost of the Greeks, because he threw away so much money on the splendid propylaæa. The case of a man overwhelmed by disaster is one thing, that of a man who seeks to improve his affairs though unaffected by misfortune, is another.

It may not make sense to the contemporary mind that Tertullian would condemn equally the tragedies, comedies, mimes, gladiatorial games, chariot races, boxing and wrestling matches, gymnastic displays, poetic contests, drama in the arena, circus entertainment, and so forth. Whatever distinctions modern aesthetics would draw between the poetic and the bestial finds no hearing in Tertullian’s court. Some of this is a matter of rhetorical strategy: in his drive to eliminate the draw of the worst aspects of the shows on the Christian, Tertullian undermines the representational (fictional) drama by lumping it together with live events courting defamatory treatment of individuals, the degradation of the body, or violent displays in which death draws the final curtain.

Tertullian is not entirely unwilling to concede that in the vicissitudes of life as presented in the tragedies, or in the turns of language of the comedies, ‘you have

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29 Marcus Tullius Cicero, Cicero: on duties, trans. Miriam T. Griffin and E. Margaret Atkins, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 60-61, p. 89. In a letter to Marius, Cicero extols the mind’s engagement in the act of solitary reading in contrast to the theatrical performance which, in all its spectacular extravagance, draws a crowd to merely ‘spectate’, as if in a somnambulant (semisomi) state.† This does not prevent him, however, from using the analogy of the theatrical persona in his teaching that the human part is performed as that ‘specifically assigned to individuals’, and from the need ‘arising from the fact that we all have a share in reason’ to share in communes with humanity. †Marcus Tullius Cicero, Cicero: select letters, trans. D.R. Shackleton Bailey, Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Letter 18, Fam. 7.1.
there things that are pleasant, things both agreeable and innocent in themselves; even some things that are excellent.\textsuperscript{30} Perhaps Tertullian’s training in rhetoric makes him familiar enough with the best of the poets not to lack appreciation for their literary merit. His task, however, is to point out to Christians what he sees as deceit in artistry exhibiting goodness in some parts only to make acceptable pernicious ideas inhering on the whole.\textsuperscript{31} Any apparently legitimate pleasure to be drawn from theatre, therefore, is considered mere veneer over its corrupting core.

Everything there, then, that is either brave, noble, loud sounding, melodious, or exquisite in taste, hold it but as the honey drop of a poisoned cake; nor make so much of your taste for its pleasures, as of the danger you run from its attractions.\textsuperscript{32}

Part of the problem for Tertullian was theatre’s descent to the aesthetics of brute contemplation, for example, the fact that the presentation of tragedy (considered the highest form of drama on the classical stage) had given way to grotesque spectaculum in which contestants were tragically felled, ‘spectating’ in itself thus being the main object for the gathered collective. Dupont argues that in the theatrical gathering, political identity took particular focus; that the Roman citizen was identified as homo spectator, an appreciator and judge of merit in public debate, rhetoric, poetic contest, oratory presentation, etc., but equally in less literary endeavours as physical combat and martial showmanship.\textsuperscript{33} St. Augustine, looking back on the decay of empire, attributes this aspect of the national character – i.e., that the Romans had become a nation of spectators – to the fact that they conceived of the gods themselves as spectating and therein dignified equally stage dramas, arena spectacles, theatres of war, etc.:

Or did it constitute a difference, that the battlefield was not an arena, and that the wide plains were filled with the carcasses not of two gladiators, but of many of the flower of two nations; and that those contests were viewed not by the

\textsuperscript{30} Tertullian, \textit{The shows}, XXVII.4.

\textsuperscript{31} The very idea of feigning for the sake of realism is oxymoronic to Tertullian as may be surmised from his comments in XXIII.6: ‘The Author of truth hates all the false; He regards as adultery all that is unreal. Condemning, therefore, as He does hypocrisy in every form, He never will approve any putting on of voice, or sex, or age; He never will approve pretended loves, and wraths, and groans, and tears.’ Ibid.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{33} Dupont, pp. 29-33.
amphitheatre, but by the whole world, and furnished a profane spectacle both
to those alive at the time, and to their posterity, so long as the fame of it is
handed down?  

Tertullian, however, considers theatre’s greatest affront to Christianity to lie
in what he sees as a peddling of images – *idolatria* – contravening theological
pictures of the creation’s goodness and, consequently, of the Creator himself.
Idolatry for Tertullian entails the mind’s disaffection from a godly perspective. It is
associated with religious use of plastic images, but also, as the ‘*principale crimen
generis humani*’, with mental pictures that would lay claim to the Christian’s
imagination. Theatre is thereby bound up irredeemably with all manner of
superstitions, ceremonial veneration of the dead, emperor worship, ritual prostitution
and the way these project themselves onto the mind; biblically, Tertullian reminds his
readers, Christians renounce all of these at baptism.

The question arises, naturally, whether Tertullian’s concern about idolatry has
any bearing in light of contemporary dramaturgies which, having severed ties with
religion, lay no claim to theological discourse and are indifferent to the expectation
that “the theatre” should uphold moral, civil or theo-centric inclinations of any
particular sort. For our purposes, however, Tertullian’s situating of his theological
thrust against theatre in the mytho-theologies of his day is only of incidental concern.
Our primary interest is his understanding that theatre’s engagement with the
imagination, coming at the expense of the Christian’s engagement in the drama of
Salvation, is all too real.

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34 St. Augustine, *The city of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Modern Library, 1993), III.14, p. 87. No doubt, however, the theatre in this period had degenerated to such extent that lowbrow comedy – *ars ludicra* – achieved the rank of theatre and was enjoyed on the same level as the best of Aristophanes’ Old Comedy, the New Comedy of Menander, or that of Terence would have been in earlier generations.


36 As we have indicated, the scope of this study is limited to the secular theatre principally known in Europe and North America. Of course, theatrical practices originating in other cultures may arise in and serve to sustain particular religious and philosophical traditions (Kathakali masked theatre of Southern India, or Noh classical theatre of Japan, for example).

37 Barish detects the beginnings of Western theatre’s break with religion as early as the decline of the Roman stage. Barish, p. 41.
In picturings of imagination

In De Spectaculis, Tertullian uses imago either as a metaphor for humanity’s creatureliness after God or, more often, in the sense of literary figures intended for imaginative apprehension. Alternatively, it occurs in description of painted images, mosaics, carvings, statuary, and so forth, but especially in the way that these educe idolatrous ‘picturings of imagination’. So for example, concerning actors’ use of the theatrical mask, Tertullian asks rhetorically whether they do this ‘according to the mind of God, who forbids the making of every likeness, and especially then the likeness of man who is His own image?’ The various senses in which Tertullian uses imago then converge on something approaching a phenomenology of how the drama communicates to a theatrical audience. The significance of this is that Tertullian does not object to theatre’s contravention of truth, morality, etc., abstractly, but rather with some sense for the way in which theatre is actually experienced in performance.

The fact that Tertullian recognizes something powerful in the projection and reception of dramatic images suggests that theatre induces the imagination to idolatry specifically by “acting out” in the flesh that which other arts merely “portray”. In answer to the question, ‘What is theatre’, Tertullian might well say that it is depiction of action in “moving images” (as we might say in present day film aesthetics). Something real which does not necessarily apply to other forms of artistic representation is therefore attributed to the stage play, pantomime, dance and other modes of the performing arts. Theatre’s kinship with the “live shows”, in fact, is that both effect moving images in the Christian imagination; in both the stage performance and the gladiatorial event, obviating the fact that one does not entail the other’s pain and suffering in the flesh, the audience responds to the realia of the dramatic—i.e., they are both manifestations of the dramatic. Staged acts are

38 Tertullian, The shows, XXX.5-7.
39 Ibid., XXIII.5.
40 The fact that Tertullian’s attack on theatre focuses on the exchange between the dramatic act and the witnessing audience is remarkable given that it is only since the integration of psychology, semiotics and phenomenology that one begins to consider the nature of dramatic exchange. Actor/audience, stage/reality relations have been the special focus of Anti-Theatrical theatre of the twentieth century, cf. Chapter 5.
41 Here, corresponding roughly to Dupont’s category of ‘spectacle’. Cf. my footnote 1.
therefore real enough to stir up the imagination, thereby promoting in reality that which they portray in their imaging of reality.

For Tertullian, of course, theatre’s access to the imagination only works to concupiscent effect, theatrical imagery thereby supplanting a theological imaging of the Truth. Riotousness at festival plays, for example, contradicts a Christian ideal of harmony and peaceful comport with one’s neighbours. The cothurnus, the high-platform boot worn by tragic actors, desecrates God’s creation by adding cubits to the actor’s natural stature (thus making Christ a liar according to Luke 12.25). Comic actors disguising themselves in women’s clothing flaunt the prohibition in Deuteronomy 22.5 and are guilty of ‘destroying all natural modesty’. In theatre, furthermore, things which would be considered shameful to do in even in the privacy of the home, are imaged by the demands of the play script, and then acted out publicly and without blushing on the stage. Indeed, writes Tertullian,

it strangely happens, that the same man who can scarcely in public lift up his tunic, even when necessity of nature presses him, takes it off in the circus, as if bent on exposing himself before [the public]; the father who carefully protects and guards his virgin daughter’s ears from every polluting word, takes her to the theatre himself, exposing her to all its vile words and attitudes; he, again, who in the streets lays hands on or covers with reproaches the brawling puglist, in the arena gives all encouragement to combats of a much more serious kind; and he who looks with horror on the corpse of one who has died [of natural causes], in the amphitheatre gazes down with most patient eyes on bodies all mangled and torn and smeared with their own blood….

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43 Cf. Barish, p. 49.
44 Turcan, XVII.2. Cited also in Theo-Drama I, 94. See further remarks on cross-dressing on the stage, and on the complication of ‘…the pantomime, who is even brought up to play the woman!’ Tertullian, The shows, XXIII.6.
45 Tertullian, Apologeticum, XXI.2, 3. Cicero, three centuries earlier, in his critique of theatre reversed rhetorical strategy by praising stage etiquette in support his doctrine of civility and virtue, though always with the implied critique that the theatres should rise above common entertainment and offer desirable models of citizenship:

Let our standing, our walking, our sitting and our reclining, our countenances, our eyes and the movements of our hands all maintain what I have called seemliness. In these matters we... should do nothing effeminate or soft, and nothing harsh or uncouth. Surely, we should not concede to actors and orators that such considerations are appropriate of them, but unconnected with us. Indeed, the customs of theatre people are, thanks to a discipline of long-standing, characterized by so great a sense of shame that no one may step on to the stage without a breech-cloth. For they fear that if an accident occurred, parts of the body might be revealed that it is not seemly to see. According to our own custom... we ought therefore to
Rules of combat in the arena, moreover, make it acceptable to partake in its cruelty, even when opposing violence in principle; moral order otherwise upheld even in secular public life is therefore subverted openly for the sake of spectacle “play”. Tertullian, pointing once more to the way in which theatrical imagery occupies the mind, questions in what sense Christians could subject their imagination to ‘[the] tragedies and comedies… impious and licentious inventors of crimes and lusts’. Such imaginative imprints, Tertullian reiterates, are not neutral to godly coordinates: they supplant images drawn from Scripture that would orient the believer’s internal conviction and outward manner. The fact that the deed is committed under the cover of theatricality poses no reason to suppose that images thereby projected have no “objective correlatives”, so to speak, which would impinge on the imagination. Even the pagans, Tertullian says, would understand this, for even they would know that abjuration of the arena is requisite for those who are baptized into Christianity; and that as Christians, what ‘we would reject in word, we cannot accept in deed’. Entertaining the image on stage only serves, therefore, to defraud the Christian of truth’s inner witness; so he asks, ‘How is it that the things which defile a man in going out of his mouth, are not regarded as doing so when they go in at his eyes and ears…?’

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46 Turcan, XVII.7. Here, I am using ‘realistic’, ‘realism’ and related terms to convey that for Tertullian, aestheticizing the act into “act” does not diminish its bearing on the imagination. Moreover, if on the model of classical Aristotelian dramaturgy the theatre act is understood as the repetition or imitation of an action, for Tertullian, questions of moral import repeat themselves also in dramatized action. This implication that theatrical play bears realistically on the ethics of action then extends to the actor through whom the act is fictionalized. The actions of fictionalizing, however, in order to move an audience to both imagine and feel the situation being portrayed, are in themselves real performance of gestures/acts. In dramatic action calling for nudity, the actor really exposes his or her body to public gaze; the expletive uttered on the stage is the same as that uttered sinfully in anger. Even less obviously, perhaps, actions “staged” for the sake of dramatic action are in themselves real, thus bringing us to the conundrum of theatre’s performance of action by means of representative action (cf. my footnote 46 in Ch. 5).

47 Tertullian, The shows, XXVII.2.

48 Turcan, XXIV.7,8.

49 To gloss Tertullian’s ‘quod in facto reicitur etiam in dicto non est recipiendum’. Ibid., XXIV.3.

50 Apparently subverting reasoning which would use Scripture to justify or minimize the harm in receiving the affectively moving images of the stage. Tertullian, The shows, XVII.5.
2.1.1f Images of creation

Tertullian considers briefly but is not dissuaded by the argument that the theatrical arts could ‘image’ truthfully God’s goodness in creation. It is true, Tertullian admits, that ‘…every one is ready with the argument that all things, as we teach [in Christianity], were created by God, and given to man for his use, and that they must be good, as coming all from so good a source’. It is furthermore argued, he writes, that among God’s good creation

…are found the various constituent elements of the public shows, such as the horse, the lion, bodily strength, and musical voice; …and that] it cannot, then, be thought that what exists by God’s own creative will is either foreign or hostile to [God]; and [that] if it is not opposed to Him, God’s faithful need not reject that which knows no hostility against God.  

For Tertullian, however, the logic that creation is both good in itself and therefore in its usability for the arts is sinful justification of human desire to imitate God’s accomplishment in creation. Theatre, in this sense, poses an affront to God and the goodness of his creation; it subverts godly uses of the creation (the body, human reason, sexuality, etc.) with impious uses in theatre. ‘We must not, then, consider merely by whom all things were made’, Tertullian adds, ‘but by whom they have been perverted. [Indeed] there is a vast difference between the corrupted state and that of primal purity, as there is a vast difference between the Creator and the [interpolatorem]…’

Tertullian does not oppose the use of creation on principle and speaks favourably, for example, of ‘former days [when] equestrianism was practiced in a simple way on horseback, and [when] certainly its ordinary use had nothing sinful in it’. Creation’s goodness, however, may also be perverted by human desire to imitate (re-image) God’s creative act. Equestrian skill may serve to direct the spectator to admire God’s creative accomplishment in both man and beast. It can also be ‘dragged into the games’ for chariot competitions leading to the death, however, thus altering the

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51 Ibid., II.1.
52 Turcan, II.1, italicised section, my gloss differing slightly from Turcan’s interpretation.
53 ‘Falsifying corruptor’, with reference to demonic incitement to exchange falsehood for truth. Tertullian, The shows, II.6,7.
image of God’s creation with corrupt human invention. Another example showing ‘the creature misus[ing] the creation’ is evident in the sport of boxing in which the ‘disfiguration of the human countenance, …is nothing less than the disfiguration of God’s own image.’

In a particularly vivid passage, Tertullian goes on to condemn the pugilist who voluntarily exposes himself to blows, as if in mockery of Christ who endured similar humiliation at the hands of his tormentors. The sport contravenes, he says, the image in Christ’s teaching in the Sermon on the Mount concerning turning the other cheek. Again, whereas Scripture presents harmonious images of what it means to know and love God, the spectacle proffers counter-images that would vie for a godly imagination. Tertullian cites further proof of theatre’s alterity to the theological mind in the fact that Christians attending the shows typically conceal their faith in the anonymity of the crowd, thereby vitiating public Christian witness (i.e., action motivated by theological conviction) by “acting” in the guise of an impersonal collective. Noting that the Christian life takes place in view of God, however, Tertullian warns those who would be tempted by the anonymity of the public shows to ‘think how it fares with you in heaven’.

2.1.1g Tertullian’s theological drama

Tertullian never fails to remind us that his reputation as a punishing master of rhetoric is well deserved—considering, for example, the unmerciful picture he paints of the lot awaiting the dramatists at Christ’s return:

I shall have a better opportunity [on that day] of hearing the tragedians, louder-voiced in their own calamity; of viewing the play-actors, much more “dissolute” in the dissolving flame; of looking upon the charioteer, all glowing in his chariot of fire; of beholding the wrestlers, not in their gymnasia, but tossing in the fiery billows…

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54 Ibid., IX.11.
55 Ibid., II.11.
56 Ibid., XVIII.1.
57 Ibid., XXIII.3.
58 Tertullian’s rhetoric relishes in the irony in that if boxing were any indication, we might believe that not only Jesus but also the devil teaches to offer the cheek to the other man’s blow. Ibid., XIII.4.
59 Ibid., XXVII.2.
60 Ibid.
Tertullian’s caricature of theatre, however, can only be understood in relation to the theological battles that in many ways define him, his desire to establish the boundaries of what Augustine would later call ‘the city of God’, and concern for peaceful but faithful existence in a world antagonistic to the Christian faith, all of which require making sense of Scripture and its revelatory application to the Church. Kaufman may be less generous in submitting that

Tertullian’s appeals to [historical and scriptural] context appear conservative. He seems to hug the coastline of sacred literature, seldom experimenting with allegory, save for the relatively tame typological readings […] of the Old Testament. Nonetheless, … Tertullian liberally seasoned induction with intuition. He cooked up historical context, using the few fresh-picked fragments he retrieved.61

Even in his indictment, however, Kaufman is forced to concede that in applying to the controversies of his day the historical use of Scripture, Tertullian was motivated by a theological understanding which both ‘completed revelation [and] gave it historical rationality’; for this reason he ‘became increasingly convinced that the church’s interpreters were insufficiently serious’.62

Tertullian’s apologetic for the Church’s place in the world, finally, which he summarizes with the injunction in Hebrews that the Christian ‘Live at peace with everyone, and in the holiness without which no one will see the Lord’,63 shows the yoke of pre-Constantinian persecution weighing on him and therefore on his theological strategy. So does his close familiarity with Christians being exposed to public derision for their beliefs.64 In this latter case, Tertullian pleads against the theatre on humane grounds, mindful of those who are victimised by the public’s desire for spectacle.65 He pleads equally for non-Christians, showing compassion for

62 Ibid., p. 48.
63 Tertullian, Apologeticum, IV, XXXI, pp. 15, 95. With reference to Heb. 12.14; 1 Tim. 2.2 and their complement in Rom. 12.18, ‘If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.’ (KJV)
64 Twice referred to in the NT with the words θεαρτον and θεαρτιζω Cor. 4.9 and Heb. 10.33. The only other use of the word occurs in Acts 19 relating the account of the riot in Ephesus, at the temple of Diana.
65 Hence the famous passage in the The Apology that ‘If Tiber overflows, and Nile does not; if heaven stands still and withholds its rain, and the earth quakes; if famine or pestilence take their marches
prostitutes engaged by dramatists to perform sexual acts on stage (both simulated and actual), and deploring their misery which is perpetuated by the public’s lust for lascivious scenarios.\footnote{66} As for the coliseum, he pleads on behalf of criminals dehumanized with punishments that require them to take the life of fellow prisoners in public combat. As for Christians at the coliseum, Tertullian denounces their taking pleasure in the suffering of another human, even of one who is culpable of the crime for which he is accused, rather than ‘mourn that a brother has sinned so heinously as to [receive] a punishment so dreadful….’\footnote{67} Inherent in this, Tertullian insists, are images which distort to increasingly pernicious effect, mere ‘sport’ providing the excuse to countenance death: ‘what a monstrous thing it is’, he writes, ‘that, in undergoing their punishment, [prisoners], from some less serious delinquency, advance to the criminality of [murderers]!’\footnote{68}

If Christianity at the turn of the third century is to have any credibility in the public arena, therefore, there is no question for Tertullian of Christians taking part in theatre’s trade in images which would defraud the mind of its transforming view of Christ, the true image of God. We have seen, however, that the question of the theatre and of its representation of life/existence/truth is, finally, a question for theology. With this in mind, we move towards a particular complication posed by St Augustine’s vehement opposition to the drama, namely that his narrative in the \textit{Confessions}, both in its content and form, may be understood for its (theological) \textit{dramatization} of God in action.

\footnote{through the country, the word is, ‘Away with these Christians to the lion!’ To which he rejoinders with scathing irony, ‘What, all of them at once?’ (my translation; compare to Reeves who translates the latter part ‘Bless me! What, so many people to one lion!’). Tertullian, \textit{Apologeticum}, XL, p. 114.}{66}

\footnote{‘I say nothing about other matters, which it were good to hide away in their own darkness and their own gloomy caves [i.e., theatres venues], lest they should stain the light of day.’ Tertullian, \textit{The shows}, XVIII.3.}{67}

\footnote{‘…innocenti dolere quod homo, par eius, tam nocens factus est ut tam crudeliter impendatur’.}{67}

\footnote{Ibid., XIX.2, my emphasis.}{68}

\footnote{Ibid., XIX.4.}{68}
Jesus’ sacrifice has taken place “for us and for all” [Hence,] there must be explicit faith that our situation has been transformed through Jesus’ initiative… But there is something else latent here[,] …namely, that if we are prepared to affirm and accept Jesus’ suffering for us, we must also be prepared to walk with him along his way. This is the Sitz im Leben of that “learning” of which Augustine spoke: …the more and more conscious insight that faith in his sacrifice, which already includes us, “passively”, by way of anticipation, also demands our active collaboration.¹

¹ Balthasar, TD IV, p. 394.
3  THE DRAMATIC CHARACTER OF ST AUGUSTINE’S CONFESSIONS IN THE LIGHT OF ARISTOTELIAN DRAMATIC THEORY

I.  THE THEOLOGICAL INVECTIVE AGAINST THE STAGE

1.  Irrationality, fraudulent affect

In our exposition of Tertullian’s treatise against the stage, we saw how the idea that drama achieves its ends through false representation – whether through imitation, pretence, play, make-believe, and so forth – was reason enough to dispatch theatre from his theological programme. Augustine, for his part, does not withhold condemnation for the ‘superfluous gratification’ which actors and dramatists are said to promote through their ‘worthless play’ and ‘theatrical trumpery’. In his teaching On Christian Doctrine, for example, Augustine contends that dance incites an audience into its conspiracy against truth through physical gesture and movements which point to a false ‘reality’. For Augustine, the dance shows its alterity to truth (mendacium) in that it requires re-interpretation in terms faithful to actual reality—that is, in words. He writes that if not for verbal explanation given after the dancer’s stage presentation, frustra totus intentus est.4

If the signs made by actors while dancing were naturally meaningful, rather than meaningful as a result of human institution and agreement, an announcer would not have indicated to the Carthaginians, as each actor danced, what the dance meant, as he did in earlier days. Many old men still remember this, and we often hear them talking about it. It is quite credible, for even now if a person unfamiliar with these frivolities goes to the theatre his rapt attention to them is pointless unless someone tells him what the movements mean.5

For Augustine, furthermore, theatrical plays may be morally reprehensible for the subject matter they portray, and in this regard he finds no shortage of indecent material on the Roman stage, so that he cites agreement with secular philosophers

5 Ibid., XXV.38.97, p. 103, added emphasis.
(favoured allies being Cicero\(^6\) and Varro\(^7\)) whose rules of civility would ban the theatre for similar reasons.

The fact that drama arouses passion in spectators is, for Augustine, further proof of its sinister nature: for even the most resolute mind, Augustine insists, cannot resist the emotional thrust with which drama “ravishes” the unsuspecting spectator. If drama is deceitful in its fictionalising of truth, it is all the more duplicitous in that it blind-sides reason through the exercise of the emotions. Theatricality is therefore not only immoral but also irrational, for against all reason, the unsuspecting spectator gets ‘carried away’ from a proper grounding in reality. Worse still, the spectator’s willing participation in the theatrical experience means that he or she conspires openly with the fraud, thereby seeking to be swept up by the open display of emotion so that intellect is overcome and sobriety of judgement suspended in the pursuit of passion. With this, Augustine’s invective against the stage brings the argument full circle: not only does theatre incite the public to take part in its immoral and irrational forgery of nature, but as a participatory experience, it also thrives on the overt enjoyment of the experience.

Theatre is an event which cannot be abstracted from the humanly embodied condition, or purely conceptualized and relegated to the realm of words. Augustine surmises correctly, then, that emotional experience in drama keeps both dramatist and audience grounded in the realities of the flesh. For him, however, the drama’s rooting in the contingency of flesh can only have pernicious consequences, hence he cannot conceive of a theological rationale to justify the Christian’s involvement in theatre. Augustine, in fact, cannot conceive of a theological orientation in theatre because for him, unlike both music\(^8\) and rhetoric\(^9\) (both of which he encourages in

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7 See, St. Augustine, De doctrina christiana, XVII.27.65, p. 89.
8 Concerning which Augustine finds compelling that while Christians in his day may not understand what music is (apart from commonality with mathematical ratios) Christian worship is nevertheless inseparably rooted in music and instrumentation, for ‘in several places in the Holy Scriptures we find… music mentioned with honour’. He is also persuaded that the voice, which is the material of song, is by nature of three kinds. For it is either produced by the voice, as in the case of those who sing with the mouth without an instrument; or by blowing, as in the case of trumpets and flutes; or by striking, as in the case of harps and drums, and all other instruments that give their sound when struck.

It is remarkable from a theology and arts perspective that in Augustine’s thought, music is not only vindicated by biblical prescription (e.g., the Psalter), but also by something of the properties in
Christian use) the fact that theatre amounts to an “in the flesh” experience compromises the spiritual orientation of the godly mind.

Given the all encompassing nature of Augustine’s anti-theatrical stance, on the other hand, it is especially problematic that in his pains to win the unconverted as well as encourage the Christians to persevere in the struggles of the faith, Augustine himself proves the most dramatic of theologians. He does not merely rely on intellectual tack to move his readers to both ‘take up and read’ and go out and ‘agitare’ according to their citizenship in the City of God, but consistently subjects his arguments to passionate narrative turns. Augustine’s drama is unrestrained in its urgency, for example, when pleading with his readers that they

See my condition! Weep with me and weep for me, you who have within yourselves a concern for the good, the springs from which good actions proceed. For you will not act accordingly lest you are thus moved.

A question may be posed whether the appeal to affect in this passage (representing, we shall argue, a broader pattern discernable in Augustine’s narrative) is merely indicative of motif or technique in the rhetorical mode, or whether we are

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9 And, for Augustine, especially rhetoric, for while it is used deftly by non-Christians, there is a case for Christians to use clear argumentation and oratory presentation in defence of the Truth (1 Peter 3.15). Augustine’s own rhetoric being particularly exemplary, the passage is worth citing, bearing in mind that he will not extend his concluding commendation of rhetoric for the presentation of Truth to the theatre:

Now, the art of rhetoric being available for the enforcing either of truth or falsehood, who will dare to say that truth in the person of its defenders is to take its stand unarmed against falsehood? For example, that those who are trying to persuade men of what is false are to know how to introduce their subject, so as to put the hearer into a friendly, or attentive, or teachable frame of mind, while the defenders of the truth shall be ignorant of the art […] in such a way that [truth] is tedious to listen to, hard to understand, and, in fine, not easy to believe it? That the former are [sic] to melt, to enliven, and to rouse them, while the latter shall in defence of the truth be sluggish, and frigid, and somnolent? Who is such a fool as to think this wisdom? Since, then, the faculty of eloquence is available for both sides, and is of very great service in the enforcing either of wrong or right, why do not [Christians] study to engage it on the side of truth…? Ibid., IV.II.3, my emphasis.

10 The precise invocation being that ‘nam qui non agitis, non vos haec movent’. St. Augustine, Confessions’, [X.xxxiii.50]


12 Latter phrase, my translation. Later, weeping over the death of his Christian mother, Augustine pleads with God to move the reader such that, ‘if a person of much charity, let him weep himself before you for my sins; for you are the Father of all the brothers of your Christ’. Ibid., p. 176, IX.xii.33.
right in pursuing this as central to the narrative frame in which Augustine’s theological thought is cast. In fact, in order to appreciate the dramatic thrust in the *Confessions* fully, it will be essential to appreciate the affective dimension in the Augustinian narrative.\(^{13}\) We will do this duly through an interaction with the narrative of Alypius. This will enable us to appreciate that although Augustine both exploits tensions between Christianity and the stage and becomes a principal protagonist in this history, his theological narrative exhibits surprising affinity with the classical formulation of the serious drama as we have in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. This includes the role of emotional content (*katharsis*) in shedding light on the transforming nature of the dramatic event. There is, of course, no point in claiming that Augustine “borrows” deliberately from the classical stage in order to structure the theological-dramatic narrative of the *Confessions*. Our point here is less ambitious; namely, that in his narrative account of a world in which God’s action redeems humanity from the possibility of the tragic ending, Augustine works identifiably within a received sense for what constitutes drama of serious consequence. Wittingly or not, then, in moving the reader towards redeemed relationship with God, the narrative aspects of the *Confessions* show sufficient kinship with the classical drama to merit a reading in such light. For now, however, let us consider how specifically Augustine understands the drama which he opposes with such passion.

### 3.1.1a Dramatic representation, ritual and the games

Considering Augustine’s dramatic aesthetics in their integrity should also mean exposing ideas which form his understanding of the dramatic. It is therefore necessary to give some indication of the differences which Augustinian antitheatrical doctrine allows between the various manifestations of the drama of his day. In fact, Augustine’s critical interpretation of the theatre is characterized, at least in part, by his treatment of dramatic forms according to their various performative goals. In Augustine’s critique, a play might be performed entirely for comedic entertainment, while another might add satire as a form of social critique. Performance of the sort

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\(^{13}\) Although Scrutton is right to caution in passing that overlaying a modern understanding of emotion on Augustine’s work can obfuscate his more subtle alternative for a rational use of the affect. See, Anastasia Scrutton, ‘Emotion in Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas: A Way Forward for the Im/passibility Debate?’ *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 2 (April 2005): 169-177.
which, as in the stage tragedy or the live-drama of the coliseum, ‘entertains’ by giving rise to visceral emotions is yet another manifestation of the dramatic. Another form still entertains in the ritual sense, providing a participatory event in which revellers perform devotion to the god(s) through music, sacred dance (sacer ludos), poetic declamation, festal pageant, liturgical pantomime and so forth. Augustine reinforces these distinctions in the dramatic presentation by providing critique specific to their intended aims. For example, comedies/tragedies\textsuperscript{14}(either ‘falsely imposed or drawn from antiquity’),\textsuperscript{15} dramatic staging of myths by pagan ‘theologos poetas’,\textsuperscript{16} the live drama of the coliseum (i.e., events which theatricalize violence and are resolved, as likely as not, in the shedding of blood) are each treated according to the particular ways in which they are said to contravene Christian character. To the extent that Augustine draws these distinctions, he accepts, at least on principle, that not all drama is of the same sort. Hence, while Augustine admits that on his arrival in Carthage he was seduced into theatrical representations of fictional dramas\textsuperscript{17} (citing famously a play about a pair of “lost lovers”\textsuperscript{18}), he finds no reason to charge the representation of such fictional material with violating a theological or supernatural dimension.

On the other hand, Augustine reserves ammunition of another calibre for dramas which quite specifically take their subjects from the pagan religions. Concerning the theatrical representations of myths, for example, he makes a circular but logically consistent argument that if the gods were real, they should be scandalized at the indecency of being represented—i.e., imitated and caricatured—on the secular stage. If it is the case, however, that the gods are not real, then mythical/religious plays prove all the more pernicious for perpetuating false belief systems.\textsuperscript{19} Augustine adds,
therefore, that even though ‘some will interpose [that these plays are but] the fables of poets, not the deliverances of the gods themselves [, and while] I have no mind to arbitrate between the lewdness of theatrical entertainments and of mystic rites’,

What man is there [sic] who will not consider that, in living his own life, he ought rather to follow the examples set in plays performed by divine institution than the prescriptions of laws promulgated by merely human counsel? [Indeed,] if the poets have falsely represented Jupiter as an adulterer, then the gods, chaste as they [supposedly] are, ought surely to have avenged themselves in anger upon mankind for introducing such abominable fictions into their shows, not for failing to present them.

The reference to ritual obligation in particular – i.e., ‘divine institution’ – exposes the theatre to the accusation that it is subservient to pagan thought. For that reason, however, it is clear that it makes some difference to Augustine how the plays are performed, what motivates the performances, and how an audience receives them—the ‘abominable fictions’ of the theological stage being cited in the passage above as religiously sanctioned license for sexual promiscuity.

These subtleties aside, it is also fair to say that Augustine condemns all drama with an equal degree of zeal; drawing dramaturgical fine lines, in fact, merely serves to reinforce his view that, regardless of motivation, association with the worst of aspects of the whole debases theatre in any of its particular manifestations. For example, although Augustine repudiates his own attraction to the fictional dramas, he considers them ‘the most inoffensive’ of the dramatic forms because they are neither performed for religious obligation nor do they play on the same level as the live acts in the coliseum. Nevertheless, the representational drama is both disdained for its

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Priapus for his phallus (‘stretched out in vile nakedness’) were not offensive enough to Christians, then his obscene appearance in plays, the actor costumed to whatever degree of exaggeration to look the part, certainly should be: ‘Is the Priapus of the priests less obscene than the Priapus of the players? Does he receive the adoration of worshippers in a different form from that in which he moves about the stage for the amusement of spectators?’ St. Augustine, The City of God (trans. M. Dods), VI.7, also IV.11, pp. 194, 203-204.

20 Ibid., p. 47, II.8.


23 And because ‘though they often handle impure subjects, yet do so without the filthiness of language which characterizes many other performances’: St. Augustine, The City of God (trans. M. Dods), p. 47, II.8. Donnalee Dox (2004) plays up Augustine’s dramatic distinctions in order to isolate theatre as an idea which, in the medieval period, is brought as metaphor into theology. She misses, however,
alleged defrauding of reality and most strongly condemned for generic association with all other types of theatre, including, of course, religious drama. For Augustine, quite simply, any aspect of the theatrical spectrum gives cause for Christian contempt. However, the fact that Augustine draws distinctions between the entertainment of fictional plays, live drama in the arena and performances which take place around offices of the pagan pantheon is only important to the extent that he considers all dramaturgies, regardless of form or purpose, as unworthy of Christian consideration, theoretically or in practice.

3.1.1b Theatrical affectation against reason

In Augustine’s theological instruction, all forms of drama/theatre are considered reprehensible to Christian thought. He finds it most vexing, though, that the dramatic event by nature (whether in the arena, the altar or on the stage) invariably demands emotional investment from an audience; that drama, in other words, ‘moves’ an audience affectively. Augustine concludes simply that the theatre’s emotive pull on an audience contrives against their rational grasp on truth. Evoking a similar point in Plato’s Republic, Augustine draws the conclusion that the theatrical act demands the suspension of rational ethic in the same way that prurient curiosity compels one against better judgement to look on the horror of a dead corpse on the side of the road.24

Such objection to affective arousal in the drama becomes especially evident in the Augustine’s narrative(s) of Alypius in which Augustine (deploying no small measure of dramatic skill) shows how easily a man of reason and reputable character can succumb to the shows by the stimulation of emotion. Given the theological aims of the Confessions, moreover, Augustine presents the story of Alypius’ fall for gladiatorial combats as a way of telling a story of God’s dramatic act for the redemption of one man and, by implication, of “man” as a character in the drama of Salvation. In order to immerse ourselves in the story of Alypius and expose the

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24 St. Augustine, Confessions (trans. Chadwick), p. 211. Cf. Plato’s dialogue on prurience in which he repeats a story of someone who, though repulsed by the sight of corpses of recently executed men, could not help but go over to have a look: ‘[H]is desire got the better of him and he ran up to the corpses, opening his eyes wide and saying to [his eyes], “There you are, curse you – a lovely sight! Have a real good look!’ Plato, The Republic, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 147-148, 439d-440a.
dramatic convention implicit in Augustine’s narrative, we need a brief overview of antecedents leading to this point in the *Confessions*. This, we hope, will establish that the Alypius story can be analysed as a critical sample of Augustine’s broader narrative writing as we have in the *Confessions*.

### 3.1.1c ‘You can take my body but not my mind’

The *Confessions* sets up the story of Alypius with an earlier narrative in which Augustine stresses the soul’s conflict with desire – and by extension, the affect – to suggest that giving in to the emotion prevents the soul from ‘coming to its senses’, so to speak, and making a rational decision for God. He recounts a chance encounter with an inebriated beggar on whom he initially takes pity, only to realize that he himself, the successful but unfulfilled academic, is no better off than the wretch.

Augustine is walking in the company of fellow academics on his way to present a panegyric on the emperor (a laudatory speech of a kind which he intimates was commonly understood to encourage mendacity). The task plays up to Augustine’s oratory skill and he is sure that taking part in the “deceit” will benefit his worldly aspirations for honour, wealth and status. He soon realizes, though, that not only is he not better off than the wretch he sees before him, but is in fact morally and spiritually worse off. Augustine reasons that the beggar aspires to nothing more than release from his stupor the morning after; Augustine cannot say as much for himself. If nothing else, Augustine reflects, the inebriated beggar would sleep off his false and cheaply acquired pleasure. The man of letters, however, ‘slept and rose’ steeped in his anxiety to please through academic achievement. In the end, according to Augustine, in the pursuit of knowledge or pleasure as ends in themselves, the soul yawns contemptuously in the face of God.

From the point of view of narrative, relating the incident with the beggar helps Augustine to establish initially the contours of a world-drama in which, whether acknowledged or not, God makes himself available to mankind. He writes that although as an academic he ‘suffered the bitterest difficulties’, this was already a

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26 St. Augustine, ‘Confessiones’, VI.vi.9.
27 Ibid.
sign that God would not allow Augustine to gain the world but lose his soul, hence to find ‘sweet pleasure in what was not [God]’. The message of the narrative is clear: pleasure and desire conspire against (conversion to) Christian faith.

This idea is revisited with greater intensity in Augustine’s critique of the theatre which, he would have us believe, enacts in vivo human disposition towards emotion at the expense of reason and the possibility of its conversion to Christ; this too is dramatized in the Alypius story. (We learn that, although Alypius abhors the violence of the arena, he is physically dragged into the stadium by a group of friends. To this, Alypius responds with imprecatory words to the effect that ‘You can take my body, but you can’t have my mind’.) Ultimately, Augustine does not propose reason to the exclusion of voluptas and cupiditas (pleasure and desire), suggesting, rather, that a properly affective disposition toward God, guided by the compass of Scripture, conjoins body and mind in seeking the clarifying light of truth. Augustine is persuaded, however, that pleasure and desire, rooted in the corruptibility of the flesh, cannot lead to anything other than a debauched mind. This, however, is where part of Augustine’s problem with theatre lies. Augustine sees theatre as a place in which the embodied participatory experience (along with its kindred emotions) prevents a rational desire for God.

Ultimately, it may not be the case that Augustine wishes to “shuffle off this mortal coil” in favour of some disembodied spiritual state. There is no question, however, that his view of Salvation includes scorn for the body and its senses as

28 St. Augustine, Confessions (trans. Chadwick), p. 97, my emphasis.
29 Obtaining, we should note in passing, similarly incommensurable anima and corpus distinctions. Augustine says anecdotally, for example, that ‘Sometimes… I remember with joy a sadness that has passed and with sadness a lost joy.’ From this, he concludes that ‘So far as the body is concerned, that is no cause for surprise. The mind is one thing, the body another.’ Ibid., p. 191, X.xii.21.
30 St. Augustine, ‘Confessiones’, VI.7.11.
31 Or, less prosaically, subsumed by its overarching authority, ‘aut quis nisi tu, deus noster, fecisti nobis firmamentum auctoritatis super nos in scriptura tua divina?’ Confessiones, XII.15.16, rendered in Chadwick’s translation as ‘Who but you, O God, has made for us a solid firmament of authority over us in your divine scripture?’ St. Augustine, Confessions (trans. Chadwick), p. 282.
32 ‘perspicuae veritatis luce’, St. Augustine, ‘Confessiones’, XIII.xviii.23. For Augustine, however, labouring after illuminating truth in the fullness of embodied faculties is tentative to the temporal condition; it demands, moreover, a deep search in scientia—unfettered by the condition of the heart—in order to attain to sapientia. This being the nature of the enfleshed condition, ‘reasonable worship’ (Romans 12.1) demands an ordering of the heart and its ensuing emotions until such time when we shall come upon truth itself (donec inveniatur perspicua veritas, VI.xi.18); cf. specially XIII.xviii.23.
means by which humans occupy fundamentally their place in the world. So, we read, for example:

The sense of touch has its own power to please and the other senses find their proper objects in physical sensation. [...] Yet, in seeking these pleasures, we must not depart from thee, O Lord, nor deviate from thy law. The life which we live here has its own peculiar attractiveness because it has a certain measure of comeliness of its own and a harmony with all these inferior values. [...] Yet because of these values, sin is committed, because we have an inordinate preference for these goods of a lower order and neglect the better and the higher good—neglecting thee, O our Lord God, and thy truth and thy law.33

This running tension in Augustine’s theology—the implication that Christian conversion means subsuming the body to an ordered scale in which mind/spirit are of ultimate value to God—is subsequently reflected in the Augustinian censure of the drama. If the dramatic act is but fraudulent reality, the argument goes, and if theatre achieves its ends by attracting the spectator with base appeal to the senses, then for Augustine there is no rational way for the Christian to contemplate involvement in theatre on any level. The persistent tension between emotion and a Christian understanding in Augustine’s narrative serves to keep alive the prohibition.34

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34 The tension recurs, for example, in Augustine’s earlier reflection on the vacant irrationality behind his act of stealing from a neighbour’s pear tree (Cf. book II.4-6). Evoking the sense of meaninglessness in the koheleth’s wisdom, Augustine writes that ‘I stole those [pears] simply that I might steal… My sole gratification in them was my own sin, which I was pleased to enjoy’ (Ibid., II.6.12.). In his own conversion story, we recall, he goes from being caught in the throes of emotion (crying out under a fig tree ‘the most bitter contrition of my heart’) to recognizing rationally the significance of the child’s ‘Tolle lege! Tolle lege!’ In fact, taking a well-reasoned step towards conversion means, for Augustine, suppressing emotion. We read, then, that on hearing the child’s voice, ‘I immediately ceased weeping and began most earnestly to think….’ (St. Augustine, Confessions (trans. A. Outler), VIII.12.29.). This sharp disruption between the affective state and sober reasoning is then reiterated in the next paragraph in which

repressoque impetu lacrmarum / ‘damming the torrent of my tears,
surrexi / I got to my feet.’

St. Augustine, Confessions (trans. A. Outler), VIII.12.29.

Clearly, the emotional state is in some sense accessory to Augustine’s repentance, but it is the logocentric sobriety that follows, confirmed in the form of the euangelica lectione, which enables his conversion. Augustine wants his readers to see that it is the objectivity of the word, and not the subjectivity of the emotions with which the word is received, that brings about conversion. In this regard, it is possible to read the beginnings of Augustine’s understanding that to ‘put on Christ’ means to reason in stark dark and light contrasts as lying somewhere in this biblical passage which urges the reader to act decisively, for η νυς προσκυνην; η δε ημερα: the night is spent, and the day is near (v.12).

Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the
Essentially, if Salvation involves the person’s rescue from sinful acquiescence in the flesh (affect/emotion/desire), quite logically for Augustine, it also entails prohibition from the enflashed affectations of the theatre.\(^\text{35}\)

II. A\(\text{UGUSTINE’S THEOLOGICAL-DRAMATIC NARRATIVE}\)

1. \textit{Salvation, the great theatre of the world}

The fact that Augustine’s attack on the theatre is theologically motivated is of particular significance to our hypothesis that life under God is finally dramatic. For, whatever apprehensions Augustine may have about drama and its manifestation in theatre, he himself nevertheless weaves a \textit{theological} narrative in dramatic terms that speak of God’s inbreaking into the world as central to human history. It would seem that for Augustine if the human condition may be described as moving, through sin’s impetus, away from God, and this movement as leading towards nothing less than tragic ends (death, destruction, godlessness, hell, etc.), apart from God’s involvement \textit{ab intra} in the human plot, no other event can effect the reversal of sin’s degenerating momentum. At the same time, however, given the dramatizing nature of God’s self-giving in Salvation, nothing less than dramatic forms can testify faithfully to the universal reach and abiding immediacy of this event made. Augustine’s patterning of God and his salvific act through a particular kind of narrative makes the \textit{Confessions} just such a dramatic witness, at once faithful to and itself defined by the dramatic scope of its subject. The implicitly ‘theo-dramatic’ thrust in Augustine’s narrative, however, cannot but stand out in contrast to his explicitly anti-dramatic, antitheatrical bias in the \textit{Confessions} and elsewhere. Our task, therefore, is to consider how Augustine dramatizes God’s inbreaking into the human story by following (if tacitly) and departing from a classical, Aristotelian sense for the tragic drama.

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\(^{35}\) St. Augustine, \textit{Christian doctrine}, XXVII.28.59-60. Augustine sees in the biblical injunction to love God with heart, mind and soul, and to love the neighbour as oneself an affirmation that ‘we love what we are and what is inferior to us but belongs to us [i.e., the body], [and] even animals love themselves and their bodies’. Thus, Augustine extrapolates from the biblical word the supposed inferiority of the affect.
In should be said that at no point does Augustine’s understanding of divine action appeal to world-theatre analogies as such. His sense of the dramatic derives from a perspective far more encompassing than even the drama’s meta-theatrical sense of itself as ‘the play within the play of life’. It is therefore all the more remarkable to find at least one instance in which Augustine cites constructively comparisons between the Church and the theatre.

In his treatise *On Christian Doctrine* Augustine illustrates the way in which Christians, drawn by the principal Actor’s command performance, become community (*societate*) as they incite one another to revel in His theatre of love: when ‘…finding their own enthusiasm reproduced in others, they “begin to love one another for the sake of him that they love.”’\(^{36}\) The love shared by this acting community is so great as to involve those who are too far from the stage to see the performance for themselves, but who nevertheless participate in the excitement generated by the master Thespian as it surges through the crowd with such vibrancy that they are unable to contain themselves. Thus we read,

Now of all who can with us enjoy God, […w]e ought to desire… that [unbelievers] should all join with us in loving God, and all [believers]…should tend to that one end. For in the theatres, …if a man is fond of a particular actor, and enjoys his art[,] …he is fond of all who join with him in admiration of his favourite [thespian], not for their own sakes, but for the sake of him whom they admire in common; and the more fervent he is in his admiration, the more he works in every way he can to secure new admirers for him; and if he find any one comparatively indifferent, he does all he can to excite his interest by urging his favourite [actor’s] merits…. Now, if this be so, what does it become us to do who live in the fellowship of the love of God, the enjoyment of whom is true happiness of life, to whom all who love Him owe both their own existence and the love they bear Him, concerning whom we have no fear that any one who comes to know Him will be disappointed in Him, and who desires our love, not for any gain to Himself, but that those who love Him may obtain an eternal reward, even Himself whom they love? And hence it is that we love even our enemies […for they are] separated from Him whom we love. For if they would turn to Him, they [would] love Him… and love us too as partakers with them in so great a blessing.\(^{37}\)

Obviously, this isolated, rhetorical construal of theatre is insufficient to help us make sense of ‘dramaturgy’ in the *Confessions* and we draw no conclusions from it. It is, however, on the way to showing that drama is in fact central to how


Augustine conceives of Salvation and its outworking in the act of conversion. It suggests even at this stage the fact that a metatheatrical perspective inheres in a theocentric understanding of the world.\(^38\)

If in some sense divine intersection with human history constitutes “drama” at its most concrete and universal—by drawing us theologically into a totalizing perspective that includes our own—Augustine’s otherwise incidental draw on a dramatic \textit{modus} would seem to make sense. In particular, Augustine’s concern with human action under the authorial minstrelsy of a Creator is responsive to Salvation as the drama of the God who acts (as man and for man). His narrative thus entails ‘theo-drama’ in as useful a sense of the term as we might find. This is hardly surprising, for the world to which Augustine speaks is \textit{the world as God’s theatre of Salvation}. The ultimate consequences of this \textit{Welttheater} are made evident in the costliness of God’s performance in the person of Jesus Christ in whose paschal giving of “himself as a ransom for all” (borrowing von Balthasar’s phrasing of the Gospel message), he ‘manifested the will of his Father who “desires all to be saved” (see I Tim 2.4-6), and through [whose] revelation, in his life and death, …proclaimed the very being of God to be triune Love’.\(^39\) This also means, then, that given Augustine’s theological goals in the \textit{Confessions}, his sense for the dramatic exhibits essential departures from classical notions of what constitutes the dramatic, and particularly, from Aristotle’s formulation of the serious drama (in the \textit{Poetics}, shaped by the demands of the tragic). In this light, it is not altogether unfitting to imagine Augustine confronting the Greek tragedian with the words

\begin{flushright}
\textit{Si enim in theatris / Quid nos in societate dilectionis Dei agere convenit.}
\end{flushright}

\footnotesize\begin{center}
\textsuperscript{38} In his translation of \textit{The City of God}, Dods draws our attention to the passage from \textit{De Doctrina Christiana}, though he fails to note the peculiarity of Augustine’s use of a theatrical analogy in support of a doctrinal point. Dods’ extremely enthusiastic interpretation of the passage (e.g., ‘Anyone who has been to the opera in a large Italian city will appreciate St. Augustine’s description’) influences my own reading. I am aware, however, that Augustine is also drawing clear \textit{distinctions} between the theatre and the church, as evident in his use of the protasis/apodosis: ‘Si enim in theatris…’ / ‘Quid nos in societate dilectionis Dei agere convenit’. The nature of metaphorical expression, however, is to attribute similitude through such differentiated means. So, for Augustine, although theatres might be ‘dens of iniquity’ (a phrase left out of Dods’ masterful elucidation of the passage), they nevertheless model a community drawn by love for the sake of the \textit{Theater-Schauspieler}. In this way Augustine reminds us that Christ came into the world “to draw all things to himself”, in whom “all things work together for the good of them that love God” (John 12.32, Rom 8.28 respectively). St. Augustine, \textit{The City of God} (trans. M. Dods), pp. xv-xvi.
\end{center}

\footnotesize\begin{center}
\end{center}
Thou seest we are not all alone unhappy:  
This wide and universal theatre  
Presents more woeful pageants than the scene  
Wherein we play in. All the world's a stage

Clearly, if in Aristotle’s aesthetics the serious drama is understood strictly in terms of the irreversibility of telos – hence, the tragedy proper – bounding a dramatic perspective on the world theologically (i.e., in the drama of God and his action in the world) should suggest the possibility for dramatic constructs which, whatever their manifestations (including in secular theatre) could be uniquely Christian in their purpose and outlook.

3.II.1a A narrative about the God who acts

The story of Alypius is unique among the dozen or more conversion narratives in the Confessions in that (unlike the other essentially ‘self-contained’ narratives) it is told in several parts that weave in and out of the main biographical narrative of the book. Alypius narratives, in fact, play alongside Augustine’s own story of conversion; the younger man, we might recall, comes to faith as a result of Augustine’s reading from Scripture upon hearing the child’s voice in the garden.

The first of these Alypius narratives focuses on events that lead to the eponymous young scholar’s prurient attachment to gladiatorial combats. However, though the story dwells principally on his downfall, Augustine composes the narrative in such a way that the reader is always prescient of divine perspective and, therefore, of the possibility of salvation. Central to this particular narrative (typifying the theodramatic frame of the Confessions) is God’s patient bearing in the midst of Alypius’ hubris; the story of Alypius’ fall plays out under God’s dramatizing perspective on the world. A close study of the interface of dramatic elements in this narrative with its theological aims should therefore bear out the unique way in which Augustine’s writing helps us to see that life lived under God is finally a dramatic proposal.

We have noted (in anticipation of our fuller analysis) that insofar as we can speak of dramaturgy in the Confessions, drama is defined not by the irreversibility of the tragic telos but by the significance of God’s involving perspective on humanity.

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40 *As you like it*, Shakespeare, II.vii.137-140. *Nota bene*: Oxford edition has ‘woful’.
41 Cf. my footnote 34.
chief end of Augustine’s dramatic narrative is to show God in action. Insofar as Christian faith affords the possibility for living from the perspective that God acts for humanity, tragedy marks the human condition but does not define it irredeemably; death does not have the final word. To cast this in its positive sense, for God, all things are possible; in the midst of tragedy, God makes himself available in Salvation; humanity is defined by Resurrection as the only hope for ‘the end’. This, as we shall see, is in stark contrast to Aristotle’s tragic vision as articulated in the Poetics. Augustine’s theo-dramatic narrative, therefore, overcomes the Aristotelian view of existence narrowed to its tragic elements. Most central to the Alypius story is the Christian idea that Salvation only comes through the extraneous authority of a Deus ex machina. This “God in the works”, having authorial insight into the events, disrupts the tragic telos of fallen humanity. The Alypius story shows this by making central to the narrative not telos/plot per se but rather character. The significance of this distinction can only be appreciated in view of Aristotle’s insistence on the telic force of the plot and not on persons portrayed – i.e., character – as being ultimately defining of tragedy (understood in the Poetics as the dramatizing frame that bears on existence most significantly). In Augustine’s theological drama, however, the plot has no momentum of its own apart from the quality of its characters. If Alypius represents the fate of humanity in its tragic dimensions, his story of rescue from following his own path to perdition is, in the end, a narrative about none other than Deum verum de Deo vero: it is a theologically motivated drama about the God who acts.

We will engage Augustine’s narrative in close study and expose its affinity with Aristotelian understanding of the dramatic through the presence of elements such as hubris, hamartia as the hero’s personal flaw; anagnorisis or the moment of recognition; finally, on drama’s opening to cathartic participation. Essentially, we will apply the tragic structure set out in Aristotle’s Poetics to the Augustinian narrative in order to understand it as a dramatization of God and his salvific action toward mankind. In saying this, we make no claim, once again, whether Augustine “integrates” an Aristotelian mode of action knowingly, much less that he does so intending to subvert or replace the tragedy with a theologically vivified drama. A close reading of Augustine’s narrative, however, should suffice as evidence of its

basic affinity with the classical drama, and in particular with Aristotle’s structuring of drama of ultimately and irreversible consequences. This should lead to an understanding of why Augustine, even at his most anti-theatrical, cannot evade or suppress the dramatic nature of the Gospel. For in spite of his explicit stance against the stage, Augustine effects an implicitly dramatic vision driven by the character of God, his action in the world and the possibility for corresponding human response.

3.II.1b In which God watches Alypius fall for the gladiatorial shows

As the narrative of Alypius’ downfall at the coliseum appears at considerable length in the original text (Confessiones, VI.7.11-8.13), we will study it here in abridged form. This should suffice to show how archetypical dramatic elements central to the Aristotelian theory of the serious drama charge the Augustinian narrative with an urgency appropriate to the biblical Salvation drama. We turn, then, to the story of Alypius and the gladiators.

One day, Alypius, a respected law student of apparent ‘great natural virtue’ and son of ‘leading citizens’ in Augustine’s hometown of Thagaste, who in principle opposes the gladiatorii spectaculi, finds himself caught unawares by some spirited colleagues, and is consequently ‘carried off in an unbelievable way by the unbelievable passion for gladiatorial shows’. While still only a promising young scholar in Rome, Alypius happens upon some friends who are intent on attending an after-dinner show, and who insist that Alypius accompany them to the stadium. Although Alypius ‘strongly objected and resisted them’, they nevertheless ‘dragged him with friendly force into the amphitheatre on a day for these cruel and deadly games’. True to his principles, however, Alypius determines steadfastly that ‘Even if you drag my body into this place, [you cannot] fasten my mind and my eyes on such shows. Adero itaque absens [I will be absent, though present], and thus I will overcome both you and them’.

It then transpires that Alypius’ resolve, once inside the stadium, is rather quickly overcome by the passionate display of emotion from the other spectators: although [Alypius] closed his eyes and forbade his mind to have any part in such evil sights, he is ultimately unable to shut out the shouted acclamations of the impassioned crowd when one of the gladiators

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43 On the use of literary archetypes, see Koestler in my footnotes 143 and 145.
45 My transposition of the subject/object in the original sentence brings out the sudden eventfulness of the encounter. The subtlety in O’Donnell’s interpretation is immaterial to my use of the story. He reads it as the friends happening upon Alypius after dinner while already on their way to the show. In any event, it is clear that Alypius could not have expected the proposition to attend the games to present itself to him that afternoon. This means that 1) his refusal is an even stronger marker of Alypius as a character who is not easily swayed than if his response had been premeditated. 2) It means that when Alypius does fall head and heart for the spectacle, his plunge is all the more dramatic. St. Augustine, The Confessions of Augustine: an electronic edition, trans. James J. O’Donnell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992. Available on stoa.org/hippo).
is struck down. At this, Alypius, ‘overcome by curiosity’, opens his eyes just enough that he catches a glimpse of blood on the arena. ‘Would that he had blocked his ears as well’ for thus did Alypius, partaking in the sight of blood combined with the passion of the crowd, take flight of his senses, and give himself, in body and mind, over to the corruption of the stadia. At that very moment, despite his previous mental determination, and partly, Augustine tells us, because of it, Alypius ‘was wounded more deeply in his soul… fell more miserably than did that gladiator at whose fall the shout was raised’.

3.II.1c Augustinian narrative and Aristotle’s dramatic aesthetics

It may appear that reading Augustine’s narrative in the light of the Poetics which treats primarily action—to include discussions of acting styles, vocal interpretation, physical gesturing conventional for the stage, the use of music and verse, scenery and special effects—involves a category mistake at the outset. The concerns of the Poetics, however, do not reflect the contemporary divisions in specialized areas of aesthetics between dramatic narrative and theatrical action, i.e., between the scripted drama and the play’s performance. We have already encountered (in Chapter 1) David Saltz’ summation of one half of the conflict in contemporary aesthetics with his aphorism that ‘a text alone does not a play make’ and its corollary that ‘[w]hat defines the play is a particular way of using the text’. Hence, favouring a theory of the theatrical event as the play in performance, he insists that

We do not go to the theatre merely to see “performance texts”. We go to see plays. [S]ometimes, we go to the theatre primarily to see performers… in the flesh. Moreover, not all theatre is text-based; on the contrary, many of the most significant performances have been developed without the benefit of a previously written playscript. Nonetheless, if there is a play to be seen, the place to see it is in the theatre, and the means to see it is through a performance. Simply put: to “see a play” means nothing more or less than to “see a performance of the play”.

Noël Carroll, Saltz’s philosophical dialogue partner, takes a different view. For Carroll, the distance between text and performance is bridged inevitably by an interpretative act, thereby adding interpretation as a third player, as it were, between text and performance (i.e., he holds that we go to the theatre to see performed

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interpretations of plays). All this to say, however, that both critics agree that dramatic text and its performance entail distinct aesthetic conditions. Carroll, moreover, avers that these conditions could not have been evident to either Plato or Aristotle whose theory of mimesis in art reflects the ‘data that history had dealt them’. He suggests that their theories of drama were ‘fairly well motivated by what was available to them’, that is, ‘imitations of heroes and gods and persons and actions—pieces of stones that looked like men, dancers that mimed human action, and plays that re-enacted important mythological events’.

Carroll’s point that there is no significant role for interpretation in either Plato or Aristotle's theories of the stage is intended to assert that both understood drama as inhering in the text (i.e., the poem, the playscript, the epic story and so forth).

Similarly, in the Poetics, while the primary element in representational art is action, Aristotle’s aesthetics do not require that this action be “performed” as such given that its drama, structured by the sequence of events, should inhere in the text in such a way as to be made evident in the plain lectio. Aristotle’s insistence on action in this sense – πράξις – speaks for decisions made by characters which define the course of events (recalling our introductory formulation as A confronts/overcomes C in his quest for B). Action in the Aristotelian sense, then, is to do with a planned accumulation of individual decision-events, hence the telos/plot/story-line. In according dramatic primacy to plot, therefore, Aristotle eases tensions which might exist between aesthetics of theatrical performance and the dramatic script; in his aesthetics, scripted drama and performed drama are equally defined as action compelled by a particular telos. He remarks, consequently, that in the tragedy

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48 Carrol is convinced by the ‘Brechtian’ stance in Walter Benjamin for whom the camera “performs” the film in a way analogous to how the actor performs the live theatrical act (pp. 123-24). For Carrol, to get from a film to a performance of the film requires a media template, but to get from a play to a performance requires a live interpretation (p. 212): ‘[For] the play must be brought to life by an interpretation, or a conjunction of interpretations (by directors, actors, etc.), and, furthermore, this interpretation governs the performance tokens of the play as it is offered to the public on a nightly basis.’ Noël Carroll, A philosophy of mass art (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 213 [insert, p. 212].

49 Mimesis, of course, does not explain abstraction as a goal in certain art, among which, the “happening” or textless performance. Noël Carroll, Philosophy of art: a contemporary introduction, ed. Paul K. Moser, Routledge Contemporary Introductions to Philosophy (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 22-23.

50 Or, in fact, decisions preceding but influential over the course of the play set before the audience/reader.
The plot should be so constructed that even without seeing the play anyone hearing of the incidents happening thrills with fear and pity as a result of what occurs. As would anyone who beard the story of Oedipus.\footnote{Added emphasis; grammar in final phrase amended slightly for consistency. Aristotle, \textit{Poetics}, trans. W.H. Fyfe (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press; Heinemann Ltd., 1932), [1453b].}

For Aristotle \textit{drama = the action of the plot}.\footnote{At stake, for Aristotle, is 1) whether imitation defines the drama and 2) whether it relies on production aesthetics which merely show that they are, as Plato had put it, ‘three removes from being’ (\textit{The Republic}, X.599). According to the critique, the more heightened styles of declamation available to the epic, through the chorus, or stylized character ‘types’ voiced by the epic (timely messengers, predictable gods, blind prophets) require an educated, interpretive apparatus on the part of the audience. Tragedy, however, in presenting something of the horror of life, stirs real emotions. The appeal to emotion, the accusation goes, means that anyone, including a vulgar class of spectator, can interpret the tragedy. This idea is present also in Augustine in a particularly focused form: he objects to the emotive pull of the dramatic which runs against a hierarchical ordering of faculties in which the affect occupies the lower ends of a vertical scale. Aristotle, \textit{Poetics}, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin Group, 1996), p. xxi.} So argues Malcolm Heath in his commentary on the \textit{Poetics}:

It should be noted that the Greek word \textit{praxis} has a wider range of meanings than its conventional English translation, ‘action’. If, using the corresponding verb, I ask someone ‘\textit{It pratteist}’ [\textit{sic}.] I might be saying either ‘What are you doing?’ or ‘How are you?’ So praxis means ‘action’ not just in the sense of what someone does but also in the sense of how they \textit{fare}. Aristotle will say [\textit{sic}] that suffering (\textit{pathos}) is ‘an action [\textit{praxis}] that involves destruction or pain’ (52b11f.); the apparent paradox in describing suffering as an action disappears when one takes account of the broad sense of praxis. Success and failure [in the tragedy] depend on action, therefore.\footnote{A position which clearly begs questions of interpretation.}

Aristotle’s more nuanced argument for telos and the primacy of narrative structure in his dramatics, one which does not play into contemporary division between drama and theatre, is found in the conclusion to the \textit{Poetics}. There, he presents his own objections to ‘the objections of the critics’ that tragedy—i.e., drama intended to be taken seriously—is ‘vulgar art’, that is, a contrived imitation of life. In his first objection, Aristotle absolves the dramatic poet from any one actor’s poor performance of the script; bad acting, he agrees, amounts to mere mimicry and is vulgar indeed. The idea that dramatic text and its theatrical interpretation may be judged independently of one another (e.g., good play, but bad acting), on first sight appears to reinforce aesthetic distance between the two modes of drama.
second objection, however, Aristotle’s emphasis is all the greater on co-inherence of *dramatic action* between text and performance. Thus, Aristotle argues that, even apart from the actors’ interpretation and staging, the structuring of events already evinces the fullness of the drama:

In the first place, one may argue that the [critic’s] censure does not touch the art of the dramatic poet, but only that of his ὑποκριτικὸς;\(^{55}\) for it is quite possible to overdo the gesturing even in an epic recital, …and in a singing contest…. [so] that one should not condemn all [gestural] movement, unless one means to condemn even the dance….\(^{56}\)

Secondly, tragedy has […] a considerable element of its own in the spectacle and the music, which make the pleasure all the more vivid; [but] this vividness can be felt whether it is read or acted.\(^{57}\)

Though the differences between dramatic text and theatrical act are, for Aristotle, essential and real, there is no inherent conflict when considering that, phenomenologically speaking, both forms aim for dramatic effect. Aristotle’s mimetic theory of the tragic, then, narrowing (or eliding entirely) the interpretive distance between text and performance, applies equally to the dramatic text as to the onstage drama. Essentially, both text and performance constitute modes of serious drama. Following Aristotle, then, we can set aside contemporary notions of dramatic action requiring praxical substantiation onstage\(^ {58}\) and thereby eliminate concerns that measuring Augustinian narrative against Aristotelian categories involves an implausible stretch in either direction.

### 3.II.1d Augustine’s theologically vivified drama

Reading Augustine’s narrative against the background of Aristotle’s classical formulation of the dramatic is intended to show a real sense in which the theologian conceives of a divine drama to which his text provides dramatic witness. It is not the case that in the *Confessions* Augustine composes in the role of a classical tragedian. In pressing narratival elements for maximal dramatic impact on the reader, however,

\(^{55}\) Bywater translates ‘interpreter’ which lacks nuance, given what we have said. Fyfe flattens the sense by translating ‘acting’, though later redeems the generalization by associating it with ‘minstrel’.

\(^{56}\) Aristotle adds that, on the other hand, gesturing by ‘ignoble’ characters, presumably following established stage convention, is condemnable by intent. Aristotle, *Aristotle on the art of poetry*, trans. Ingram Bywater (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), [1462a].

\(^{57}\) Aristotle, *Poetics (trans. Fyfe)*, [1462a].

\(^{58}\) Though only to take it up again in Ch. 5.
he naturally orders them in a way that, from our contemporary perspective, is best appreciated in the light of Aristotelian categories (vide infra\textsuperscript{59}). This still raises, though, another possible objection to the approach. Specifically, it raises the issue of genre and whether dramatic narrative in the Confessions is merely indicative of some other established (but otherwise non-extant) writing convention. In fact, however, our thesis does not rely on showing the extent to which (if any) Augustine follows and/or departs from established writing styles. Even though either case would still show the theologian working with a received sense of the place of the dramatic in narrative intended to communicate a subject of grave consequence, the question to hand probes the particular connections between dramatic narrative and the theological setting of the Confessions.\textsuperscript{60} This is an extremely important aspect of our hypothesis and requires immediate amplification.

Our claim is effectively that in his effort to compose a theological narrative which will move readers to understand their life as occurring under God’s perspective on the world,\textsuperscript{61} Augustine relies on a dramatizing structure which, considering the dramatic aesthetics of the day, exhibits elements central to Aristotelian tragedy. In doing this, elements typical of the classical drama are in their turn reordered by the theological aims at work. Specifically, the fact that Augustine’s sense for dramatic


\textsuperscript{60} For which reason, it is important to read the Confessions as more than the narrative of a spiritual journey. Eugene Vance argued along these lines, urging a broader understanding of the theological aims of the Confessions to include Augustine’s ‘systematic dramatization of [Pauline] ideas in what we commonly call, for lack of a better term “autobiography.”’ Vance made clear, however, that it was essential to loosen modern constrains on the autobiographical genre in order to understand why Augustine would become dissatisfied with the narration of his personal life as a source of true wisdom and would consequently invite his soul (as he does in Book X) to reflect upon its own spiritual substance as opposed to reflecting upon external images of the creation that have threatened to corrupt his soul by infiltrating his memory.

If we can accept that there is more than literary reflection on self and God at work in the Confessions, it makes sense that paying close attention to dramatic elements in Augustine’s narrative would show evidence of his sense that something essentially dramatic happens in God’s action in the world. Eugene Vance, ‘Augustine's Confessions and the poetics of the law’, MLN: Modern Language Notes 93, no. 4 (May 1978): 618-634, pp. 622, 630.

\textsuperscript{61} This, of course, limits the argument to this particular aspect of Augustine’s work (I ignore, for instance, his exegetical treatises in the last ten books of the Confessions). I recognize, however, that the question of genre and the Confessions is widely contested in Augustinian studies.
action is pitched toward theological ends means overcoming the classical imposition of a telic force over the dramatic character such that it leads inevitably towards his/her tragic end. His emphasis on God’s salvific action towards man means that, while taking into account the consequence of the tragic, the Augustinian narrative envisions something beyond what in Aristotelian dramatics could be read as ‘tragedy proper’. This theo-dramatic turn in the Confessions both brings to light and casts doubts on Augustine’s aversion to the drama. Clearly, this bears on an understanding of God and his action in the world as being dramatic in some sense. Yet, from a Christian perspective, we cannot but conceive of the incarnate manifestation and overarching scope of Salvation as the meta-theatre of God’s glory. If there is one thing we have gleaned from interaction with von Balthasar’s Theo-Drama it is his sense that metaphors of the stage are true and proper to divine action which elicits human thinking after God. Here, we can adopt fruitfully Ben Quash’s Balthasarian understanding that God’s trinitarian missio does not appear to us like a beautiful though static icon but in action and in the beauty of ‘the dramatic movement within the Trinity to us’; that ‘God’s life itself, then, as revealed to us, is somehow dramatic’.

62 For Steiner, for example, tragedy’s absolutizing aesthetics effect the tragedy’s own justification; he asserts that before the tragedy, questions have no answers, ‘And [that] beyond the tragic, there lies no “happy ending” in some other dimension of place or time. The wounds are not healed and the broken spirit is not mended. In the norm of tragedy, there can be no compensation’. Then, leaning on I.A. Richards, he adds that “The least touch of any theology which has a compensating Heaven to offer the tragic hero is fatal [to the tragedy].” George Steiner, The death of tragedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 129.

63 Later, we will develop Abel’s understanding of metatheatre (in Ch. 4.I.2 Calderonian metatheatre and theo-drama). This is furthered here in describing the world as it appears in perspective of the God who acts, hence theologically, and therefore ‘theatre’ in its grandest possible sense. This includes but is not restricted to Abel’s introduction of “metatheatre” to describe theatre’s ability to reflect on itself as theatre from within the resources of the performance. My use is even less restrictive than Witting’s who explains metatheatre in terms of ‘devices’—the play-within-the-play for instance—

which have the effect of imposing upon the audience an unavoidable awareness of the form and the nature of the dramatic medium, of the structural features which articulate this medium, and of the relationship between the senders and the receivers within this communicative event. In other words, such plays [as] depend primarily on the metalevels of discourse… rather than on the informative level, while the play’s chief function is to draw attention to these signifying structures.


64 Quash, Theology and the drama of history, pp. 37-38, original italics.
Augustine’s prime concern in the *Confessions* being the drama of divine action (i.e., not just recounting it, but involving his readers in it), it is not surprising to find in it a dramatic *modus* at work. We can therefore follow provisionally Annemaré Kotzé’s important proposal that, in addition to considering its obvious relationship to autobiographical writing of the period, Augustine’s text be read for its *protreptic*\(^6\) purpose of persuading the not-yet-converted to realign their lives in light of Augustine’s exposition of who God is.\(^6\) The emphasis here is on preaching to the unconverted, in contradistinction to the *paraenetic* which ‘speaks to the already-converted, about the [their] life-changing choice… exhort[ing] the audience to persist in the chosen course in spite of difficulties…’.\(^6\) Kotzé’s case against the narrowness of reading ‘Augustine’s great work [as] the ““autobiography” of a sinful, guilt-ridden soul’ tempts our own instinct to understand the way in which this text ‘aims to influence its readers to make a life-changing choice and be converted’, though in our case through the lens of the dramatic composer in the conviction that Augustine is motivated primarily by something of the dramatic action in God’s self-giving for the world.\(^6\) Consequently, we will read Augustine’s theologically vivified narrative as a script faithful to the world-theatre as God’s theatre.

### 3.II.1e Consonance with Aristotelian tragedy

Augustine’s account of Alypius has greater purpose than to caution readers that even such a perfectly rational man as the man who was later to become bishop of Thagaste,\(^6\) determined though he is to resist the rousing temptation of the games, is pathetically hopeless apart from God’s intervention. According to the story, rather than resisting the crowd’s influence once inside the stadium, Alypius, in fact, loses

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\(^6\) Furley defines the *protrepticus* (προτρεπτικός λόγος) as ‘an exhortation (to philosophy), first developed as a genre by the 5\(^{th}\) century sophists, who thus persuaded students to take their courses in philosophy and other arts [τέχναι]….’ David John Furley, *The Oxford classical dictionary*, ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, 3 ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 1265. Cited examples of which are Aristotle’s *Protrepticus* (now lost) and Cicero’s *Hortensius* (to which Augustine refers, also lost); and, still evident of the style, though belonging to a different era; Mark D. Jordan cites Aquinas ‘Against the Gentiles’, Cf. *Rewritten theology: Aquinas after his reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2006).


\(^6\) Kotzé will add that this too is present in the *Confessions*, though to a different degree and using techniques different to the protreptic. Ibid.

\(^6\) Ibid., pp. 1, 3.

himself to the events with such abandon that ‘He was no longer the person who had come in, but just one of the crowd which he had joined, and a true member of the group which had brought him [inside].’ 70  

Worse still, once Alypius ‘spectated, shouted, became excited’, 71 he persuaded others to join him in ‘the madness that would stimulate him to come again’. 72 Clearly, the story has an admonition concerning Christians and (what were perceived to be) the dangerous pleasures of the arena. 73 Augustine’s purpose, however, is larger than this. He does not lavish the kind of rousing language readers are treated to in the Confessions 74 simply to arrive at a moral to the story. On the contrary, Augustine takes pains to show that his intention with the Confessions is primarily theo-logical. In recounting the downfall of Alypius, therefore, Augustine is essentially setting up the story of his redemption through the dramatic ‘behind the scenes’ work of God. In the end, we should see that Augustine’s narrative structure concurs with the classical shape of tragic drama, yet departs from its aesthetic goals with the redemptive turn of God’s entrance onto the stage. In other words, in developing a narrative mode for communicating the drama in divine action, the historic influence of the Aristotelian understanding of the dramatic weighs on the theologian’s sense for what makes for drama well told and, perhaps most importantly, how to overcome the sheer directionality of the tragic plot with the character-driven quality of divine action.

Augustine’s rhetoric against the stage complicates and, in places, as we have seen, frustrates the possibility of a constructive encounter between theology and drama. Nevertheless, as we hope to suggest, the combination of dramatic convention and theo-logical orientation in Augustine’s own narrative posits character and its redemption as an alternative objective to the tragic telos, Aristotelian tragedy thus ceding to Augustine’s theo-dramatic vision. Firstly, we will need to show a vital correspondence between the central elements of the Augustinian narrative and

70 Ibid., p. 101. NB: Rephrasing Chadwick’s ‘not now’ with my ‘no longer’; emphasis added.
72 St. Augustine, Confessions (trans. A. Outler).
73 Something which John Chrysostom had preached about unceasingly, though apparently without much success. See, Leyerle.
74 It should be clear by now that my use of the various translations cited, including my own glosses of some key phrases, though they may appear eccentric in choice, intend to capture something of the dramatic overtones in Augustine’s language.
Aristotle’s formulation of the tragedy—i.e., as a mode of action with serious implications and of ultimate consequences which mediates affectively the disclosure of all such suffering. To this end, we propose the following graphic analysis of the Alypius narrative and its shaping along the lines of the tragedian’s sense for the drama.

### Augustine’s narrative use of Aristotelian tragedy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONCEPT</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
<th>SCENE CITATION</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Agent of action</td>
<td>Alypius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Decisions taken by the agent trajectory/plot</td>
<td>Alypius asserts to his companions that he cannot be tempted into the arena, they think otherwise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict/complication</td>
<td>Plot development leading to <em>peripeteia</em> and <em>anagnorisis</em></td>
<td>Alypius’ encounter with friends, leading to the moment of recognition when the gladiator is struck down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peripeteia</td>
<td>Reversal of the set course of events</td>
<td>Alypius takes in the sight of blood and this precipitates his becoming “one” with the crowd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anagnorisis</td>
<td>Moment of recognition</td>
<td>Discovery that the affects force of the dramatic event is too great for Alypius to resist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denouement/resolution</td>
<td>Events that follow the moment of recognition</td>
<td>From the moment that the fall of the gladiator precipitates the downfall of Alypius, the presumed ‘hero’ of the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hubris</td>
<td>Pride, or exalted view of oneself</td>
<td>Leaning on his own strength of character, Alypius resolves to resist the emotional pull of the event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamartia</td>
<td>Action stemming from personal flaw that brings on the hero’s downfall</td>
<td>Despite his initial resolve, Alypius is overcome by curiosity when he hears the crowds, and opens his eyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catharsis</td>
<td>Purgatory expression of emotions in the theatrical setting</td>
<td>At the gladiator’s fall, the crowd loses itself in exhilaration; Alypius, in turn, is overwhelmed by their passion and he too takes part in the commotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathos</td>
<td>The tragedy’s incitement of an audience to pity and fear</td>
<td>Augustine cues the audience to respond with pity for the hero, and fear of the emotional pull of the gladiatorial contest, when cautioning that in the course of events, Alypius will be carried away by the games</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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75 As per my initial gloss of this crucial and contested passage in the Poetics (a proper translation of which is provided below in 3.III.1b Vicarious experience of suffering). Aristotle, ‘Poetics: Greek text’, (Available on perseus.tufts.edu/cache/perscoll_Greco-Roman.html), 1449b: 24-25, 28. Part of the rationale behind my interpretation is the need to reflect adequately Aristotle’s use of *mimesis* as a mode of human creation and learning, rendering the concept in a very constructive, positive sense (*contra* Plato for whom imitation is the imperfect imaging of an ideal nature; e.g., ‘I should not like to have my words repeated to the tragedians and the rest of the imitative tribe—[for] all poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers, [so] that the knowledge of their *true nature* is the only antidote to them.’).† Fyfe’s translation of a related passage is particularly fluent on this point:

[Man] differs from the other animals in that he is far more imitative and learns his first lessons by representing things. […] The reason is this: Learning things gives great pleasure. […] We have, then, a natural instinct for representation. …and starting with these instincts men very gradually developed them until they produced poetry out of their improvisations.

2. Received sense for Aristotelian tragedy

If the focus on the Alypius narrative and its dramatizing structure exposes a received convention of Aristotelian aesthetics, what might these received ideas of tragic aesthetics look like? We have said that in the Poetics, Aristotle defines the tragedy principally in terms of a telos which re-presents life’s action in terms of the tragic. Representation through the mode of action means that the plot should unwind organically, as it were, from within the immediacy of a personal account, thus establishing the place of character in drama.

Another aspect which defines the Aristotelian tragedy is the seriousness of the events portrayed and the consequences they bring. For Aristotle, seriousness in tragedy means resignation to the impossibility of favourable resolutions, thus he excludes specifically the introduction of divine action into the drama. Aristotle writes that in sharp contrast to the self-affirming levity of the comedy, tragedy treats events which are ‘serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude’. By contrast, he sees comedy as ‘a representation of inferior people’, inferior in the deprecatory sense implied by class hierarchy, but also as ‘a species of the base or crass’. In this sense,

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76 I.e., presentation with reference to action other than itself, as per our definition of the theatrical act.

77 In distinguishing between the various ‘modes’ of dramatic imitation (Epic, Tragedy, Comedy), Aristotle underscores the phenomenal quality of aesthetic reception, as well as in the production itself (e.g., the poet should ‘keep a careful eye on… the appeal to the eye’). He proposes that the artwork is achieved by a ‘means’ (μέσοι as per Else) appropriate to its goal, and is therefore received (read, performed) according to the particularity of such ‘medium’ (Butcher): ‘Since [the dramatists] imitate men in action† […] it is evident that each of the modes of imitation… become a distinct kind in imitating objects that are thus distinct. Such diversities may be found even […] in language, whether prose or verse unaccompanied by music.’ This does not address whether the medium conforms to the presentation of the tragedy, however, or the extent to which the quality of the dramatic presentation is shaped by the medium, but it does make clear that the drama takes effect both in the versification of the script and in the live representation. †Aristotle, Aristotle Poetics, trans. Gerald F. Else (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1970), p. 17. •Aristotle, Poetics, trans. S.H. Butcher (London: Macmillan, 1907).

78 Developed most clearly, for Aristotle, in an I/thou dialogic relation, and not primarily from the (epic) distance of a third-person portrayal. The epic supports only the third person narrative through which the audience/reader adopts an attitude viz. the action (Aristotle, Poetics (trans. Fyfe), 149b.25.). Aristotle supports however the presentation of tragedy in ‘mixed media’ (as happens in the Augustinian narrative), ‘by narrating part of the time and dramatizing the rest of the time’, therefore by switching perspectives between I/thou and third person narrative. Cf. Aristotle, Aristotle Poetics, p. 18, 84, fn. 23.

79 Aristotle, Poetics (trans. Fyfe), 1449b [27].

80 Fyfe translates ‘ugly’ for the Greek ἀμερός, but this obscures the fact the Aristotelian means unrefined in the presentation, in other words that the scene is presented as a gross deviation from the
the comic presentation bears weakly, if at all, on higher human aspirations. (Evidence of this, Aristotle says, is that while the history of drama is extensively preserved in tragic plays, the comedy has no established lineage as it was not taken seriously in the first instance.) He sees the situation specific to comedy as ‘some blunder’ that ‘does not cause pain or disaster’, therefore without consequence of lasting effect, and certainly none which cannot, in the end, be resolved to the satisfaction of both characters and audience alike (e.g., the comedy of error, the Shakespearean identity switch). This is in strict distinction from the ‘blunder’ in the tragedy, the hamartia which speaks of the tragic character ‘missing the mark’, because of which the expectation of a best outcome recedes inevitably into the background. At the end of the tragedy, things which in the course of events may have been hoped for never come to pass—i.e., ‘Tragedies end badly’. By definition, then, the tragedy does away with the possibility of credible resolutions envisioned by an author—hence Aristotle’s critique that the deus ex machina, as a closing device, is desultory to the dramatic plot. (He cites as a critical example of this Medea’s flight from the stage in the god-in-the-machine.) This, of course, is consistent with his view that telos determines ‘plot’ trajectory understood as decisions (action) effected by character (quality). Telos, therefore, is the mode of action by which the tragedy accomplishes its intended end. He writes aesterely that

Tragedy, therefore, must have… Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Song. … […] But most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, not of [character], but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. […] Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character:

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81 Ibid., [1449b].
82 Ibid.
83 Cf. George Steiner, in my footnote 111, Ch. 5.
84 Aristotle, ‘Poetics: Greek text’, (Tufts University, 2006), 1454b.
85 Augustine responds to the same scene with reference to the myth as set down in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, with his own critique that the very idea of a ‘Medea flying through the air’ is desultory to theology. St. Augustine, Confessions (trans. Chadwick), p. 42.
character comes in as subsidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all.\textsuperscript{86}

3.II.2a Character-action and acting outside the plot

Augustine’s theological-dramatic purpose in his narrative means, of course, both similarity and distinction from that in Aristotle’s description of the serious drama. Continuing with the Alypius story as our critical example of dramatic evidence in the \textit{Confessions}, Augustine, to be sure, takes readers on a particular plot trajectory. So for instance, set against the backdrop of the Roman forum, the Alypius story is partly a drama about a young man from the province away from home who succumbs to the debauchery of the city. Going beyond the compelling movement of plot central to the Aristotelian tragedy, however, Augustine’s concerns are to effect a narrative which is true to a theological account of life in its dramatic aspects. The Alypius story therefore focuses on the drama of a man whose good character (i.e., quality in the Aristotelian sense) is dissipated amidst a throng which is as impersonal as it is soulless:

What should I add? He looked, he yelled, he was on fire, he took the madness home with him so that it urged him to return not only with those by whom he had originally been drawn there, but even more than them, taking others with him.\textsuperscript{87}

In Aristotle’s tragic theory, character describes the agency and qualities – good, bad, heroic, pathetic, etc. – which the story reveals of persons portrayed: it can be formulated both as the impact of the \textit{dramatis persona} over the action, and as the action’s imposition of character over the dramatic person. The theory states that specific decisions portrayed both define the trajectory of plot\textsuperscript{88} and “characterize” the total quality of the personal portrayal. This relation between plot and character portrayal is most fully appreciated from the point of view of the audience. While character decisions give particular shape to the plot, an audience acting externally to the play attributes dramatic significance to these character choices and deduces from

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{86} Aristotle, \textit{Poetics (trans. Butcher)}, XV.1450, my emphasis.
\item \textsuperscript{87} St. Augustine, \textit{Confessions (trans. Chadwick)}, p. 101.
\item \textsuperscript{88} Aristotle associates specific decisions made by characters with the play’s ‘thought’, a strand of his dramatic theory which is not relevant to our purposes. See, Aristotle, ‘Poetics: Greek text’, 1453a.
\end{itemize}
them the quality of person thereby represented. Consequently, whereas plot shows particular choices which characters make, how these choices bear on qualities of the dramatic tells us “who” those characters are.

A brief synopsis of Sophocles’ tragedy *Oedipus Rex* (c. 429) should serve to illustrate the relation between character and action. Oedipus has acceded to the throne of Thebes through marriage to the recently widowed queen Jocasta. This imposes on Oedipus an obligation to find her husband’s murderer, so he sends for Tiresias the prophet to help him exact justice on behalf of the late king. On one level, the action of consulting the prophet constitutes a logical furthering of the course of events. Certain character implications, however, inhere in this action. While Oedipus interprets his command of the throne as evidence that he is no longer bound by a childhood prophesy (that predicted he would grow up to kill his father and marry his mother), bringing Tiresias on the scene will only show that the prophecy has been actually fulfilled in every detail. Tiresias reveals that the stranger whom Oedipus had killed at a crossroads some years before was in fact Oedipus’ unknown father, the king of Thebes. The horror of the revelation leads Jocasta to hang herself while Oedipus, concluding that ‘no mortal other than I can bear my own tragedy’, banishes himself into exile. As an archetype of the serious drama, the play shows Oedipus as the agent of a particular set of events which, reciprocally, reveal him for the pathetic character that he is. The fact that the events over which he is responsible are fixed in an irreversible sequence (i.e., they are the plot) marks Oedipus as the embodiment of the total and unforgiving event which is the tragedy.91

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89 Aristotle specifies that neither should the tragic character be ‘pre-eminent[ly virtuous]’, so that the downfall arouses fear but not compassion, nor so vile and deserving of the tragic end that it undermines the drama. The dramatist should create rather ‘the character between these two extremes[; …]a personage like Oedipus’. Aristotle, *Poetics* (trans. Butcher), 1453a. N.B. Butcher has ‘ flaw’ for the Greek ὀμορπία.


91 A short article published in 1951 outlined what the author deemed a need for a specifically Protestant theological theory for literary critique built on Aristotelian tragedy. Roberts agreed that the tragedy can be understood most concisely as a theory of the irreversible event (p. 3), but found no reason why the theological (Tillich-influenced) intent in his project should pose challenge to this aspect of Aristotelian tragedy. In fact, Roberts holds that ‘The consequences of sin are not erasable or completely reversible’ (p. 7) and that this is a key to a Christian theory of the tragedy on the Aristotelian model. Nevertheless, Roberts suggests that the kinds of ‘Christian dramatic tragedies’ (p. 19) exemplified in Shakespeare and Dostoevsky add a coda to the finality of the Aristotelian tragedy, he thereby urges literary and genre ‘re-enact[ments of] the Passion and the Resurrection of Jesus
Aristotle adds further complexity to the question of character by pointing to the paradox of the persona who exists as the dramatization of human quality. She exists, that is, as a representation—embodied in the performance or, in the reading, as an imagined portrayal—of what it means to be human. In portraying a character, therefore, the dramatist effectively presents a person of particular character, understood here as humanity in its ethical and transcendent dimensions. Aristotle maintains that in the theatre, actors ‘do not perform a “character” but rather lend human depth of “character” [i.e., ethos] to their performance’, or, stated differently, that actors do not merely present human action but in their performance lend depth of humanity to action (οὐκον ὁπος τὰ ἡθη μιμήσωνται πράττουσιν. ἀλλὰ τὰ ἡθη συμπεριλαμβάνουσιν διὰ τὰς πράξεις). The point is that characters do not exist apart from their enfleshed/imaged portrayal, and then only as the unified dimension of the persona and ἡθος.

Character action in the sense of that which defines plot trajectory and of that which lends human ἡθος to the action, furthermore, means that characters in the drama may have goals apart from the overall movement of the story; in a sense, that characters may ‘think’ independently of the plot to which their sequence of choices amount. Oedipus, as we saw, wants to escape the curse of the prophecy even if in doing so he makes choices which in fact fulfil the prophecy. This phenomenon of being able to identify the individual character from the play’s telos, that is, to speak of motivation which characters have in relation or in opposition to the trajectory of story, is described in the Poetics in terms of προσφιέρεσις, i.e., the human, ethical outlook which gives impetus for character choice: ἐστιν δὲ ἡθος μὲν τὸ τοιοῦτον

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ο δηλαί τήν προσέφεσιν.\textsuperscript{93} ‘[προσέφεσις] is a technical term in Aristotle’s ethics corresponding to... the deliberate adoption of any course of conduct or line of action’,\textsuperscript{94} this corresponds to the contemporary theatrical cognate character-action.

(The term character-action probably gained status in modern theatrical vocabulary as a description of character development goals in the acting school of Uta Hagen.\textsuperscript{95} In the latter half of the twentieth century, Hagen became renowned for her development of actor’s training techniques for the contemporary stage. Her use of the term ‘character action’ coincides with the Aristotelian theory that characters are synonymous with their actions and that these add up to the actualization of the play’s telos. Citing as illustration ‘an old adage claiming, “Tell me what you do, and I’ll tell you who you are,”’ Hagen concludes that in drama, ‘The selection of actions as well as their sequence reveals the specific human being’. She therefore advises her actors that in order to achieve the stage character,

...you must learn to expand your image of self (enlarge your sense of identity) in order to use yourself to be somebody else, to avoid illustration of a preconceived outer image of the character. [...] You ought to be ready to test the selection of actions belonging to a character in a specific play; to test how you can make a lie into truth, fiction into reality, by using your own being.\textsuperscript{96}

Expansion of an actor’s range of action/self, according to Hagen, requires mastering ‘sense memory’ as a way of creating characters from the inside out, by building on the actor’s actual experience and recall of emotion, particularly in the experience of suffering. This is not far from Aristotle’s use of ethos in relation to the character/actor. In the end, as common currency in the theatrical rehearsal, ‘character-action’ reflects most fully the interrelatedness of character and action as described in Aristotle’s theory of the tragedy.)

The dynamics of character-action, focusing on performance in the face of conflict, also relate something of the life-like depth of the dramatic person. ‘By Character’, Aristotle writes, ‘I mean that in virtue of which we ascribe certain qualities to the

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{94} Aristotle, Poetics (trans. Fyfe), 1450b, fn. 4.
\textsuperscript{95} American stage actor (1919-2004) acclaimed for creating the character of Martha in Edward Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf (1962), and for her Blanche DuBois on A Streetcar Named Desire (1948).
[dramatic] agents…'97 so that the same sense in which character, in his words, ‘determines men’s qualities’ applies to the tragic character. Drama as a mode of action – in Aristotelian terms, the life-likeness of ‘tragic imitation’ – ‘implies personal agents, who necessarily possess certain distinctive qualities [of character] …for it is by these that we qualify actions themselves….'98 Therefore, whatever is true of the onstage persona is true of the play’s dramatic intent. Hence, to the extent that we understand, experience and/or simply enjoy without further reflection the development of dramatic action through its presentation of character, we are able to recognise acting ‘in character’, according to the parameters set by the story-line, and ‘out of character’ action which falls implausibly outside the plot.

A positive construal of Aristotle’s theory of character and action, as we are suggesting, renders something of the real sense in which characters may be said to exist, that is insofar as they are concomitant with the life-like expectations they create for one another and themselves, and reciprocally, that which the plot places on them. Even the case of unexpected character choices which may initially strike the reader/spectator as ‘out of character’—e.g., the suicides of Hedda Gabler or Emma Bovary as distinct from those of Jocasta or Lady Macbeth—should, in the broader perspective, lend greater consistency to the story. The added complexity such characters take on in light of the re-reading of events should reveal the dramatis personae to have acted more ‘in character’ than could have been possible otherwise.99 To the degree that the drama exhibits character consciousness through agency, characters in some sense ‘live’ through their action.

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98 Ibid. Fyfe, again, explains προορισμὸς as a matter of will or choice in the sense that determines the goodness or badness of [human] character. If character is to be revealed in drama, a man must be shown in the exercise of his will, choosing between one line of conduct and another, and he must be placed in circumstances… in which everybody's choice would not be the same. The choice of death rather than dishonourable wealth reveals character; the choice of a nectarine rather than a turnip does not.’ Aristotle, Poetics (trans. Fyfe), 1450b, fn. 4.

99 In Aristotle’s Rhetoric, ἴθις is used with even greater emphasis on ἴτικός (‘for as is the moral purpose, so is the character, and as is the telos, so is the moral purpose’) which is why Fyfe’s translation of ἴθις as ‘character-study’ makes good sense. It is equally substantiated by Aristotle’s critical remark that in painting, ‘the difference between Zeuxis and Polygnotus [is that] Polygnotus delineates character well [while] the style of Zeuxis is devoid of ethical quality [ἵθη]’. †Aristotle, Rhetoric, vol. 22, trans. J.H. Freese, Aristotle in 23 volumes (London: Harvard University Press Ltd., 1926), XVI.8, my italics.
This positive extrapolation of the real sense in which characters, according to the Poetics, ‘act’, however, overlooks a particular difficulty in Aristotle’s understanding of character as action. Our specific concern with character-action in tragic theory, in fact, relates to the primacy Aristotle accords the plot/story/telos over character. In the Aristotelian construal of drama, as we will see, character exists entirely in service of plot as the chief end of the drama. Holding to the previous formulation that whatever is true of the dramatic person is true of the play’s dramatic intent requires, therefore, the further qualification that this is only the case in virtue of the shape and direction of plot. Consequently, it is the dramatic telos which determines – and to that extent, predetermines – what counts for acting ‘in character’. Characters, in other words, serve the demands of telos, for ‘in fact the story and plot are the telos of the tragedy, and, inevitably, telos is everything’. We can think of genre clichés of the classic western film as illustrative of the primacy of story/plot/telos over character in the Aristotelian sense.

In American western films, it became conventional that the rider on the black horse was the antagonist who provided a worthy obstacle to the protagonist whose white horse served him in his nobler goals. Neither villains nor lone heroes, however, require horses of a particular colour on which to set off on their exploits. Moreover, it would be a bizarre film if a character’s choice of horse determined the quality of his character and therefore the outcome of the story. The kind of plot afforded by the story of the American western, however (of family, community, rule of law, conquest, etc.), determines character choice and its implication for the action. Part of an audience’s enjoyment of the genre is, of course, in seeing how characters are developed while maintaining conventions of style, and indeed how the genre itself is interpreted through specific authorial/directorial choices. If, however, genre demands particular ways of telling the story, then it also dictates particular forms of characterization appropriate to that story. This is the sense in the

100 ὡστε τὰ πράγματα καὶ ὁ μύθος τέλος τῆς τραγῳδίας, τὸ δὲ τέλος μέγιστον ἄπάντων Aristotle, ‘Poetics: Greek text’, [1450a]. My gloss has emphasis on μέγιςες in the sense of action; telos, then, is ‘the chief thing of all’ (Butcher), and is understood as ‘of prime importance’ (Fyfe), though only because of the immediacy implied by telos as the motivation for action, hence my more expressive use of ‘inevitably’.

101 Clearly, the plot can make other provisions; for example, the hero and his accomplice of the Cisco Kid films (circa 1950s), being characters of California’s Spanish era, typically rode pinto and palomino horses.

Aristotelian subsumption of character-action to the overarching movement of story and its telos. The theological genus of the Augustinian narrative, on the other hand, led by characterization of divine action, requires a dramatic formulation of a different sort.

Augustine’s distinctly theological orientation means that it is the character of God, not the course of events, which defines the dramatic quality of the story. In contrast to the Aristotelian drama, the unique goals of the theological-dramatic narrative makes possible events which could not have been foreseen from within the parameters of the given plot. Specifically, the narrative dramatization of divine action exhibits its particular shape in virtue of a particular understanding of who God is. Dramatizing the character of God in the Augustinian narrative therefore means that God, although acting outside the expectations of the human drama, remains in character, true to himself and his creature. This also means that the particulars of the plot, however fixed into a telic givenness (of the Aristotelian sort), are recast – and indeed brought into their true telos – in light of the eventful quality of divine intervention. It means, moreover, that in the Augustinian narrative, God remains in character precisely to the extent that he exercises authorial command over the action, breaking into the human drama and giving it its telos in divine character-action—citing, once again, the epistle’s extraordinary claim that as Christians, γίνεσθε οὖν μιμηταί τοῦ θεοῦ. If there is any meaning in speaking of Salvation as drama, it must be that God himself characterizes the human story according to ends proper to himself, therefore, we become “character actors” of God’.\(^\text{103}\) The particular kind of drama which Salvation is, therefore, instantiated by the person of God and his self-revelation to mankind, demands rethinking received patterns of dramatization through which divine action might be understood as Good News. To this effect, the theological thrust in the Augustinian narrative holds up God’s character-action as the only telos proper to the world theatre.

3.II.2b Telic inevitability, the object of the Aristotelian drama

In Aristotle’s aesthetics, story (μύθος) is ‘the arrangement of the incidents’ that constitute the drama; the dynamics of plot trajectory demanded by the story’s

\(^{103}\) Ephesians 5.1. Aland et al., eds. Cf. Introduction, fn. 12.
telos is what draws a reader/audience into dramatic action.\textsuperscript{104} The tragic story, to reiterate the point, is a dramatizing structure showing movement of characters from some starting point through an experience of suffering, toward an inevitable end (τέλος). Aristotle makes it clear that even in the story dramatized from real-life events, the dramatist’s art is in ordering details into a coherent and compelling vehicle for telos,\textsuperscript{105} for ‘a poet’s object is not to tell what actually happened but what could and would happen either probably or inevitably’.\textsuperscript{106} In this sense, the argument goes, both the epic historian and the dramatic poet, though ‘one writes in prose and the other in verse’, are concerned primarily with the arrangement of story as the outworking of telos:

[for] the poet must be a “maker” not of verses but of stories, since he is a poet in virtue of his “representation,” and what he represents is action [πράξις]. Even supposing he represents what has actually happened, he is none the less a poet, for there is nothing to prevent some actual occurrences being the sort of thing that would probably or inevitably happen, and it is in virtue of that he is their “maker” [ποιητής].\textsuperscript{107}

By contrast, in the Augustinian theo-drama, the prescription that the tragedy should channel every aesthetic element into a telic inevitability, runs against its priority of character as the driving force behind the story. Aristotelian privileging of action in the movement of plot→telos necessarily implies that events arranged one way and not another, in the aesthetic instrumentality of their synthesis are therein defining of character. Character, for Aristotle, exists only as an expression of telic sequencing of events (that is the very ‘beauty’ of the dramatic story).\textsuperscript{108} The subsumption of character into the function of plot is such that for Aristotle ‘without action [i.e., plot→telos] there cannot be a tragedy [, though] there may be [tragic] action without character’, so that even

\begin{quote}
if you string together a set of speeches expressive of character, and well finished in point of diction and thought, you will not produce the essential tragic effect
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{104} οἴσθησις being the play’s ‘sense perception’, or the extent to which an audience receives the drama. Aristotle, ‘Poetics: Greek text’, [1451a].
\textsuperscript{105} Aristotle uses καλός to describe plot composition, meaning that it should be beautiful in its ordering, and show ‘proportion’ in scope and correlation of parts. Ibid., [1453b, 1450b].
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., [1451a].
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., [1451b].
\textsuperscript{108} See previous note (105) on καλός.
nearly so well as with a play which, however deficient in these respects, yet has a plot and artistically constructed incidents.\textsuperscript{109}

In other words, the mode of action particular to the tragedy is the movement of plot, such that in drama, (and quite suggestively in Aristotle) as in life, character is necessarily (ἀνάγκη) subservient to the telic pull on the events.\textsuperscript{110}

### 3.11.2c Divine character-action

From the perspective of the Augustinian narrative, the tragedy’s primacy of plot over character is problematic insofar as for the theologian, the telos of the story of redemption is to show how divine character effects a particular kind of story. Augustine’s characterization in the Aristotelian sense of persons coursing through an established trajectory of events is evident enough in the Alypius narrative. From beginning to end, we follow Alypius through a plot about which Augustine leaves no doubt that it happens but ‘of his own accord’,\textsuperscript{111} his life-choices feeding the drama of his moral downfall. This presentation is true to the Aristotelian sense of the person of character whose capacity for wilful choice (προαίρεσις) justifies his presence in the story:

Character is that which reveals choice, shows what sort of thing a man chooses or avoids in circumstances where the choice is not obvious, so [that] those speeches convey no character in which there is nothing whatever which the speaker chooses or avoids.\textsuperscript{112}

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\textsuperscript{109} Aristotle, \textit{Poetics (trans. Butcher)}, VI. Aristotle finds support for the primacy of aesthetic arrangement in visual composition: ‘if a man smeared a canvas with the loveliest colours at random, it would not give as much pleasure as [a deliberately designed] outline in black and white’. Similarly in the drama, the theory holds, aesthetic ordering of events determines the need for and extent of character expression since ‘it is mainly because a play is a representation of [life-]action that it also for that reason represents people’. Aristotle, \textit{Poetics (trans. Fyfe)}, 1450a-b, my emphasis and bracketing rendering the fuller argument.

\textsuperscript{110} As in life because the tragedians, of necessity, portray ‘men doing or experiencing something’, as per Fyfe’s literal rendition of ‘μιμούνται οἱ μιμούμενοι πράττοντας’, revisited in another passage as ‘πράττοντες ποιοῦνται τὴν μίμησιν’. Aristotle, \textit{Poetics (trans. Fyfe)}, 1448a, 1449b.

\textsuperscript{111} St. Augustine, \textit{Confessions (trans. Chadwick)}, p. 121. Fyfe’s analysis on what constitutes Aristotelian character choice is worth bearing in mind, particularly in light of the two senses in which character is used in the tragedy, as personage and as person of character: ‘προαίρεσις [lit. ‘a choosing’] is a technical term in Aristotle’s ethics, corresponding to our use of the term “Will.”’ Cf. Fyfe in my footnote 98 above. Aristotle, \textit{Poetics (trans. Fyfe)}, 1450b.

Equally, there is concordance with the Aristotelian understanding that the tragic character must begin the story from a position of high moral ground.\textsuperscript{113} Augustine in fact precedes the Alypius narrative with a chapter that paints the picture of a young man who is above reproach in every respect. Augustine vouches personally that Alypius comes from ‘one of the leading families’ in their hometown, and that even as a student sitting in Augustine’s lectures ‘it was quite clear that he had much natural disposition to goodness’.\textsuperscript{114} Not only does the story establish that Alypius is a good character in the ordinary sense, but under the pressure of the dramatic structure, Augustine presents him as archetypically good (thus setting up the moral lapsus that will lead to his ruin). In this way, Augustine rationalizes ‘character’ along the lines of conventional dramatic aesthetics.

In contrast to the Aristotelian account of character and its subservience to story, however, Augustine’s narrative develops as a consequence of the persons represented; character is the chief end of the Augustinian theo-drama. The Alypius story follows the rise and fall of one man ostensibly on the model of the Aristotelian drama: it shows Alypius giving himself over to the attractions of the stadia through a hubristic display of pride as he takes it upon himself to resist temptation towards sin. However, in Augustine’s concern to represent the character of “man” in the midst of life’s drama, there is no overarching, determining telos driving Alypius to his downfall.

Again, elements of the Aristotelian drama are firmly set in place in the Augustinian narrative. We learn in the course of the story that Alypius will fall ‘in the whirl of easy morals at Carthage, with its continual round of futile entertainments, and [therefore] lose his head and heart to the games in the amphitheatre’.\textsuperscript{115} The story establishes also God’s presence in Alypius’ life. Divine character-action, the story shows, is in favour of Alypius the man and will ‘theatricalize’ events so as to bring him to the point of recognition – anagnorisis – that his chief end and purpose in life is for God.\textsuperscript{116} The theological-dramatic telos of the story is personal, an aspect of the Augustinian narrative underscored in the

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 1452b, 1453b
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., p. 120.
\textsuperscript{116} Augustine is careful to establish from the outset that no one could have had the ‘means of offering [Alypius] advice or [for] using any pressure to restrain him’ from his headlong fall into sin. Ibid.
personalizing terms of the I/Thou exchange between Augustine and God. In this
dialogic mode, the audience ‘hears-in’, as it were, on the affirmation that ‘you, O
Lord, who hold the reins of all you have created, had not forgotten this man
Alypius] who was one day to be a bishop and administer your sacrament to your
children’. 117 This affirmation that God precedes and encompasses the particulars of
the human drama is reiterated at the end of the Alypius narrative. There we read
(with reference to Alypius’ unlawful arrest when erroneously suspected of theft;
book VI.9) of yet ‘another event in his life… which you, my God, must surely have
allowed to happen only because you know that he was to be a great man in later life’.
These dialogic moments head, finish and repeatedly punctuate segments of the
Alypius story as they appear throughout the Confessions. From a dramaturgical
perspective, these moments, far from being mere spiritual asides, are the vocative
entr’actes in which Augustine frames the action, something which should suggest
that humans act in medias res of a drama of the God who acts. This I/Thou dialogic
frame provides a participatory means for readers to enter into the drama of the
Confessions, for it is through this frame that Augustine brings his audience118 into the
specifically theo-dramatic dynamics of divine perspective on the action.

3. Drama and the character of God

So far, we have tried to show the way in which the narrative goals of the
Confessions effect an inversion of Aristotelian priority of plot over character, and
how in doing this Augustine develops a dramatic narrative whose telos originates in
an understanding of who God is. On one level, the Augustinian dramatization of a
theo-centric story shows obvious accord with the Aristotelian emphasis on action as
the movement of plot→telos. It maintains, in other words, the telic arrangement of
the tragedy ostensibly on a received sense of classical tragic drama which succeeds
on the strength of its plot trajectory, ‘The plot [being] the first principle and as it

117 Ibid.

118 Dramatic writing is always for an audience. Aristotle makes clear that the dramatist, though
writing as much for the reading as for theatrical performance, should compose by exercising an
imaginative staging of the events, mindful, that is, of the audience’s reception: ‘In constructing plots
and completing the effect by the help of dialogue the poet should, as far as possible, keep the scene
before his eyes [thus] getting the picture as clear as if he were present at the actual event….’† This is
no less the case in the particular form of Augustine’s Confessions which implicated readers in the
intimate exchange between the theologian and God. On the I/Thou referential structure of the
Confessions, see Andrew Hamilton, ‘The Confessions: autobiographical theology’, Colloquium 17
were the soul [ψυχή] of tragedy: character com[ing] second’.119 Because Augustine’s goals are towards the dramatization of divine action, however, his narrative departs from classical convention in at least one significant way. Even as the narrative in the Confessions follows the tragedy’s plot structure towards a pathetic telos,120 this arrangement is a consequence of and is deployed in the service of its focus on divine character-action (προσώπεσις in the Aristotelian sense). Augustine’s theological-dramatic narrative establishes thereby divine character-action as the chief end of the world drama in theological perspective.

Augustine, of course, confirms the pathetic trajectory which Alypius takes in his inclination towards sin. Accordingly, Alypius plunges into the corruption of the stadia and does so with such passion as to return each time ‘leading new sheep to the slaughter’.121 A theological-dramatic perspective, however, cannot bear this end to the story and demands a divine reckoning in light of whose action alone will Alypius recover from his fall and be transformed. Telic inevitability, effected by hubris and hamartia, belongs to the Aristotelian tragedy. The theo-dramatic character of the Augustinian narrative means, however, that precisely because human character-action is exhausted by pride and ethical failure (i.e., hubris and hamartia), God acts in the world drama in order to the shape it according to his own character-action.122

The question is not whether Augustine develops a new narrative genre in which hope for divine Salvation overcomes ‘the end’ (whether in death, as eternal banishment from the city of God, and so forth). The martyr stories that precede him, liturgical works and, indeed, the Gospels and other canonical writings set the pattern for understanding the Salvation drama, not from within the resources of the human story, but in the light of who God is. In that sense, the Augustinian narrative, in representing God’s action in humanity, works into the Confessions the redemption of Alypius from the tragedy of sinful degeneration by a mechanism, as Aristotle might say, external to the world stage (i.e., the deus ex machina). From our perspective, evidence of dramatic convention in Augustinian narrative, showing classical

120 Pathos being the tragic effect which arouses pity and fear.
122 Ibid.
deployment of the tragedian’s plot, character, affective content, etc. in order to cast the need for external redemption with utmost urgency, cannot but suggest a contradiction in Augustine’s imperative against the drama.

Whether the Church in Augustine’s day could have redeemed theatre for theological ends remains a matter of historical speculation (though in fact, Eucharistic worship at some point invited overt forms of theatre in support of the dramatic nature of sacramental representation; see Ch. 5 below). Our primary interest is not, of course, historical. Treating the dramatization of Christian narrative as we have in Augustine’s Confessions in dialogue with Aristotelian theory intends to show that a Christian understanding of divine action in the world is inherently dramatic and consequently calls for dramatic forms of representation. To that end, we still need to tackle anagnorisis and the disclosure of suffering in the tragedy, which, along with plot and telos, achieves the shape of the classical drama.

3.II.3a Anagnorisis and the deus ex machina

In Aristotle’s dramatic scheme, ἀναγνώρισις is a technical term describing the revelatory moment in which characters in the drama (as well as the audience) recognize that the plot will take a turn toward the inevitable tragic end. Oedipus learning of his true parentage, for example, makes it known that the prophecy that he would bring tragedy on the royal house is being fulfilled in every horrific detail; it is the climactic moment of anagnorisis on which the entire play depends in order to reach its tragic conclusion. Aristotle enumerates various ways in which the revelation of anagnorisis may be introduced into the plot – a sudden discovery, a message, an error made, an oracle, etc. – all of which must arise “organically” from what has already been established in the story. This latter point is particularly important to the Aristotelian theory as anything that questions the pre-established arrangement of events, and especially what Aristotle calls the ‘invented’ incident, counts as an implausible deviation from the dramatic logic of the play. ‘Accordingly’, he writes, ‘the poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities’. Impossible possibilities such as the god’s intervening action in the drama, needless to say, are excluded from the tragedy by definition.

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123 Aristotle, Poetics (trans. Butcher), XXIV, my emphasis.
The fact that for Aristotle, the serious drama depends on the unidirectional movement of plot means that external solutions – however desirable from the standpoint of hope, justice, resolution, etc., – necessarily undermine the inevitability of telos. From the Aristotelian standpoint, resolutions “from above” represented by the deus ex machina overturn the unidirectional necessity of plot → telos as the very basis for the dramatic. Apart from placing the play in some sort of context (e.g., `STAGE MANAGER: This play is called “Our Town.” It was written by Thornton Wilder…`)124), Aristotle explains that the perspective of the deus ex machina should only be used to explain what lies outside the play, either what happened earlier and is therefore beyond human knowledge, or what happens later and needs to be foretold in a proclamation. […] There must, however, be nothing inexplicable in the [plot itself], or, if there is, it does not belong in the tragedy.125

We said earlier that Aristotle cites the final scene of Medea (Euripides, 430 BC)—in which the infanticidal Medea is banished from the city for her crimes—as an example of an anti-tragic telos brought about ‘mechanically’ (απὸ μηχανῆ) rather than ‘visibly’ (χρηστέον) from within the unwinding complications of the plot. In the end, amidst the confrontation for Medea’s unspeakable crimes by a suppliant Jason, the god hears her husband/accuser and a chariot is lowered onto the scene so that ‘with the corpses of her children [Medea] is borne aloft away from Corinth’.126 The chorus then chants an apologetic epilogue explaining that should anyone take offence at the external imposition of solution, the fact is that the gods may intervene at will despite an audience’s aesthetic expectations.127

124 Cf. APPENDIX A.
125 Aristotle, Poetics (trans. Fyfe), [1454b], final phrase paraphrased from ‘it must lie outside the tragedy’.
126 Euripides, Euripides, with an English translation, trans. David Kovacs (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Forthcoming), 1414. A positive example, by contrast, is seen in Shakespeare’s Escalus (Romeo and Juliet) who delivers no resolution to the tragic end but reassures both the onstage audience and that before the stage that some measure of peace and justice will be sought from the warring families for, with Shakespeare’s appeal to the Christian drama, such deaths cannot be allowed without the least hope for redemption. On the Christian setting for Shakespeare’s drama, see Roy Battenhouse, Shakespeare’s Christian dimension: an anthology of commentary (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
127 Thus we hear:  

CHORUS
Many a fate doth Zeus dispense, high on his Olympian throne; oft do the gods bring things to pass beyond man’s expectation; that, which we
In reasoning why the entrance of the god is less than dramatic, Aristotle cites tellingly the fact that, in any case, ‘the gods [have] the power of seeing everything’. The gods, in other words, can arrive at solutions which characters could not have foreseen from a perspective internal to the drama. (To take this perspective, therefore, is to step outside the drama.) From Aristotle’s dramatic perspective, the I/Thou relation through which Jason appeals for justice in the Medea—‘O Zeus, dost hear how I am driven hence; dost mark the treatment I receive from this she-lion, fell murderess of her young?’—is simply reduced to a stage cue to prepare the mechanical lift which will spirit away the actor playing Medea. The fact that some form of justice is meted out (aside from raising the questions of theodicy) upsets the possibility for an absolute and irredeemably tragic ending.

3.II.3b Divine intervention, the impossible possibility

In Augustine’s theological drama, God, as principal player, effects anagnorisis in such a way that human characters come into the knowledge that there are no human resources through which to enact a rescue from the tragic end. However, revelatory action in God’s self-presentation (e.g., in conversion) means that the theological person can adopt a divine perspective as her own. The vocative entr’actes in which Augustine frames his narratives, in fact, afford the reader a perspective from character-action in God on character-action in man. Even from this perspective, however, God’s action in the human drama appears as an impossible possibility. Once again, however, tragic inevitability as such cannot be the end of the Christian drama. Death does not have the final word; evil is not ultimately triumphant. If there is anything dramatic in the idea that God gives himself a character role amidst humanity—grounded in creation, Incarnation, his witness in Scripture and the promise of salvation—it is that in doing so, God’s character action

thought would be, is not fulfilled, while for the unlooked-for god finds out a way; and such hath been the outcome of this story.

[Exit Chorus]

Euripides, Medea, trans. E.P. Coleridge (Adelaide, TX: Adelaide University Library, 2004), final phrase adapted from D. Kovacs translation. It may be argued the Medea story is made all the more tragic in the Seneca’s Latin version, the final action played by Jason who, as Medea’s ‘chariot of fire’ takes to the sky, seems to imprecate against the gods: ‘Per alta uade spatial sublime aetheris, / testare nullos esse, qua uheris, deos’; in H.M. Hine’s translation: ‘Travel up above through the high expanses of the heavens; / bear witness that wherever you go there are no gods’. Seneca, Medea, trans. H.M. Hine (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips Ltd., 2000), p. 109, cf. also 32.

128 Aristotle, ‘Poetics: Greek text’, [1454b]. Phrase ellipsed from the previous quotation of the Poetics.
gives telic meaning to mankind’s action on the world stage. In this sense, the Gospel’s breaking through the limits of the tragedy reconfigures existence and defines it by openness to life lived under God.

In the end, the conflict between probable impossibility and improbable possibility on the Aristotelian model may determine the tragic, but may not be sufficiently dramatic from the point of view of theo-dramatic impossible possibility. The theo-dramatic narrative in the Confessions does not deny the encompassing nature of tragedy, either in unmitigated human suffering or as sin’s distaniation between man and God. To that end, Augustine shows the tragic aspects of the Alypius narrative taking shape along the lines of conventional dramatic aesthetics, where hubris leads to hamartia and this in turn leads to the undoable quality pathos. The almost unbearable awareness that Alypius’ tragic fall takes place in full view of God, moreover, heightens the drama to levels unimaginable from the perspective of the Aristotelian tragedy (by comparison, Shakespeare’s ‘As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods...’ is dramatic from within a Christian perspective). The dramatics of God’s character-action in the world, however, cannot allow the Alypius story to be determined finally by the inevitability of plot—i.e., it militates against the tragic view that ‘in the end, telos is everything’. To this end, Augustine raises the drama once again in showing the impossible possibility that God’s ad extra action emerges ab intra to Alypius’ life (e.g., in the act of conversion). This is to say that the fall, however tragic it might be in view of who God is and his characteristic availability towards man, is not of itself sufficiently dramatic, and in fact demands further reckoning with God’s role in the action.

In Aristotle’s theory of the tragic, a character’s fall from some moral height is sufficiently dramatic as to warrant introducing a ‘probable impossibility’ to ensure that anagnorisis, the recognition of a point of no return leading to the tragic effect, makes redemption, reconciliation, resurrection, etc., the ‘impossible possibility’ which the drama can never reach. In the Augustinian narrative, Alypius’ fall for the vice of the spectacles (the peripeteia or ironic twist) also brings the reader into an

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129 See Ch. 1, footnote 138 above.
130 In the sense proposed by Frye for whom tragedy follows along a continuum encompassing comic and ironic phases, and ending, on the other extreme, in romance. The phases in which the drama terminates, as Palmer explains, ‘are determined by the stature of the protagonist, whether we see him
awareness (anagnorisis as discovery) that not only do such things happen, but that they happen in full view of God. We have already seen that to arrive at this point, the narrative lays out the hubristic element by which Alypius presumes to be able to maintain a moral stance, to be a person of good character, apart from relationship with God: ‘This was presumption, not courage. The weakness of his soul was in relying upon itself instead of trusting in you[, God]’. The tragic trajectory of which this story is but one episode, however, is that Alypius is unaware how life can be when lived for God. This is precisely where the tragedy in the Augustinian narrative is thrown into sharpest relief: whereas for Aristotle, the possibility for divine intervention undermines the tragedy, in Augustine’s drama, it is tragically undramatic for the character of “man” to be dispossessed of his chief end in the dynamics of God’s character-action for mankind. The picture of the tragedy which Augustine paints for his audience is in fact one of humanity alone on the world stage existentially grasping after its own ends, all too aware that ‘Life is a misery, death is uncertain’; and yet…

in all the bitter disappointments which, by your mercy, thwarted our undertakings in this world, we tried to see the reason for our sufferings. But darkness overshadowed us and we turned away asking, ‘How long is this to be?’ Again and again we asked ourselves this question, but we did not relinquish our worldly aims, because we could not see the light of any truth that we might grasp in place of them.

In the same moment that he shows the futility of life lived for itself, however, Augustine makes his audience aware that coming to such an understanding is already a sign of God’s merciful presence and of his action being the only possible source of resolution. If in the classical drama anagnorisis reveals the irreversible nature of the tragic telos, the Augustinian drama overcomes the finality of the tragic with revelation that allows humans to adopt a theo-centric perspective on ourselves and the world. Tragedy, on the other hand, describes the life in which recognition that

or her favourably or unfavourably. In the romantic phase the quest succeeds; in the ironic, it fails’. But because Alypius “was not sufficient to have stood, the mode is purely ironic...” where as to not have been free to fall in the first instance would make the play “purely romantic.” Quoting Frye, p. 211, et al. in Richard H. Palmer, Tragedy and tragic theory (Westport, CT; London: Greenwood Press, 1992).

132 ‘Like myself’, Augustine says of Alypius, ‘he was perplexed as to what course of life we ought to follow’. Ibid., p. 125.
133 Ibid., p. 126.
God both authors himself into the human drama and humanity into his drama never comes. In Augustine’s theo-dramatic aesthetics, by contrast, the impossible possibility of Deus verus de Deo vero on the world stage is truly and ultimately dramatic.

III. TRAGEDY AND THE CONSTRUAL OF THEOLOGICAL DRAMA

1. Pathos and the realization of drama

So far, in our attempt to instantiate and sustain theological exchange with the theatre, we have engaged Augustine’s antitheatrical dogmatism through an exploration of a narrative whose drama is most clearly appreciated following the pattern central to the classical tragedy.\(^1\) This initial claim concerning the Augustinian narrative aimed to uncover a clearly definable sense in which Augustine’s narrative in the *Confessions* dramatizes and thereby presents to his readers a divine perspective from which to view the world and themselves. Its resulting, more elaborate argument, meanwhile, tried to flesh out a theory of how this framework holds together—i.e., ostensibly drawing on a received tradition of Aristotelian dramatics, yet availing itself of a theo-dramatic perspective.

This distinctly theo-dramatic intention in Augustine’s *Confessions* at the same time exposes the inability of Aristotelian tragedy to account for the impossible possibility that Salvation could be the end of the drama, either in life or in its aesthetic manifestations in narrative and, indeed, the stage. In the *Poetics*, ‘tragedy mirrors most closely life’s action as such’;\(^2\) from this understanding, Aristotle considers drama in the movement which the tragic telos elicits from a story framed in an action plot filled with characters which exhibit tragic flaws. For Aristotle, telic imposition (inevitability) makes the tragedy the most efficacious application of drama in literature or on the stage. The imposition of a tragic telos, however, again, on the stage as in life, cannot make sense of possibilities outside its own grammar of the dramatic. It is all the more significant, then, that the Augustinian narrative takes

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\(^1\) On the question of genre in Augustine’s *Confessions* in relation to The Word in conversion, see Kenneth Burke, ‘Verbal action in St. Augustine’s *Confessions*’, in *Rhetoric of religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

\(^2\) See below (3.III.1b Vicarious experience of suffering) for the precise wording and a critical translation of the relevant passage in the *Poetics*. 

in the seriousness, encompassing nature and magnitude of the Greek notion of tragedy—σπουδαίος, τέλειος, μέγεθος. Its ‘bi-focal’ view of the world means, however, that gaining perspective “from above” enables man to see/believe beyond the demands of the tragedy. Shakespeare’s verse visits us once again: ‘the gods connive at us and we may do any thing extempore’. The bi-focal, meta-theatrical perspective of the Augustinian narrative therefore, places tragedy in the context of ‘the rest of the story’—of God’s character-action in Christ for mankind—thus making sense of life lived from a God-given perspective.

At stake from the perspective of our thesis is a dramaturgy which takes seriously a Christian understanding of dramatic aesthetics. This has made it necessary to read the antitheatrical Augustine in the light of Aristotle’s construal of the drama and determine theo-dramatic significance in terms of plot, character-action and their movement towards telos, and within that, hubris, hamartia, peripeteia, and anagnorisis, the moment of recognition that an inevitably tragic ‘the end’ is near. A final aspect of Aristotle’s dramatic aesthetic bearing on the Augustinian narrative, though, is κάθαρσις.

In the Poetics, aesthetic elements most central to the tragedy work together towards the phenomenological reception of the drama in the experience of pathos, in Aristotelian terms, suffering and its katharsis through emotions resulting from ‘pity and fear’ (ἐλέου καὶ φόβου). This third and final section, then, brings us around to facing ‘catharsis’ and suffering in Augustine’s theological-drama. We press forward, therefore, with the hypothesis that Augustine’s narrative posits character-action as warrant for a theo-dramatic anagnorisis. For in the Augustinian theo-drama, suffering changes from a purely existential aspect of the human drama – i.e., Aristotle’s life as tragedy – to a condition of expectation for overcoming tragedy’s telic inevitability. A concluding implication of this will be that Augustine’s narrative effects a sort of divine dramatization that points to the need to redeem the theatre in Christian theological discourse far beyond its usefulness as a source of metaphors.

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136 Aristotle, ‘Poetics: Greek text’, [1449b].
137 Phrasing suggested by McLelland, for whom doxology is the ode to joy central to the seriousness of ‘theological humour’ (though his aphorism is less helpful: ‘As comedy is to tragedy, so is gospel to law, and doxology to theology’). Joseph C. McLelland, ‘Doxology as suspension of the tragic’, Theology Today 31, no. 2 (July 1974): 114-120.
138 The Winter’s Tale, Shakespeare, IV.iv, 694-695.
3.III.1a Affective content of the drama

The suggestion has been made that Aristotle’s theory of the tragic includes the anti-Platonic view that the experience of ‘pity and fear’ produced through the imaginary activities of reading or play-acting the drama enables the participant to face real-life suffering with greater measure of understanding.\(^1\) If in Plato’s aesthetics, theatricality is understood as ontologically unrealistic—or, more precisely, as an anti-realistic process diminishing from being—then the exercise of pathos in the drama is seen as mimicry of an already imitative poetic presentation of life’s suffering (see APPENDIX B).\(^2\) In the Poetics, on the other hand, Aristotle views dramatic representation as real insofar as it achieves its ends at the point(s) where the audience-receiver really experiences the emotional states on which the serious drama is pitched. To the extent that the drama moves an audience through emotions which accompany fluctuation from relative contentment to complication and irreversible downfall, the “as if” representation on the stage is realized in an affective (pathetic) experience of life “as is”. Precisely what it means for Aristotle that the tragedy entails the ‘purging’ of the emotions, however, is more problematic and remains contested both in philosophy of aesthetics and dramatic theory. For although it is clear that the drama’s aesthetic modelling of acts of serious consequence produces an affective experience, it is not at all clear why this should be a desired goal for the drama.\(^3\) The intent of the Poetics, Aristotle tells us in his conclusion, is to describe what constitutes efficacy in the tragedy. However, having

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\(^1\) See for example commentary in James Adam, The Republic of Plato (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), X.606b. For Plato, dramatic pathos is concrete proof of the theatre’s conspiracy against ‘the better part of human nature’ (τὸ δὲ φύσει βέλτιστον ἠμῶν), and particularly as he sees emotion in general as disabling to the soul’s rationality in the moment of suffering. Cf. Plato, Plato, trans. J. Burnett, [X.606a].

\(^2\) Salkever’s critique of simplified definitions of pathos in Plato and Aristotle is instructive, particularly when pathos is understood without due substantiation from Republic X as ‘by definition an event that is entirely or primarily unfair’. In my reading, Plato seems to use the term rather technically (perhaps even scientifically) to describe suffering, deserved or not, and its attendant emotions. Salkever furthermore emphasises that the emotional experience of pathos is to be distinguished from the false consolation of the sentimental or the moralistic comeuppance of the melodrama. See Stephen G. Salkever, ‘The ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy’, Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2, no. 3 (December 1991).

made his case for the superiority of tragedy over against other representational modes
(the epic, lyric chorale, the satyr play, dithyrambic dance, comedy and so on),
Aristotle simply asserts that the imitation of ‘things as things themselves’ (ἐν τοῖς τὰ
αὐτὰ μιμεῖσθαι) in the serious drama achieves something truthful by effecting
emotional change.

Aristotle’s focus on affective change in the audience-receiver as the real ‘thing’
which is the play circumvents Plato’s problem of whether emotions produced in the
drama are a further dissent from reality.142 drama, in the Aristotelian theory of
pathos, is change, and change, insofar as it is experienced emotionally, is real. If the
tragic story (mythos) is defined by change in the expected course of events from good
fortune to bad fortune (peripeteia), and while an audience tracking this dramatic arc
intellectually also ‘participates’ affectively at the point of suffering (pathos), we can
construe transformation through pathetic participation as the essence and form of
dramatic action according to the Poetics. The Aristotelian view of the dramatic
phenomenon includes an audience’s implication in a real – therefore, efficacious –
change from passive spectators to active participants through their self-giving
vulnerability to compassion and sadness (ἐλέου καὶ φόβου).

This positive view of the interaction between reality, its imaged representation in
the drama and the spectator’s affective response (katharsis) posits that the serious
drama is a mode of understanding suffering ‘purged’ of the instinct to evade life’s
suffering—e.g., the undramatic formulation of philosopher (A) wants ethical life (B),
but encounters obstacle C (suffering), and abandons quest for B. Arthur Koestler
expresses this idea of purgation in twofold form:

Firstly, [catharsis] signifies that concentration on the illusory events on the stage
rids the mind of the dross of its self-centred trivial preoccupations; in the
second place it arouses its dormant self-transcendent potentials and provides
them with an outlet, until they peacefully ebb away. Peaceful, of course, does
not necessarily mean a happy ending. It may mean the “earthing” of an
individual tragedy in the universal tragedy of the human condition—as the
scientist resolves a problem by showing that a particular phenomenon is an
instance of a general law. It may dissolve the bitterness of personal sorrow in
the vastness of the oceanic feeling; and redeem horror by pity.143

142 Recalling that Plato considers the onstage performance tertiary to Reality, as are the lecito,
recitatio and other forms of representation.
143 Koestler (1965), p. 307, as quoted in Michael Hinden, ‘Ritual and tragic action: a synthesis of
Koestler’s latter phrasing of ‘dissolution’ of suffering in ‘oceanic feeling’ appears misleading if not understood as an attempt to account for consolation which vicarious suffering, with and for others, may bring. With this in mind, Koestler interprets Aristotle correctly in citing *katharsis* as the real point of contact between the stage tragedy and the drama of life. The emotional appeal in the Aristotelian tragedy then emerges as a “clarifying” event, and only in that sense “cathartic”, in a way not possible in Plato’s aesthetics.  

Nevertheless, accepting pathos as the real meeting point between dramatic representation and life, is it really the case, as is supposed by Aristotle, that the outpouring of emotion is purgatorial in the sense that it distils the essence of suffering in an aesthetic setting—that it is therefore a palliative mode of suffering? (That may well be, particularly if we aver that suffering in the drama, because it is experienced in an “experimental” frame, enables the spectator to rehearse affectively conditions which make it possible to imagine hope beyond suffering and in so doing, to enact protest against it. In this sense, however, a question remains whether therapeutic uses of drama explain sufficiently what theatre is. For example, the model of drama as a principle of social organization advanced by J.L. Moreno (1939) exacerbates an idea that theatre is useful because it has a social function. Moreno’s use of theatre, represented by the *psychodrama*—in which the psychological structure of human society is dramatized into a ‘miniature’ experimental set-up—posits pragmatic, therapeutic value as the measure of theatre. In the psychodrama in particular, achieving a subject’s experience of transformation from

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371. Koestler’s conclusions on literature are driven, evidently, by the need to find unity between mankind, myth and, in his words, ‘the distant echo of the primitive word behind the veil of words’ which is literary making. See, Arthur Koestler, *The act of creation* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1965), p. 351.

144 The *Republic*’s prohibition of theatre as a way of engaging reality for its pull on the emotions, though of obvious relevance to our thesis, cannot be included in our study given space constraints. For this reason, however, an interaction between Plato, Aristotelian poetics and Augustine’s ban on the drama from the divine City is provided below in APPENDIX B.

145 Koestler’s focus on the individual points to the difficulty in articulating the importance of the communal aspect in the theatrical experience; he asserts that “Tragedy, in the Greek sense, is the school of self-transcendence”. However, he also provides an account of theatre’s communal transcendence through its appeal to memory: ‘the action of a drama... is always the distant echo of some ancestral action behind the veil of the period’s costumes and conventions’. This, in turn, makes sense of the iconic function of archetypal conflicts recurring in literature and drama. See, Koestler, pp. 351, 353.
More to the point of our thesis, however, what realistically is the dramatization of pathos? And, how does this appear in Augustine’s theologically vivified dramatics?

3.III.1b Vicarious experience of suffering

Aristotle, placing considerable distance between himself and the Platonic view, sees pathos in the drama as a truthful articulation of gravity, scope, inevitability and other such qualities in suffering. In the Poetics, we have seen, tragedy models an action of serious bearing and implies ultimate consequences. From this understanding, Aristotle expounds a functional approach to plot and character, drama thus being defined as action through which characters undergo some form of permanent change. This event-trajectory in which character serves its ends has an emotional dimension. The tragedy, he writes, ‘mediates, between pity and fear, the disclosure of all such suffering’, thus rendering an understanding of the tragic as a trajectory of change through the experience of suffering. The relevant passage from the Poetics reads in its original

\[ \varepsilon \text{στιν οUIViewController μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἔχουσης, } \ldots \text{δὲ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαινοῦσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων καθάρσιν.} \]

This contentious passage – hinging problematically on the affective dimension (καθαρσίς), and not forcibly on the qualities of imitation (μίμησις) – is typically and unsatisfactorily translated as per Butcher: ‘Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; …with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its katharsis of such emotions’. Or, again, by Fyfe who concurs with Butcher on the first part but follows his own lead thereafter: ‘…and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions’. Neither interpreter adds greater clarity, however, to the meaning and function of καθαρσίς in Aristotle’s text. Gerald Else attempts some redress and offers his

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146 The point is simply that theatre’s pragmatic justifications (whether therapeutic and ‘sociometric’ as per Moreno; pedagogical, political, ritualistic, evangelistic, etc.) are ancillary but not satisfactory for an explanation of theatre’s nature and aims.
148 Aristotle, Poetics (trans. Butcher), 1449b, added emphasis.
149 Aristotle, Poetics (trans. Fyfe), 1449b, my emphasis.
translation as ‘...through a course of pity and fear completing the purification of tragic acts which have those emotional characteristics’.

The translation we are proposing here, while literal on every point, attempts to account critically for the teleological function in the drama’s exercise of the affect. Essentially, it posits a working understanding of the Aristotelian notion that in mirroring life’s action, the tragedy invites an understanding of suffering through its vicarious experience. This will serve us in trying to understand the relation between divine perspective in Augustine’s theo-dramatic narrative and expectation beyond human suffering. According to Aristotle’s theory of the drama, then

Tragedy is a mode of action enacting an event of serious implications and of ultimate consequence which mediates, between compassion and understanding, the disclosure of all such suffering.

3.III.1c A participatory (comitative) understanding of tragedy

Our proposed translation, it should be noted, deviates from the usual interpretation of drama as being primarily about the ‘imitative’ aspect of the performance, or katharsis as the ‘flushing of emotion’.

By our estimation, Aristotle’s notion of purgation in tragedy has little to do with the expectoration of emotion as an end in itself. This is a point on which other translations run aground given their instrumental focus on the drama as mimetic play, something which necessarily brings into question the authenticity of the emotional response to the drama. Closer to Aristotle’s purpose is the issue of what it means that the tragedy stages truthfully something of the magnitude in human suffering (πάθημα) through the emotional medium of ‘pity and fear’ (ἔλεος καὶ φόβου). Therefore, a comitative reading, to borrow a grammarian’s category, subverts the mimetic obstacle by taking

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150 Aristotle, Aristotle Poetics, p. 25.

151 For example, in his seminal study of the Poetics and dramatic action in the Shakespearean tragedy, Murray, taking plot to be ‘almost negligible’ in Greek tragic plays, a reading which he then imposed over Aristotle’s definition of tragedy, favoured the imitative theory of ‘Peinture de caractère’ in the tragedy (roughly in place of my ‘character-action’), thus citing favourably Fagues’ Drame ancien, drame moderne to the effect that “…cela prouve que les Grecs attachent beaucoup plus d’importance à la caractère qu’à la continuité de l’action.” Most problematically, however, Murray undermined his own argument in correctly raising the issue that the Greek actor did not follow our interpretive notions of acting for the tragedy (in contemporary terms, of Shakespearean root) but with the employ of the mask rather formalized and ‘fixed’, as it were, character in its subservient role to the dramatic action. Augustus Taber Murray, ‘Plot and character in Greek tragedy’, Transactions and Proceeding of the Philological Association 471916): 51-64.
for granted that onstage suffering achieves something instrumentally—aesthetic pleasure in imitation, intellectual entertainment, cultural ritual, and, as is entirely conceivable, even purgatorial outlay of emotion—but adds the perspective from the side of the participant audience. This latter aspect is lost to contemporary interpretations of the Aristotelian tragedy (here, aptly noted in Richard Palmer’s study on the problem):

The idea of art functioning as a device for relieving subconscious impulses fits into the broader pattern of what psychoanalysts have labelled *katharsis*, the process of eliminating psychic tension by bringing an impulse into consciousness and affording it expression. This obvious adaptation of Aristotle’s concept of *katharsis* illustrates the dovetailing of psychological and literary concerns. This particular approach, however, explains the art more clearly from the view of the creator, *but what of the spectator?*

Our interpretation therefore emphasizes a comitative, or simply, *participatory* understanding that *with* the dramatic presentation, *an audience performs*. What it performs is an enactment of life’s unseemliness in aesthetic form, an act through which suffering is confronted with *feeling or affect in the experience of pathos*. The tragedy in this sense enacts questions of suffering, if not as to its reasons and purpose, then by enjoining the audience participant to an affective disclosure of self in the face of suffering on stage.

Where it is done well (hence Aristotle’s concern with dramatic success), the tragedy is, and not paradoxically, a clarifying experience; it does not, therefore, absolve the spectator – *through perverse pleasure, as Plato supposes* – from facing the darker side of reality. For Plato, there is no question that encouraging affective response in drama merely encourages a like response to life’s suffering, thus making ἡθος subject to personal feeling: ‘Take the best of us listening to Homer’, he writes, or any other of the tragic poets, when he is imitating a hero in grief and spinning out a long melancholy lamentation or imitating men singing [dirges] and disfiguring themselves in grief: you know that he gives us pleasure, and we give ourselves up to following him; we sympathize and are seriously...

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152 Palmer, p. 34, et al.
153 Or, of course, in the reading of the text.
154 It is worth noting that in this conception of aesthetics, stage performance of the drama and the author’s ‘performance’ of drama, as it were, upon the page both amount to representational modes which is why Plato’s critique of the drama and Aristotle’s positive rendition of a theory to sustain it applies to the dramatic reading as to the performance.
impressed, and praise as a good poet whoever most affects us in this way. […]
But when an intimate sorrow comes to any of us, you notice that we pride
ourselves on the opposite kind of behaviour, on being able to bear it with quiet
and endurance. […] Then is the praise rightly given? … Is it right to look at [an
actor] being [afflicted,] what we ourselves should not wish to be without
shame, and so far from feeling disgust, to enjoy and praise the performance?
[…] It does not seem reasonable. […] For if we feed the element of pity on
others’ misfortunes and [thereby] make it strong, it is not easy to control it in
our own [suffering].

In the Aristotelian tragedy, however, dramatic artistry, concentrating
‘cogency’ of plot and ‘elegance’ in the presentation of suffering, hence ‘logical
sequence with shattering emotional impact’, achieves ‘in a real sense, a functional
beauty’. In the tragedy, therefore, an audience—affect ed by compassion, relative
to the stage persona as an afflicted other, and understanding, in relation to the
audience-participant’s self-recognition in the other—participates in an experiential
and vicarious exploration of meaning in suffering.

3.III.1d The pathetic turn in theological perspective

Augustine’s understanding of drama merits noting the theological direction
that distinguishes his critique from a generically neo-Platonic view of pathos and the
passions. For Augustine, in the context of the Confessions, pathos and related
emotions are not in themselves cause for dissipation and therefore derision, but are
primarily part of a person’s creaturely constitution. They prove pernicious, however,
when they are pursued for their own sake apart from reference to the Creator
(whereas ‘all things are to be loved in reference to God’). So, for example,
Augustine admonishes that ‘If bodies please you, praise God for them and turn your
love back from them to their maker, lest you should displease Him in being pleased

309-310, Book X: 605, emphasis added.
156 Aristotle, Aristotle Poetics, 97, n. 98, original emphases.
157 As when leading to prurient behaviour, for example:
For what pleasure hath it, to see in a mangled carcase what will make you shudder? […]
From this disease of curiosity are all those strange sights exhibited in the theatre. Hence men
go on to search out the hidden powers… which to know profits not, and wherein men desire
nothing but to know.

St. Augustine, The confessions of St. Augustine, trans. E.B. Pusey, Everyman’s Library (London/New
[exclusively] by them’. According to Augustine, therefore, in supplanting what might be real cause for emotion with ‘made-up dramatics’ (actio histrionis), theatre leads the spectator into the affective experience for its own enjoyment, a pleasure abstracted from creatureliness in God. In Augustinian thought, as we recall in the narrative of Alypius’ experience at the games, affections aroused by the aesthetics of pathos such that spectators are thereby ‘carried away’ amount to transgression against creaturely character-action for God.

In Aristotle’s aesthetics, powerful emotions elicited by the tragedy move the audience-participant to engage suffering in life. For Augustine, however, there is something of a parody in a disposition toward affective disclosure in the theatre. In Augustinian aesthetics, the onstage dramatization of life’s suffering is mimesis (in the derogatory Platonic sense) of an existential drama in which the creature acts without reference to God, either in his principal role as the Creator who acts for man, or as the One in whom alone is found Salvation. The pathos in such irreverent, a-theistic condition comes closest to defining a theology of the tragic in Augustine’s Confessions. As we noted, however, casting pathos as the essential absence of divine perspective in mankind’s movement towards an inevitable end also implies a positively theological countermovement, a régissement in which God acts and overcomes tragedy’s finality. This theo-drama implies, in turn, the presentation of passion for theological ends.

We refer back to Kotzé’s otherwise convincing study of the Confessions in which she argues that Augustine’s writing is read most effectively according to its

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159 For the moment we are leaving aside concerns that jouissance, to capture the sensuality implied in any notion of enjoyment, as a deeply human response to our creaturely being in the world, can be godly in and of itself, or in any event fully in keeping with our call to voice creation’s praise (Psalm 150).

160 In reflecting on stage plays and their corrupting influence in society, Augustine cites the idea that such blessings (bonis) as peace, prosperity, and material good can be enjoyed ‘honestly’, by which he means, frugally and judiciously, but also with an attitude of piety, therefore with deference to He who gives such blessings (de Civitate Dei, XXX). For Augustine’s use of imagistic language, typology and metaphors, see the previously cited article on revisioning Augustine’s critique of theatre by Smith.

161 We are reminded that it is not necessary to interpret ‘catharsis’ as a dissipation (or excretion) of the passions so that one might face suffering rationally and unhindered by emotion but, more helpfully, that an audience’s emotional effort attains fully to the agony and ecstasy (‘pity and fear’) intended by the drama, the exercise of which confronts the quality of suffering and thus the necessity for a freely given mercy.
protreptic intent to guide readers to Christian conversion. Reading Augustinian narrative for its sense of dramaturgy, however, would seem to make sense of passion in Augustine’s theological communication as central to the task. Kotzé approaches this crucial aspect of the *Confessions*\(^{162}\) under the literary rubric of ‘tone’, maintaining that

One aspect of the style of extant protreptics [comparable] with that of the *Confessions*... is the tone of these works. [...] A good measure of variation in tone is probably to be expected, and... to be examined in the context of its contribution towards the protreptic purpose of the whole. An analysis of the tone used can... yield important information about both the communicative purpose of the text and the relationship between the author and his audience. [Tone] can be a very powerful tool of persuasion, especially if the author’s insight into the psychological make-up of his audience enables him to find the exact tone at the right moment to touch tender or weak spots.\(^{165}\)

That said, and even though Kotzé rightfully picks out *sine qua non* vocabulary of “feeling” in Augustine’s protreptic writing – *accendere*, *flamma*, *incendium*, \(\pi\nu\rho\) – her literary approach misses the centrality of pathos and the emotional response evident in the *Confessions*. Simply put, ‘tone’ can hardly do justice to the impassioned drama in Augustine’s narrative. For Kotzé, the combination of a ‘diatribe-like tone’ and a caring tone ‘is of course only an indication of the [rhetorical] variation Augustine uses in order to do everything in his power to reach his audience’.\(^{164}\) Theologically, however, we would have to go farther and consider that the presentation of passion in Augustine’s narrative, of existential suffering and the joy of redemption, is proper to the subject under consideration.

The theological narrative is driven by a need to witness to God’s paschal *intentio* towards mankind. To this end, Augustine does not recoil from the affective implications of a dramatizing perspective; he suggests, in fact, that Christian conversion evinces a theological *anagnorisis* (again, revealing insight) for overcoming the absolutizing aesthetics of unredeemed pathos. This is precisely the sense of the mature Augustine’s ‘heart-felt regret’ for sinful senselessness which had

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\(^{162}\) Against a general neglect, he claims, of other exponents of Augustine’s style.

\(^{163}\) Kotzé, p. 61, added italics.

\(^{164}\) Ibid., p. 67.
him as a child tearing at the pear tree, poignantly expressed in his cry of ‘ecce cor meum, deus, ecce cor meum’—‘This heart of mine, oh God, this heart of mine which thou didst pity even in that bottomless pit’.\textsuperscript{165}

More significantly, however, Augustine’s extensive use of the vocative voice in the narrative of the \textit{Confessions} – what we have termed vocative \textit{entr’actes} – is enough to establish that Augustine frames life’s pathos in terms of the drama of God’s perspective on the world. We have seen, of course, the ambiguity Augustine holds towards affective disposition in his own conversion narrative.\textsuperscript{166} The narrative itself, however, is charged with the pathos of the lone human actor taking to the world stage like a character in search of its author. The hapless character, lacking the external \textit{intentio} which authorship implies, apprentices itself to “an author” of its own creation. Citing memory of his conversion in the vocative voice, the converted Augustine speaks of the joy as well as pain of Christian conversion

Your scalp cut to the quick of the wound [in my soul], so that it should… be converted to you, who are “above all things” (Rom. 9.5) and without whom all things are nothing, and that by conversion I should be healed. How unhappy I was, and how conscious you made me of my misery…\textsuperscript{167}

Even from within this joyful perspective, however, Augustine affirms as observable and experiential reality that ‘\textit{vita miser\ae est, mors incerta est}'.\textsuperscript{168} Here, the brutally given telos of life as tragedy would seem to have found its home in the converted Augustine, even as it had before his conversion: ‘Insofar as the death of [Christ’s] flesh was in my opinion unreal, the death of my soul was real. […]Thus] I was on my way out and dying’.\textsuperscript{169} In a theological dramatics, however, the certainty that life is misery and death uncertain is appreciated as the very evidence that, as Augustine puts it in a vocative \textit{entr’acte}, mankind wants for the ultimacy of redemption ‘through your hand remaking what you once made?’\textsuperscript{170} The tragedy’s deterministic imposition over the character of man (and God) is therefore

\textsuperscript{165} St. Augustine, \textit{Confessions (trans. A. Outler)}, II.4.9.
\textsuperscript{166} Cf. my footnote 34 above.
\textsuperscript{167} St. Augustine, \textit{Confessions (trans. Chadwick)}, p. 97, VI.vi.9.
\textsuperscript{168} ‘Life is misery, death is uncertain’. Ibid., p. 104, cf. also VI.vi.9.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., pp. 82-83, V.viii.16.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., p. 80, V.vii.13.
reconfigured by the dramatic dimensions of God’s impassioned self-giving to the world.

Ultimately, for Augustine, none of this translates into a theological appreciation for the stage, as a means, for example, for cultivating a theological perspective on the world, hence, as theo-drama. His idea that dramatic play (ludicrum) amounts to a mere contrivance of feeling—Augustine recalls that in the theatre ‘I sorrowed quasi misericors’—sidelines drama permanently from theological consideration. Augustine thus questions seriously what ‘quality of mercy’ it is which can be squandered on ‘feigned and scenical passions’. However, life lived under God, in the awareness of God’s penetrating perspective on the action, is finally dramatic. For this reason, theo-drama makes sense of the dramatizing structure in Augustine’s witness to the Christian Gospel.

One example in particular, though not in the Confessions but in a sermon written on the Feast Day of St. Cyprian, illustrates vividly the way in which a dramatic element permeates Augustine’s sense of what it means to be Christian. In his sermon exposition, Augustine attacks the theatre as “base curiosity, empty desire of the eyes, greed for trivial spectacles” while at the same time extolling the triumphal drama of the Christian life. Thus, he writes in conclusion to the sermon:

The passion of St. Cyprian has just been read. We heard it with our ears, we watched it in our minds, we saw him struggling, we feared somehow for him in his danger, but we trusted in the help of God. Do you then want to know in brief what the difference is between our spectacles and theatrical spectacles?

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171 But, as we argued for Tertullian, and as we have shown above, nor is it conceivable that it could have considering the fact that theatre in Augustine’s day could not be distinguished from pagan ritual. Von Balthasar summarizes the situation neatly:

By the time Christianity arrived, there was little left [of the Greek drama] but a noisy, popular entertainment; it was principally coarse and lewd and often cruel, so that even the pagans themselves turned away from it. All the same… there was not only the vulgar, unchaste mimus but also the more humane comedy; tragedy still dealt with the ancient myths. […] But whether the passions were stirred up by nobler or more crude spectacles, whether it was artificial or real blood that flowed, the lower nature was unleashed. Balthasar, TD I, pp. 89-90.


174 This much, Kotzé has pointed out, but also Van Fleteren with reference to the dozen or so conversion narratives in the Confessions. Typically, they follow a movement from headlong concupiscence (hubris and hamartia), to an unprecedented encounter with divine telos through some ordinary event (peripateia), followed by an impassioned pursuit of God (anagnorisis), the whole of which could only be attributed to God’s character-action and not to telos in human effort.
We, inasmuch as a sane mind flourishes in us, want to imitate the martyrs [whom] we watch.\textsuperscript{175}

The theatricality implied in the author’s note that in the liturgical setting, the audience is to imagine the drama of the martyr’s passion and therein exercise trust in God, is remarkable. The irony in Augustine’s appeal to affect and imagination despite his impassioned critique against the theatre is not lost on Simon Goldhill who adds an understanding of the dramatics of \textit{lectio} in light of ancient practices:

This description of [dramatic] reading runs through the full gamut of rhetorical expectation of a narrative: the audience experiences \textit{enargeia}, or vivid bringing to mind; \textit{phobos or ekplexis} ([as with Aristotle,] fear or astonishment); and, finally, in the hope and fulfilment of God’s help, the tension and climax of good \textit{diegesis}.\textsuperscript{176}

Because it is not just any reading which Augustine has in mind, however, either here or in the \textit{Confessions}, but one specifically focused on God and his dramatizing perspective on humanity – looking beyond Augustine’s ‘literary milieu’, as Kotzé puts it\textsuperscript{177} – his intention is theologically dramatic, and only as such does he revel in the emotional impact of the narrative. In this light, can we follow Goldhill when he points to how much joy Augustine finds in the vivid narrative of Cyprian’s martyrdom:

Indeed, Augustine enjoys the story greatly[:] “I see [St. Cyprian], I delight in him, with all the strength of the arms of my mind I embrace him. I see the struggle. I rejoice in the victory.” For Augustine and his account of responding to the narrative of a Saint’s passion, a desire to imitate the Saint (however difficult) is the necessary aim of the narrative, and the pleasure of the triumphant tale produces joy.\textsuperscript{178}

Or the pleasure, we would hasten to add, of the triumphant narrative faithful to the world theatre as God’s theatre.


\textsuperscript{176} Diegesis simply refers to the way in which elements come together to form a narrative, whether in literature, film, or in the drama. Ibid., p. 115, my italics and editorial emphasis.

\textsuperscript{177} Kotzé, p. 67.

In our goal to articulate a dramaturgy of theological significance, we are drawn to the conclusion that a positive Christian approach to theatre is possible to the extent that theo-drama in some meaningful sense describes what it means to live in a world in which God acts for and with mankind. Although unintended, one cannot avoid the positive move in this direction implied in Augustine’s dramatic aesthetics as we have demonstrated here. Whilst negating the possibilities for theatrical solipsism or idolatrous disaffection from God, Augustine nevertheless locates dramatic action in God’s movement pro hominibus to redeem his creation from a deterministic imposition of tragic telos over the character of “man”. That this theo-dramatic directio is a ‘fidelis misericordia’,\(^{179}\) moreover, means that the affective orientation toward God, even in the theatrical aesthetics of pathos, can be responsibly appropriate to the action. The shift from pathetic action on the world stage (Aristotelian) to the theo-drama of God’s action with and for man (on the Christian model) makes man responsible to divine action. It enacts genuine grounds upon which Christians may cultivate on the theatrical stage a theo-dramatic perspective on the human condition in all its implications, even pathetically, and to do so, in fact, as a practice of their calling to be imitators of God in Christ. For, to rephrase Peter Brook, man walks across the world stage, God is watching him, and this is all that is needed for the act of theatre to begin.

\(^{179}\) St. Augustine, ‘Confessiones’, III.1, 3, 11.
This “theo-drama” is a “theological” undertaking; that is, it reflects upon the dramatic character of existence in the light of biblical revelation. […O]ur view of God, the world and man will […therefore] be drawn from that drama which God has already “staged” with the world and with man, in which we find ourselves players. This horizon will prove to be the widest possible horizon (and not a constricting one) inasmuch as it is able to recapitulate and integrate within itself all the ways in which man can possibly view himself.¹

¹ Balthasar, TD II, p. 9.
I. Staging Theology: Calderon’s Great Theatre of the World

1. Enacting God’s dramatizing perspective

Although Tertullian, as we have said, does not evince a theologically developed version of the world-theatre metaphor, his rhetoric in *De spectaculis* nevertheless exhibits some suggestion that, even as Christians bear witness to and are implicated in the drama of God in Christ, a Christian perspective is by implication dramatic. In Chapter 2, we had considered in passing Tertullian’s argument that whatever carnal pleasure the world’s theatres have to offer pale in the light of Salvation, the theatre of divine revelation (e.g., ‘*Vis autem et sanguinis aliquid? Habes Christi*’).¹ As was the case with Augustine, we have seen also that, for Tertullian, images that attract spectators to the stage are but poor forgeries of the images which Christians have of God’s revelation in the Incarnation; they defraud eschatological images (and ‘whatever they are, they are nobler than both circus and theatres’) which animate Christians to hope for Christ’s return.²

Tertullian’s treatise on theatre ends, for example, with strong allusions to the drama of Christ’s return as the only theatre worthy of Christian consideration, a drama which ‘even now we in a measure have… by faith in the picturings of imagination’.³ Ironically, in their struggle against the theatre, neither Tertullian nor Augustine can escape the idea of Christian faith as drama. In fact, Tertullian’s understanding of a Christian “imaginary” faithful in its picturings to the biblical God cannot but press for a theologically articulated theatrical analogy. As we have seen, however, conditions which define the stage of the second and fifth centuries mean that theatre might elicit analogies for theological thought but could not allow for a Christian commitment to the stage.

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¹ Cf. Ch. 2, fn. 93.
² Turcan, XXX.5-7.
³ Ibid., XXX.5-7, my emphasis.
4.1.1a Calderón de la Barca

On the opposite end of such circumspect and embryonic use of theatrical analogues is the Calderonian stage, born at the height of Spain’s literary Golden Age, when it became possible to stage God’s dramatizing perspective over the world. The drama of Pedro Calderón de la Barca occurs at a time when playwrights turned their attention to theatrical theories received from the classical drama and considered their applicability to the stage in a Christianized, European culture. Aristotle’s Poetics in particular played a central role in reviving ideas of dramatic time, unity of action and space, character development and other elements central to the tragic genre. Some have identified the apogee of this movement with the publication of a vernacular translation of the Poetics (1626) as well as a scholarly commentary on the classical stage (1633). Academic approaches to Aristotelian tragedy in seventeenth-century Spain prompt rediscoveries of classical forms, but also new thinking on genre conventions, critical departures from traditional structuring of action, reorganization of unities of place and time, new developments of character ‘types’ for the stage, etc. The dramaturge Francisco Cascales, for example, in dismissing the merging of classical tragic/comic genres, followed with remarkable literalism Aristotle’s understanding of the tragedy as ‘an imitation of a noble action, complete and of suitable grandeur, in smooth dramatic language, which purifies the passions of the soul by means of compassion and fear’. In the same period, González de Salas, followed Aristotle on tragic form but added moral telos – in complement to plot – as a function proper to dramatic action on the Catholic stage. Thus he echoed Aristotle in writing that the tragedy instructs by

habituating the soul to such passions as pity and fear [in order] to make them less offensive. And then when those occasions common to mortals arrive in which such passions are aroused by misfortunes, they will certainly be less felt.  

4 Some authorities date Spain’s Siglo de Oro with the publication of Antonio de Nebrija’s Gramática castellana in 1492; most sources agree on its end with the death of Calderón in 1681.


6 Francisco Cascales, Tablas poéticas (Murcia, 1617), cited in Carlson, p. 65.

7 González de Salas, Nueva idea de la tragedia (Madrid, 1633), cited in Ibid.
He added, however, that “if [tragedy] delights in any way, it is with sorrow and tears, as St. Augustine teaches.” In citing Augustine to validate his modified understanding of the tragedy (as having moral import in the vicarious experience), Salas betrays the apologetic stance of the dramaturge working in the face of continued ecclesial opposition. In fact, in the Poetics, Aristotle is not concerned with delight in the theatrical experience – i.e., fulfilment, pleasure, entertainment – but rather with the tragedy’s success in dramatizing a particular kind of telos so as to achieve a clearer understanding of suffering (i.e., as inevitable, hence demanding ethical response). We see both in Cascales and González de Salas, however, the importance attributed to classical dramatic theory in the Spanish baroque drama.

In this period, Don Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600-1681), emerges as a dramatist of a distinctly theological stage enacting God’s dramatizing perspective on the world. Calderón, overcoming tragedy/comedy genre divisions paramount to Aristotelian dramaturgy, favours dramatizing on the secular stage a theologically-motivated telos that to be human is to be an actor in God’s theatre of Salvation, the stage performance thus being used self-consciously as a theological enactment of the “theatre of the world”.

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8 González de Salas (Madrid: 1633), cited in Ibid.
9 Ibid. Carlson’s assertions of tenuous theatre/church relations during Spain’s Siglo de Oro, though unqualified, are supported in the work of Jesus Menendez Pelaez, “Teatro e Iglesia en el siglo XVI: de la reforma Católica a la contrarreforma del Concilio de Trento,” in Horror y tragedia en el teatro del siglo de oro: actas del IV coloquio del G.E.S.T.E. (Toulouse, France: France-Iberie recherche, 2005), and, Marin Gelaberto Vilagran, ‘La palabra del predicador: contrarreforma y supersticion en Cataluña—siglos XVII-XVIII’ (PhD, Universidad Autonoma de Barcelona, 2003).
10 We have treated in full this aspect of the Poetics in the previous chapter in relation to Augustine’s dramatizing narrative in the Confessions.
Thirteen hundred years between Tertullian’s proscription of theatre – for its supposed antithetical bearing on the Christian mind – and the ascendancy of the Church to principal institutional pillar of society in Calderón’s era had not prevented theatre from becoming a space in which society entertained ideas about itself through comedic, tragic and mixed dramatic genres (though without anything approaching a theory of theatrical performance). However, with the exception of Augustine’s extensive pronouncements against theatre in the fifth century (see above, Chapter 3), Christianity had all but sidelined theoretical discussion about the theatre, even if polemics and tradition kept alive antitheatrical assertions. Nevertheless, by the turn of the first millennium, drama had emerged in the Church in versified departures from the traditional liturgy, in personified representations of biblical narratives, as well as in scripts relating the lives of the saints, the history of the Church and aspects of Christian doctrine.12 In chapter 5, we will treat in detail the development of dramaturgy in the liturgical setting at the end of the tenth century; we will do this in view of asking whether bringing into the secular theatre the theological claim that God acts dispels the theatrical effect. For the moment, however, we will register the peculiarity of Calderón’s dramatizing what it means to live in a world in which God acts, and specially to the extent that he presupposes this as the overarching theological drama that gives meaning to theatrical action on the secular stage.

4.1.1b Divine reckonings in profane spaces

Calderon’s theatre may be approached from various perspectives; typically, the seventy or more autos sacramentales he composed have been used to illustrate the height of religious use of the arts in this period.13 The term auto refers to dramatic action (and possibly also to the car or coach paraded through the street) in which actors presented doctrinal plays as part of a procession in honour of the feast of Corpus Christi. The solemn procession, later expanded to Christmas and Easter

12 One such example of this development being the continental 13th c. triumphal procession of Corpus Christi that preceded the Mystery play cycles in Britain See. John R. Elliott, Jr., Playing God: Medieval mysteries on the modern stage, vol. 2, Studies in Early English Drama (Toronto, Buffalo & London: University of Toronto Press, 1989).

celebrations, included dignitaries marching alongside a devout throng that would wind through the streets following the consecrated Eucharist held aloft by a priest. The procession would culminate with the performance of an allegorical auto. Variations of the auto sacramental preceded Calderón by two centuries, though he is considered to have perfected the genre by blending lyricism and dramatic representation with the self-consciously theological character of these plays. Although Calderón left no theoretical reflection on his works, in the introduction to an early auto, he provides a definition which must be taken as authoritative lacking further evidence. Autos sacramentales, he writes, are

"[Sermones puestos en verso, en idea representable, cuestiones de la Sacra Teología, que no alcanzan mis razones, a explicar ni comprender, y al regocijo dispone con aplauso de este día.]"

The autos may be compared with English morality plays, often characterizing human vice, Christian virtues, divine attributes, elements of the Creation, etc., but also for their presentation in open air stages. The fact that the autos were performed in the public square, however, meant that they took on increasingly profane elements, leading to their suppression in the 18th century, by Charles III of Spain.

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14 Before Calderón, associated with Juan de la Enzina and Gil Vicente, but principally with Tirso de Molina, and Lope de Vega (the latter, 1562-1635, best known for Fuente ovejuna, c.1619) who provided a verse definition of the genre in an introduction to his auto El dulce nombre de Jesús:

"[¿Y qué son autos? - Comedias a honor y gloria del Pan que tan devota celebra esta coronada villa, porque su alabanza sea confusión de la herejía y gloria de la fe nuestra, todas de historias divinas.]"

So what are autos?
- Dramatics in honour of glorious Eucharist to which devotion is given this village festivity-clad, that its glorification be confoundedness of heresy and elevation of our faith, this very story divine.


15 In preface to his Loa de la segunda esposa, cited in Ibid.

In our effort to substantiate a theological approach to drama, we will set aside the processional aspect of the *auto*, its ritualistic aspects and appeal to religious devotion, in order to focus singly on Calderón’s blending of Christian doctrine and secular theatre aesthetics in the plays themselves. These plays at once obviate theological conflict with theatre and elevate the stage to the status of a dialogue partner for theology. Our interest in Calderón’s dramaturgy alights on the fact that he does not do away with distinctions of secular and sacred; to this extent, his dramatic works are normally divided into plays which are strictly secular (comedies, romance, tragedies) and drama of overt theological significance. However, in his theological plays, (again, as distinct from the procession pageant which incorporates the Eucharistic sacrament,) Calderón approaches the stage for its ability to exposit publicly the drama of life in Christian perspective, yet without deracinating theatre from its secular soil. The result is that theatre in its very secularity, rooted in “the world”, hence outside the church, becomes subject to a theologically ordered world and serves as a living instantiation of the great theatre of God’s world.

(It is important to keep in mind that unlike the liturgical dramas of the Church which flourished from the tenth century roughly through the thirteenth century, the *auto* is not performed in churches.\(^{17}\) For our purposes, therefore, it makes sense to distinguish these plays as theological rather than sacramental, even if the procession that precedes the play presentation clearly draws on elements of the latter. The *auto* is dramatic entertainment for the secular stage which nevertheless relies on the public making sense of the story in view of theological presuppositions originating in Christian understanding.)

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4.1.1c  The Prodigy Enchanter

We have in the verse drama *The Prodigy Enchanter* (*El mágico prodigioso,* c. 1663) a particularly vivid illustration of the Calderonian double movement in which theatre reinforces sacred/secular distinctions while at the same time placing itself in a divinely ordered perspective. This *auto* is based on the hagiography of Saint Cyprian and Saint Justina (martyred c. 290 A.D.). In the drama, the dualist opposition of sacred and secular is represented by the characters of CYPRIAN, a scholar whose theological curiosity leads him to inquire into pagan mythology, and the DAEMON who works to detract him from God’s unseen leading to Christian conversion. In the end, CYPRIAN receives divine witness through the chaste affection of JUSTINA, the Christian woman whose love he pursues—’I believe it, and am ready / Now a thousand lives to give Him’—upon which both are martyred by a pagan despot. Their martyrdom bears witness to God’s ultimate triumph in mankind’s struggle with unbelief and, in a final scene prefiguring the end of Lorenzo de Ponte’s libretto for *Don Giovanni* (1787), the DAEMON falls defeated back into his hell.

The significance in a theological drama such as this one is that whereas earlier liturgical dramas, and indeed the procession leading to the *auto*, served to reinforce the internal witness of the Church in which God’s presence is enacted in the Eucharist, for Calderón, theatre outside the church bore prophetic witness to God’s abiding presence above the world as well as in it. A closer look at the text will make evident both the force with which Calderón distinguishes between secular/sacred and his use of the secular stage to represent the theological drama.

In the first act of *The Prodigy Enchanter,* two students enter the stage carrying philosophy books for their academic master, CYPRIAN, who follows close behind.

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21 The play’s title refers to a declaration by the pagan king of Antioch, upon seeing the DAEMON witness to God’s glorification in CYPRIAN’s martyrdom, that ‘These are all but the enchantments / Which this sorcerer [CYPRIAN] effected /At his death’, hence the play is typically translated as *The Wonder-Working Magician.* Ibid., XXVII, p. 208.
The setting is a country road leading to the city of Antioch where public spectacles in dedication of a pagan temple are taking place. The afternoon sun setting, fatigue wears on CYPRIAN and he dismisses the young men, asking them to leave him to his books while they join the festivities in the city:

\[
\text{In the sweet solitude of this calm place,} \\
\text{This intricate wild wilderness of trees} \\
\text{And flowers and undergrowth of odorous plants,} \\
\text{Leave me; the books you brought out of the house} \\
\text{To me are ever best society.} \\
\text{...You, my friends,} \\
\text{Go and enjoy the festival; it will} \\
\text{Be worth the labour, and return for me} \\
\text{When the sun seeks its grave among the billows...}^{22}
\]

The young scholars protest that they would not abandon their professor in such a desolate place, but CYPRIAN rejects this insisting that, in any case, he is far too preoccupied with theological questions, specifically the attributes of God, and would rather spend the evening investigating Greek poetics on this point. The inaugural temple festivities, he adds, are for free-spirited youth, but it falls to the serious scholar to face questions of ultimate consequence. The students complain that their master would forsake ‘such free, such unrestricted / Revelry, and mirth, and fun / ...frolic of the city’ in order to sit by the side of a country road for the sake of theological enquiry. CYPRIAN, however is unmoved:

\[
\text{...for while, to-day,} \\
\text{Antioch, the mighty city,} \\
\text{Celebrates with such rejoicing} \\
\text{The great temple newly finished} \\
\text{Unto Jupiter...} \\
\text{I, escaping the confusion} \\
\text{Of the streets and square, have flitted} \\
\text{Hitherward, to spend in study} \\
\text{While some daylight yet may glimmer.}^{23}
\]

From the opening scene, in rhetoric reminiscent of St. Augustine’s City of God, Calderón posits an incessant conflict between the Christianity presupposed by his audience and the secular/pagan orientation of the world. Antioch is the city of

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man where temptation and carnal excess abound; the openness of the pastoral setting, by contrast, offer CYPRIAN, theological treatises in hand, the opportunity for revelation to break through his struggle with the virtues of monotheism and teaching from the Greek pantheon.

The polarization is doubly emphasized in Calderón’s staging in which the Hellenic city is quite likely painted on the backdrop scenery at the diminishing end of the road. The stage then appears as the broad section of the road which in fact opens towards the public space, thereby emphasizing that Calderón both assumes the audience into the Christian setting for his play and intends for them to journey with CYPRIAN through the drama of his conversion. The stage, for Calderón, is a liminal space negotiating dualisms of belief/unbelief, Christian/pagan, religious/secular, and indeed theatre and “world theatre”. If dualisms provide Calderón with material for dramatization, the dramatic conflict in The Prodigy Enchanter is the tension between the latent availability of God’s revelation – in nature, in intellectual pursuit, in CYPRIAN’s love for a Christian woman – and a force that would dispel this possibility by using the country setting as a wilderness for temptation, turning intellectual pursuit to pride, diminish love to carnal avidity, etc.

CYPRIAN’s self-motivated pursuit of divine truth, in fact, cues a ‘rustling in the thicket’ from which appears a DAEMON disguised as an itinerant scholar. The stranger claims to have lost his way to Antioch where he is expected to add his part to the festivities. The stranger’s demeanour arouses suspicion and CYPRIAN thinks it best to direct him onwards without indulging him with conversation:

\[
\text{I am surprised to hear this,} \\
\text{That in plain view of the high-rise} \\
\text{Antiochian Towers still you’ve} \\
\text{Lost your way. There’s not a single} \\
\text{Path astride this mountain} \\
\text{But thither winds or aims directly…} \\
\text{Thus whatever path you follow,} \\
\text{Follow consequently.}\]

\[24\] Calderón’s ‘memorias de apariencias’ (productions notes) do not specify the painted backdrop, though this could well be down to the fact it seems patently obvious that the action of the play would demand such a visual representation against which the action is played.

\[25\] El mágico prodigioso in Calderón de la Barca, Comédias, Scene III, vv. 1-320. As elsewhere, my translation, unless otherwise indicated.
The **DAEMON** evades **CYPRIAN**’s better instinct, however, and pounces on his theological questions claiming to be broadly read, having formal acquaintance with divine matters and being, therefore, capable of holding theological dialogue to great depths. **CYPRIAN** hesitates at this point, suggesting that perhaps excess study and argumentation can only go so far as to show up one’s ignorance, moreover that it invites arrogance and he might be content to set aside his questions for the moment. To this, the **DAEMON** responds with enthusiastic praise of what he says is evidence in the scholar of the unprejudiced mind which theological inquiry requires, adding that where he comes from, in fact it is not learning but ignorance that leads to pride.26

_Such is truth… yet lacking study_  
_I, all the greater pride affected_  
_Vying for the Professorial chair_  
_Thought of nothing but to earn it…_  
_Now having failed is enough_  
_There being satisfaction,_  
_Glory plenty in the attempting.27_

**CYPRIAN**, persuaded that the stranger takes his study seriously, proceeds to lay out a contradiction in Pliny’s position that the supreme good, omniscience and all works of creation are attributable to the one God, for thus the status of the pantheon of the ancient gods would have to be resolved lest they represent redundantly “attributes” of God. Monotheism, **CYPRIAN**’s argument continues, would also saddle God causally with suffering and evil.

The **DAEMON**, fears being bested in the argument, and changes tactics, denying the thesis outright and cautioning that a natural theology cannot account for divine revelation which is beyond human understanding. He warns, furthermore, that such ‘depth’ of theological enquiry is ill advised, for in the end ‘…’tis providence, / [That] more good may have arisen / To the loser in that battle/ Than its gain could bring the winner.’28 **CYPRIAN** insists, however, in pursuing the argument trusting that he might yet glean a deeper truth from his theological texts, at least to the effect that

_…there must be_  
_One sole God, all hands, all vision,_  
_Good Supreme, supreme in grace,_

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26 Shelley’s translation, sensible to Calderon’s verse, reads: "DAEMON…For in the country whence I come the sciences / Require no learning—they are known. CYPRIAN Oh, would / I were of that bright country! For in this / The more we study, we the more discover / Our ignorance’ Shelley, p. 411.

27 Calderón de la Barca, Comédias, Scene III, vv. 1-320.

28 Calderón de la Barca, _The wonder-working magician_, Scene III, p. 23.
One who cannot err, omniscient,
One the highest, none can equal,
Not beginning, yet Beginner…
And though He in one or two
Or more persons be distinguished,
Yet the sovereign Deity
Must be one, sublime and single. 29

At this, the DAEMON feigns defeat and sees himself offstage, though not before vowing, in an aside to the audience, to derail CYPRIAN from truth by luring him away from theology towards the lustful pursuit of the feminine sex. Thus, the DAEMON bounds down the road leading to the feast in Antioch where, the night still being young, many a young reveller eagerly awaits his arrival. 30

2. Theological thrust on the Calderonian stage

The Calderonian stage, as we have said, dramatizes (somewhat crudely) oppositions of will (God’s claim over his creature and man’s refusal of revelation), the witness of the Church and resistance from the world, good/evil, and so forth. Some critics have compared this dramatic play of light against dark to the chiaroscuro and tenebroso techniques evident in the works of Velásquez, Murillo and Zurbarán, Calderon’s painter contemporaries. 31 Whether or not Baroque aesthetics explain his theological approach to the stage, Calderon’s dramatization of conflicts between earthly/spiritual realities, and considering the theocratic setting of his day, show that life’s fuller dimensions are only appreciated in the revelatory light of divine witness from the Gospels, the Church and the lives of the saints. In The

29 Calderón de la Barca, Comélias, Scene III, vv. 1-320.
30 Ibid., p. 422. The Wonder-Working Magician is in fact an interesting combination of martyr play and romance. The play continues with the DAEMON manipulating the beauty of the young maiden JUSTINA against CYPRIAN, thus forcing him to offer his soul in bond for her love. Both find themselves imprisoned by the pagan king of Antioch. God’s providence intervenes, however, to save them from the DAEMON’s spell, when they find themselves castaway and imprisoned in pagan Antioch. Learning that the young maiden is in bonds for her faith in the one true God, CYPRIAN is moved to conversion. The two then confess Christian love to one another. In the DAEMON’s final scheme, however, the pagan sovereign of that country demands on pain of death that they recant their Christianity; they refuse, choosing instead to offer themselves for martyrdom in exchange for their newfound Love for God and for one another. It is noteworthy that in this final scene, taking parting with Tertullian’s (or Augustine’s) objection to bloody scenarios, Calderon’s stage direction insists on the spectacular sight of ending with ‘the bodies and severed heads staged as seems best, …while the DAEMON looks down aloft his serpent’. Calderón redeems the horror of sparagmos on stage, however, in the play’s coda, when the DAEMON, realizing that the sight will seem a beautiful oblation in God’s eyes, falls screaming into the abyss behind the back drape.
Prodigy Enchanter, we see divine revelation prevail over opposing forces so that, in the end, CYPRIAN comes to faith in a public act which also becomes a testimony to God’s glory. The extraordinary nature of the events amazes the unbelievers around him who, humanly speaking, have no resources to make sense of them. The pagan king thus dismisses CYPRIAN’s conversion, martyrdom and the DAEMON’s dying witness to divine triumph as mere signs of a magician’s enchantment while his henchmen are left bewildered, each declaring that ‘I am in doubt, / To believe them or reject them’, ‘The mere thought of them confounds me’.32 Neither response, however, is a final word; in the end, both are recast by the witness of CYPRIAN’s students (also present at the events) who affirm that if Christian conversion is the work of enchantment, it must be that God is a master enchanter, thus the only solution is to repent and become one of the enchanted.33 In the Calderonian stage, unbelief has a voice, but only in a penultimate sense of wanting ultimate fulfilment in faith.

Taking the theological thrust of the auto into account, it bears considering what it means that this is given action on stage as well as the way in which the secular stage takes particular shape in its encounter with Christianity.

If Calderon’s dualist conflicts seem to lack sophistication, his physical staging also lacks the synthetic appeal of the Shakespearean drama or the pictorial fluidity in Molière’s comedies.34 To the contemporary reader, a play like The Prodigy Enchanter may read as overly obvious and undeveloped in dramatic complications, each one introduced in speech rather than actions (hence appearing more lyrical than dramatic). It has been pointed out that Calderón succeeded in adding secondary plots to the dramatic thrust of his autos, thus layering the stage with greater dramatic interest than had done his predecessors.35 By comparison to the tragedies of his French contemporaries Corneille and Racine, however, the Calderonian stage appears

33 ‘Yo solamente resuelvo / Que, si él es mágico, ha sido / El mágico de los cielos.’ ‘Pues dejando en pie la duda / Del bien partido amor nuestro / A el mágico prodigioso / ‘Pedid perdón de los yerros.’ Calderón de la Barca, Comédias, Scene XXVII.
34 For example, Calderón keeps to his contemporaries’ convention of dividing scenes on character entrances and exits, though for him these could be as short as a few lines spoken by a single character on stage, thus giving the staging an unintended feel of being caught out by its own contrivance.
35 See, Stroud.
two-dimensional, specially when exploiting stock characters as the galán, the dama and the gracioso: the dandy, the noble lady and comic servant, respectively. Moreover, if Calderon’s Spanish contemporaries composed in agreement with or in detachment from the formal conventions of the Aristotelian drama (which limited the stage, for example, to three characters at any one time, restricted the time and place in which the action took place, and conceded primacy to plot), none of this is evident in his work. Setting aside his comedies, ‘capa y espada’ (honour) dramas and other specifically non-theological plays, however, Calderon’s theological effort in the auto in a real sense determines the aesthetic dimensions of that particular genre so that the play entertains as an act in itself while at the same time directing the audience toward realities above and beyond the theatrical event.

This synthesis of dramatic entertainment and theological efficacy may be observed from another direction: the Christian mindset which Calderón assumes in his audience, in allowing theological dramatics onstage as a truthful representation of life as it actually is, conceives of the stage as metaphor for the world as God’s theatre of the world. His theological drama does not, therefore, require full-blooded incarnations in the actors, in the scenery, or in the stories themselves. As metaphors, it is enough that they figure in action the drama of humanity under God. On the other hand, in the sacramental drama, whatever depth is lacking in such secular theatre aesthetics as character impersonation, plot construction, the mechanics of stage representation, etc., when employed for the sake of enacting a theological vision of the world, is paid with added values such as beauty in its faithfulness to the Word, or the goodness of making known Truth in the immediacy of the dramatic experience. For Calderon’s audience, therefore, enacting in dramatic mode a theological telos (such as Cyprian’s conversion and martyrdom) means that the play is valued for entertainment as with any secular play, and that this becomes part of its success in dramatizing life as it would appear in divine perspective (‘gloria de la fe nuestra / todas de historias divinas’). It means that in dramatizing divine reckonings on the secular stage, the theatre, no less than the world, is given meaning in virtue of its being the locus for theo-dramatic action.

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36 Ibid.
37 ‘The glory of our faith, / of all stories divine’, as per Felix Lope de Vega’s understanding of the auto sacramental; cf. my footnote 14.
4.1.2a Calderón as Christian dramatist

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Calderón de la Barca’s theological drama is being enthusiastically introduced to Britain in more or less reliable translations of his Baroque verse (at the turn of the century, Percy Bysshe Shelley had penned a free translation of *The Prodigy Enchanter*, published posthumously as ‘Extracts from Calderón’). 38 He was proclaimed ‘The most Christian among Christians, most Catholic among Catholics’ by one such enthusiast and interpreter. 39 In 1856, Richard Chevenix Trench, Dean of Westminster and Archbishop of Dublin, undertakes a commentary and passage translation of Calderon’s *Life Is a Dream* (1635) and *The Great Theatre of the World* (c. 1633). 40 In his laudatory treatise, the erudite Trench 41 sees in Calderón a literary equal to those he deems ‘the first three’ dramatists of Western European theatre, namely, Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare. 42 Despite his contention that ‘comparison has been sometimes instituted between Calderón and Shakespeare, by friends of Calderón and by enemies – ‘the friends as injudicious as the enemies unjust’ 43 Trench himself does not hesitate, in a two chapter essay extolling Calderon’s genius, to reinforce the notion that the Spanish dramatist is of particular interest to an English speaking Christianity. His appreciation for Shakespeare is for a dramatist who is said to stage in secular terms ‘the riddle of life, without attempting to solve it’, while he considers Calderón exemplary of a theological expression and resolution of ‘the enigma of life’ in the medium of the theatre. 44 Trench is not entirely original in his reading, relying on

38 Cf. Shelley. As with most translators, Shelley used the literally-translated, but to my mind, easily-misconstrued title *The Wonder-Working Magician.*

39 Denis Florence Mac-Carthy, *Calderón's dramas: The wonder working magician; Life is a dream; The purgatory of Saint Patrick* (London: Henry S. King & Co., 1873).

40 In the preface (dated 1880) to the second edition of 1886, Trench notes that since its original publication (1856), the interest in Calderón in Britain, ‘though not absolutely non-existent, is exceedingly faint’.

41 Noted as the original proponent of the Oxford English Dictionary in a paper he presented to the Philological Society of London: Richard Chenevix Trench, *On some deficiencies in our English dictionaries* to which is added a letter to the author from Herbert Coleridge, Esq. *on the progress of the society's New English Dictionary*, 2 ed. (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1860).


43 Ibid., p. 79.

44 ‘Staging’ understood in terms of the theatrical production is for Trench of secondary concern, if it is a concern at all. In that regard, Fitzgerald’s translation of *Life is a Dream* is also instructive; he titles his version *Such Stuff as Dreams are Made Of*, after Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s poem of the same title (c.1900), possibly in attribution of the Shakespearean reputation among English speakers to
dramaturgs (and German translators of Shakespeare) Fredrick and August Schlegel whose work on Calderón had appeared in Spanische Theater (2 vols., 1803/1809). Trench’s immediate concern is to bridge the distance between Shakespeare and the less familiar Calderón for the English-speaking public. Trench does not merely transliterate Calderon’s dramatic merits for the English stage, however, but develops a running argument for the ‘Spanish Shakespeare’ as a dramatist of Catholic significance. His appeal to a Christian readership leads him to draw facile analogies and contrasts between Shakespeare and Calderón on concerns of Victorian morality codes for the stage; he tells his readers, for example, that unlike his English counterpart, Calderón’s comedy is marked by ‘the entire absence of grossness, of indecency, of double entendre from his plays’.

Trench’s work is in great part a literary apology for Calderón as a dramatist and a Christian, thus he raises him explicitly to the status of ‘Christian dramatist’, something that in his view even Shakespeare cannot claim. Quoting the Romantic Fredric Schlegel, he reinforces his own view that “In every situation and circumstance Calderón is, of all dramatic poets, the most Christian.” He cites the other sibling, August Schlegel, ‘who had not his brother’s Romanist sympathies to affect his judgement’, yet encouraged readers to characterize

the religious poetry of Calderón as one never-ending hymn of thanksgiving, ascending continually to the throne of God. Falling in, too, with the very point of his brother’s praise, “Blessed man!” he exclaims, “he had escaped from the wild laboratory of doubt into the stronghold of belief; from thence with undisturbed tranquillity of soul, he beheld and portrayed the storms of the world; to him human life was no longer a dark riddle.”

Calderón (though misquoting in the title Shakespeare’s The Tempest, IV.1). Ironically in doing this Fitzgerald removes the play from the realm of the Shakespearean theatre which had implicated itself in the idea of a theatrum mundi (we have noted the motto totus mundus agit histrionem of the Globe Theatre; the theatre’s name itself, of course, makes explicit the world-theatre metaphor). Fitzgerald asserts that the play is not intended for acting on the stage but rather aims to capture the imaginative elements of the Spaniard’s drama: ‘...much else (not all!) that defies sober sense in this wild drama, I must leave Calderón to answer for; whose audience were not critical of detail and probability, so long as a good story with strong, rapid, and picturesque action and situation, was set before them’. The play, then, is taken as an exercise for the literary imagination, though in placing the global perspective in tension with the imagination of Shakespeare’s speech, he dissolves it entirely and undramatically within the world of dream. †Edward Fitzgerald, Eight dramas of Calderón (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1906), p. 443, my italics.

45 Trench, From the Spanish of Calderón, p. 79.
46 Ibid., p. 2.
47 Ibid., pp. 2-3.
Trench appears to have been well aware that his work on the Calderonian drama would run counter to popular Christian opposition to theatre prevalent in his day; the treatise thus aims in three directions. On one hand, Trench wants to protect himself from the possible charge of perpetuating, through literary publication, what sermons and popular literature of the period were denouncing as the immoral influence of the stage on society. The busy traffic in pamphlets, tractates, and private publications typical of the nineteenth century outlining reasons why the stage is incompatible with the life of the believer seems to condition Trench’s Christian apology. At the same time Trench hopes to absolve Calderón from the accusation of immorality by placing his theatre in context of what he hopes readers will agree are nobler aspects of his life, including his service under Philip IV\textsuperscript{48} as court dramatist, chaplain and in his military role (at the quelling of Catalunya’s rebellion). Equally, he lionizes the dramatist for his theological training and for having taken holy orders in the latter part of his adventure-filled life. If more puritanical readers should still wish to reserve judgement or regard as morally suspect the playwright who in \textit{The Great Theatre of the World} puts God onstage in the personage of the ‘Director’, Trench offers the following:

That my own judgment does not agree with theirs who set him thus low in the scale of poetical merit, still less with theirs who charge him with that profound moral perversity, I need hardly affirm. …[Yet] I should have been little tempted to bestow the labour [this volume] has cost me on that which, as poetry, seemed to me of little value; and still less disposed to set forward in any way the study of a writer who, being what his earnest censurers affirm, could only exert a mischievous influence, if he exerted any, on his readers.\textsuperscript{49}

Finally, evidently anticipating the objections of Christian moralists who would fail to understand the significance of a Calderón to the Church, Trench drifts between defence and explication to present something of the theological subtlety evident in Calderon’s work. Trench’s entire essay, in fact, focuses on Calderon’s \textit{auto sacramental} and its development as a dramatic vehicle for theological exercise. For bishop Trench, the thesis of \textit{The Great Theatre of the World} in which ‘All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players\textsuperscript{50} marks the starting point for a theatre that acts within the drama of existence and, in turn, plays along

\textsuperscript{48} Immortalized in Diego de Velásquez’ painting ‘Las Meninas’ (1656-7).

\textsuperscript{49} Trench, \textit{From the Spanish of Calderón}, pp. 4-5.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p. 196, citing ‘As You Like It’, II.7, 139-167.
with the divine drama of creation, fall and redemption. For Calderón, Trench takes
pains to point out, this is no mere literary motif but rather a theatrical aesthetic
played in and through the dramatizing perspective offered in Christian tradition.

In his sacramental auto To Know Good and Evil Calderón lays his claim to theatre as
a space on which humanity’s contingency is perpetually rehearsed when he writes
that

[...]

The appearance of a purely existential drama in this passage—in which time is the
principal constraint on human will, the choice being to persevere “in character” until
“the end” (or not)—would seem to make God redundant to “existence” which itself
could be but self-referentially emergent in the human actor’s playing on the world
stage. Calderon’s dramaturgy, however, is theo-dramatic not existential.

51 To Know Good and Evil, in Calderón de la Barca, Comédias, p. 147, my translation.
52 So, it makes little sense that Brandt distinguishes what he sees as the ‘philosophical’ approach of
The Great Theatre of the World from the ‘religious plays’ featuring explicitly Christian themes. The
division can only work as an artificial convenience imposed by the contemporary secular stage and
overlooks the particularity of the Christian context in which Calderon’s drama is first played. For
example, could it have occurred to the 17th century groundling standing before the stage that the
theatrum mundi therein exploited was anything but an exposition of a doctrine of creation and
redemption? If not, how else could the scene of the final judgement be significant except as an
allegory of existence for its own sake—i.e., the unbearable ending of things. Brandt’s reduced
allegorical reading excludes both theological substance and religious sentiment behind the play,
particularly in proposing that the allegory served primarily as reinforcement of a ‘rigorously
conservative doctrine’ of class status in Baroque Spain which ‘most of us will reject out of hand’ (p.
xvii):

The point of The Great Stage of the World... was to teach a lesson by allegorical means.
... “[T]he theme of [the play] is to Demonstrate that since the world is a stage, certain important
conclusions follow... (pp. 113-14).†

[These touch on] the relation of social classes to each other and to the final end of human
existence, and of the nature of moral life in terms of individual social status [...] And the
lesson to be inculcated? It is that, status being divinely ordained, men in all ranks of society
may differ in their opportunities and their temptations; but all can achieve perfection (albeit by
different means) wherever they may happen to find themselves on the social ladder (pp. xv-
xvi).*
he merely implies God, leaving him “offstage”, but only to the extent that divine presence is simply assumed to be the real backdrop against which the human drama unfolds.\textsuperscript{53} We see this explicitly, then, in The Great Theatre of the World\textsuperscript{54} in which the divine act of creation gives meaning to the time and space within which mankind is given to play its part. Thus, we witness the dialogue between the DIRECTOR and the WORLD speaking of its role in the drama:

\begin{verbatim}
DIRECTOR
I your Maker, you the thing made,
Employ you
In a thing invented for my joy.
I mean to celebrate in this
My power infinitely great:   \[delight
For does not mighty Nature find her sole
In showing forth my divine right?
Now as we know it to be true \[show,
That the most pleasing entertainment is a
Stage interpretation as began
The Life of Man,
I choose that Heaven shall today
Upon your stage witness a play.
I, being audience and manager together,
Bid the company to gather…
I the Director, you the stage,
And for the actor, none but Man.
\end{verbatim}

\begin{verbatim}
WORLD
…Great theatre of the world
Shall I be where men act
Their parts, and each one may
Find everything in me
In every way arranged
As Thou hast set it down…
Thy miracles to stage […]
By means of a black drape
Which in its darkness shall
Stand for primeval chaos
But then…
…piercing through black vapours,
Two lamps will scatter beams
Of light throughout the playhouse.
Without which light there’s
Action none upon the stage.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{verbatim}

In the course of the drama, the individual characters will hear their cue to leave the stage spoken by a VOICE coming from offstage. The voice is audible only to the character concerned and, of course, to the audience so that they bear witness to the author’s positing of a meta-theatre which is both external and internal to the human

\textsuperscript{53} On the idea that God theatricalizes himself by his offstage presence in central texts of the Old Testament, see Shimon Levy. Levy uses theatrical production values (lighting, usage of space, costuming, etc.) to translate the drama inherent in Old Testament narratives (David and Bathsheba, Ruth, Song of Songs, Jonah, Samuel, etc.) for the contemporary reader who approaches the text as a Script for the religious life. Shimon Levy, The Bible as theatre (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2000).

\textsuperscript{54} Brandt uses ‘stage’ for \textit{teatro} in the play’s title and thereafter without explanation, so I have restored the English cognate closest to the original. Calderón de la Barca, The Great Stage of the World: an allegorical auto sacramental.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., pp. 2-3.
drama, the latter “mode” being contingent on the other. The drama is clearly of
religious significance and works within a particular system of belief. The success of
the Calderonian auto, however, is in drawing the public into its belief structure, as
exemplified here, by making them participants in a performance which only makes
sense in view of God.

4.1.2b Calderonian meta-theatre and theo-drama

The idea of metatheatre was first proposed as a way of describing the
momentousness of theatre’s reflection on itself as theatre, something which has the
added effect of interrogating reality about its own theatricality. The theory arose
from the need to explain theatre’s tendency to foreground the theatricality of
performance. This may be seen in the Shakespearean aside, or in final apologetic
addresses to the audience that reconcile the comedy’s pretence with reality, but is
most conspicuous in the play-within-the-play technique. Metatheatrical, it has been
observed, imposes a supra-dramatism over the play when characters or plot break
through the theatrical ‘fourth wall’, thus providing critical commentary on both the
play and on life’s drama, though from within the resources of the theatrical act.

Metatheatrical reach over theatre and life is aptly described in Peggy Phelan’s
interpretation of Lear’s love test imposed on his daughters as the play-within-play
architectonics on which King Lear is built:

As a piece of theatre set within the play, the love test functions as an
examination of what, if anything, distinguishes performance from the real. In
this sense, the love test is meta-theatrical and operates in much the same way as
The Mouse Trap in Hamlet. Shakespeare suggests that piling representation
upon representation will paradoxically fortify the real, and this reinforced
outline of the real will provide a resistant force against which performance can
be measured. In staging plays within plays, Shakespeare sets his now clichéd
proposition that “All the world’s a stage” against something that might disprove it.
This something would have to have an enigmatic and deeply surprising
nature about it – perhaps loyalty, a true heart, courage, guilt, or a still-
functioning conscience. Qualities of feeling are the core of Shakespeare’s sense

56 See, Hubert, Judd David, Metatheatre: the example of Shakespeare (Lincoln: University of

57 In a way that, for example, a canvas depicting a painter at work on his canvas, say Velázquez ‘Las
Meninas’, points to itself as being the work of the absent painter. Or, the way in which Magritte’s
painting of a pipe detaches from its own painterliness, as it were, to tell the viewer that ‘Ceci n’est pas
une pipe’ (in The Treason of Images, 1928/9).

58 So that the painting in our example, and not the artist, adopts for itself Rimbaud’s ‘Je est un autre’.
of character. His plays are fascinated by whether or not these virtues can be feigned or if they have a foundation, a robust architecture if you will, that will outlast the insubstantial pageants of theatricality tout court. In this sense, Shakespeare’s plays are absorbed by the limits of theatricality, an absorption that exploits theatricality in order to defeat it. In Shakespeare’s plays, conscience is buffeted by the temptations of theatre….

One of the consequences of metatheatrical theory is that theatrical aesthetics (i.e., the act of theatre) not an external telos (in any sense) determines the course of the action. In the narrowest sense, the metatheatrical critique proposes, that the end of theatre is theatre; at its most encompassing, that dramatic nature of life itself elicits self-reference in the dramatizing medium of theatre. Dramatic action may therefore effect moments in which dramatist, players and audience alike become conscious that they are party to the theatrical event: moments in which theatre accepts its limitations but also exploits its potentialities as “theatre”.

We saw this demonstrated in The Prodigy Enchanter; when the Daemon implicates the audience in his scheme against Cyprian’s life (‘Weaving round him the bewitchment / Of rare beauty […] one stroke, / Thus, two vengeances shall give me’), Calderón challenges his audience to assume dramatically an external, unseen grace which might yet turn the Daemon’s plot to divine purpose. In the end, God’s salvation drama emerges triumphant over the action, and Calderón’s auto as an instantiation of this eschatological promise.

A more extensive example is Goethe’s Faust who effectively becomes the playwright of his own drama when he sits down in his study to recompose Scripture (his creative overreach thus inviting the unrestrained ‘freedom’ offered by Mephistopheles):

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60 Cf. Lionel Able, Metatheatre: a new view of dramatic form (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963). Metatheatre has been inevitably associated with existential philosophy and understood almost exclusively as a twentieth-century theatrical tendency. Abel, however, applied the concept to plays covering the span of dramatic history. In this light, some work has gone into attempting to understand period drama and its use of world-theatre metaphors as metatheatre; these include Shearle Furnish who finds metatheatrical use in the Chester plays, the Wakefield Master shepherds’ plays and other Medieval drama (‘Metatheatre in the First Shepherds’ Play’, in Essays in Theatre, Vol. 7, No. 2 [May 1989], pp. 139-148); and Jeanne-Pierre Marquerlot, ‘Playing within the Play: Towards a Semiotics of Metadrama and Metatheatre’ in The show within: dramatic and other insets, English Renaissance drama 1550-1642 (Montpellier: Paul-Valéry University Press, 1990), pp. 39-49. Barbara Simerka applied meta-theatrical critique to (Calderón’s predecessor) Lope de Vega, particularly in bringing his play Feigning Truly / Lo fingido Verdadero into contemporary appreciation (‘Metatheatre and Skepticism in Early Modern Representations of the Saint Genesius Legend’, in Comparative Literature Studies, Vol. 42, no. 1, 2005, pp. 50-73).
We learn to seek a higher inspiration,  
A supernatural revelation—  
And where does this shine in its fullest glory,  
If not in that old Gospel story?  
Here is the Greek text; I am moved to read  
Its sacred words, I feel the need  
Now to translate them true and clear  
Into the German tongue I hold so dear.  
       [He opens a volume and prepares to write]  
‘In the beginning was the Word’: why, now  
…I must change that…  
There is some other rendering….  

The entire drama of Faust (1808) is of course framed by the metatheatrical ‘Prelude at the Theatre’ scene that opens the play. In it, Goethe articulates the dilemma that theatre, though aware of its own artifice, nevertheless struggles towards a meaningful representation of reality. In the ‘Prelude’, the director forges with the poet and the comedian a dramaturgic triunity to create a drama unlike any the world-theatre has seen. This scene is usually played in front of the curtain and always in direct reference to the audience who ‘labour up that straight / And narrow way’ to throng ‘Into our wooden paradise’:

My friends[,] tell me, you two have stood  
By me in bad times and in good:  
How shall we prosper now? […]  
The posts and boards are up, and it’s our job  
To give [the audience] a merry time of it.  
They’re in their seats, relaxed, eyes opened wide,  
Waiting already to be mystified.  
I know how to content popular taste; […]  
And yet they are appallingly well-read.  
How shall we give them something fresh and new,  
That’s entertaining and instructive too? […]  
Only the poet’s magic so holds sway  
Over them all: make it, my friend, today!”

Metatheatrical critique has been an important aspect of contemporary dramatic theory and, as proposed by Lionel Abel, has been specially applied to the modern tendency for dramatists in the role of their characters to question and judge reality from within the dramatizing medium of the theatre:

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62 Ibid., I.1.2, p. 4.
In Abel’s view, metatheatre is a kind of theatrical antiform filling the void left after the collapse of human kind’s faith in an ordered universe. Bereft of comforting moral absolutes, Abel perceives that modern playwrights and characters within plays are faced with a dilemma best articulated in the drama of Pirandello and Beckett. These modern playwrights and their characters feel compelled to question every assumption. Characters query not only the fate assigned them by their playwrights, but even the genres of the play in which they find themselves trapped. In the modern (meta)theatre, “only that life which has acknowledged its inherent theatricality can be made interesting on the stage.”

Metatheatrical critique has also been used to make sense of Greek drama, comedy and tragedy alike, in which the dramatizing structure is redoubled with the use of the chorus. The chorus might spectate and comment lyrically on the action, but it can also raise questions not evident to the characters involved, thereby dramatizing the perspective of the audience (and the author) upon the action. Ringer’s understanding of this aspect of theatrical aesthetics in the Greek drama is particularly instructive. The plot details of the The Women of Trachis (Sophocles, c. 401 BCE) which Ringer subjects to the metatheatrical critique are not of concern at this point, but rather insight into the dramatizing perspective of the chorus in their overt reference to the audience—the theatron as the locus of the action, and the omnipresent witness of the Helios:

The chorus, in its [elevated] parados, calls attention to the performative realities of the drama with its sonorous invocation to the sun, Ἀλιος Ἀλιος. These young Trachinian women call on the sun to reveal the whereabouts of Heracles to the audience, those sitting in the theatre and that most important audience-member-within-the-play…. The sun was one of the most prominent features of performance within the Theatre of Dionysus. It blazed down on the orchestra, illuminating and uniting actors, audience, and performance space. The play will enable the sun to “reveal” Heracles. Before the tragic day has ended, Heracles will be brought into the orchestra. Natural sunlight will both activate and reveal the ravages of the burning robe that consumes his body and brings the prophesies of Zeus to fulfilment. The sun is evoked as the ultimate spectator for the events unfolding in the theatron or “seeing place.” Of all the spectators in the Theatre of Dionysus, the sun has “the strongest eyes” (κρατιστεύων κατ’ ομμα).  

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65 Ringer, p. 54.
As this passage shows, the theatrical act can be made to play against its own theatricality so that it is experienced as an intensified form of reality. Metatheatre, therefore, provides both an exploded view of specific places in which theatre pulls on the limits of the real, and a panoramic view which projects theatre and reality onto a single phenomenological plane. With this understanding in mind, it should be evident how Calderon’s auto, as the passage from The Great Theatre of the World illustrates, projects onto the human actor moving images of the Welttheater, but implicitly also of theatre as Gottestheater. In this sense, the Calderonian stage may be said to be meta-theatrical, though only in virtue of it also being theo-dramatic. For if the Sophoclean chorus referred the audience by way of the theatrical event to the eyewitness of the sun-god, Calderon’s auto places his audience in a moment of responsiveness to God’s abiding action on the world-stage (as Creation, society, the Church, the theatre itself, etc.).

This interpretation differs significantly from Barbara Louise Mujica’s existential critique of the seventeenth-century dramatist who, in her view, affords the luxury of presuming a role for God (a luxury she considers lost to her situation in twentieth-century literary critique) but only at the expense, she claims, of reason. Mujica’s application of twentieth-century existentialist literalism to Calderon’s dramatic character is in itself not without merit, raising important questions of freedom and identity, of the distance between being given a role to play and playing it willingly. Furthermore, she probes ‘the type of character—free and en situation—which is the hallmark of existentialist fiction’ and its formative moments in character indecision on the Calderonian stage. Mujica’s use of existentialism seems overly optimistic, however, when she tells us that Calderon’s submission of reason to theological scrutiny is an anachronism from which her literary age is exempt. Her thesis—an existentialist, a-theological critique of what she says is a religiously ‘engagé’ Calderón—opposes irreconcilably the dramatist’s faith and his use of reason:

Cyprian is guided by reason, but he is saved by faith. […] For the existentialist—even for the Christian existentialist—the problem is quite different. For twentieth-century man, religion is no longer inviolable by human reason. Religion is perceived as another human system, subject to inquiry. Calderón excludes religion from his criticism of the will to rationalize, but existentialism does not. The existentialist writers have by and large seen religion as simply another means of imposing meaning on a[n otherwise]
meaningless universe and comfortably justifying human existence while assuaging man’s fears about death. […] God corresponds to that which is egotistical in us, to our inner self. The “authentic,” unreasonable or a-reasonable self… is in all of us the antithesis of the other human reality, the rational self. […] Unlike seventeenth-century man, [however], twentieth-century man can no longer use the inadequacy of human reason as an argument to reinforce blind faith. He can no longer leave faith unquestioned. Unlike Calderon’s CYPRIAN… for twentieth-century man, reason is a constant hindrance to faith. The Christian existentialist must justify his faith in the face of the menace of reason. He must consciously choose to believe in spite of reason. […] For the seventeenth-century fideist, such justifications were unnecessary and even unthinkable. […] The seventeenth-century fideist did believe; he did not choose to believe.66

Rodriguez and Tordera, taking an alternative view, however, see in the Calderonian stage implicit trust that the theatrical performance of the word, versified and metered, could be a medium in which faith’s incipit inquires after an explicit in reason. ‘It is evident in Calderón’, they write, ‘that the stage play abandons the obsession with realism, grounds on which it also departs from slavish servility to prose. Derivations of metre then come to the fore, [are made] possible, given the imposition of a public which must at every moment “re-cognize” through the dramaturge’s strategy at the level of the verb’. Calderon’s theologically informed drama, in other words, does not exempt reason from the ‘performance’ of faith.67

Calderon’s use of secular dramatics, then, takes a decidedly theological turn in The Great Theatre of the World, when God in the guise of the DIRECTOR68 of the world drama exits onto the stage.69 “God” himself making an onstage appearance

66 Barbara Louise Mujica, Calderon’s characters: an existential point of view (Barcelona: Puvill-Editor, 1980), pp. 267-270.
68 Director is merely a modern equivalent of the name Calderon uses (Autor) indicating that the character has authorial command over the production.
69 The point regarding characters on the Spanish stage, including, in our example, the divine Author, making an exit onto the stage rather than the typical entrance in the English-speaking theatre is minor but not entirely without significance. This mode of entry implies, on the phenomenological reading (i.e., as experience from the side of the actor and audience), that characters have some place from which to exit and therefore exist prior to their appearance on stage: he or she ‘lives’, in some sense, independently of the stage. This points minimally to the “risk” borne by the dramatis persona when exiting the safety of authorial intent and entering into the interpretive dimension of the actor/audience. The priority of the dramatic character relative to the audience and actor acquires some theological significance in the context of the auto sacramental. For while it is the case, of course, that the actor enters the stage from the wing, in the auto the dramatic person exits an unconditioned priority and becomes present to both actor and audience. The secular aesthetics of the stage means ‘encountering’ the real through the medium of the particular. The auto is a distinctly theological medium, however,
represents such radical departure from nineteenth-century British stage convention that Trench advises his reader to reconsider Calderón according to his original dramatic thrust, but specially his theological intention, for ‘what was not intended profanely or even over-boldly, but in strong religious earnestness and reverence, must be taken in no other sense by [the reader]’.

Still, not wishing to have the charge of blasphemy laid at Calderon’s (or his) door, and in defence of the possibility that there is something meaningful behind his (and Calderón’s) claim of ‘Christian drama’, Trench urges the reader that if he is ‘unable so to take it, he will do best in not proceeding any further’. Indeed, what the Spanish dramaturgo proposes in The Great Theatre of the World is an exploration of divine reckonings in profane spaces.

In the play, the director exits into the playing area and summons the world into existence. The world, obeisant to its Author’s fiat, comes into the play fully cognizant of its origin and sustenance in the Creator, thus Calderón cues the audience to see both the stage play and themselves at “play” with God. The world is therefore blessed to play its part and vows to act according to the will of the Creator in furnishing time and setting for the play; thus,

\[
\text{All things now provided stand} \\
\text{That to the end, this comedy} \\
\text{May be acted worthily} \\
\text{Which for mortal men is planned}^7
\]

As he distributes various parts to the company of actors—beauty, the king, a rich man, the beggar, a laborer to work the land, and so on—the director advises them that no role is lesser or greater but all parts must be played in view of their Author and of the dramatic mission given to each, the beggar’s vain complaint not withstanding:

\[
\text{All things now provided stand} \\
\text{That to the end, this comedy} \\
\text{May be acted worthily} \\
\text{Which for mortal men is planned}^7
\]

insofar as perspectival precedence (i.e., the world theatre) proceeding from faith (i.e., as God’s theatre) are consummated on the stage. In the auto, then, an exit onto the stage may describe something of the missional opening of the divine drama onto the secular stage.

70 Trench, From the Spanish of Calderón, p. 177, my emphasis.

71 Trench goes further in his attempt to quell the possible charge of blasphemy when asserting apologetically that although with this play Calderón soars ‘on loftier wing’ than in other allegories, ‘this one, [is] rather ethical than theological, [and] offers itself to me as more within the sympathies of all, and [is] less likely to startle’. Ibid., p. 176-177.

72 Ibid., pp. 180-81.
The King, meanwhile, demurs at being entrusted with a role bearing such responsibility—‘Of all errors ’twere the worst / In this so mysterious play / To mistake’—but receives assurance from the Director and accepts. The others protest that they are unrehearsed and are therefore bound to miss their cues. The Director is sympathetic but reassures them that ‘life is a play which must be acted without rehearsing’; it is for Him to call their entrances and exits, and it falls to Him, in the end, to cue the curtain.74 It is for them, however, to set loose upon the stage and exercise freedom to create a play within the play. This freedom is assured by the Director’s talent so that whatever dangers might inhore in the theatrical frame, have been borne by the Director for the sake of a redemption drama. Stage fright, for the theological players, is an unavoidable part of the ‘Legacy Adam has to us consigned’,75 because it is not evident to them why God has chosen the ‘thing’ of the play in which to delight himself and his players, and not no-thing. However, should they lose their way and falter in the performance, the Director’s prompter, the Law of Grace, will intercede to right the drama in light of the intent which inspired the play in the first instance.

73 Ibid., pp. 178-180, alterations made to preserve the trochaic meter.
74 Two doors are placed upstage, one bearing the figure of a creche, the other that of a coffin, through which the characters pass from the audience’s view at the direction of Grace the prompter.
75 Trench, From the Spanish of Calderón, p. 184.
It is not lost on Calderón that critiques like Tertullian’s and Augustine’s precede him to the stage, namely that dramatization implies an antithesis to truth: feigning in the case of the actor, fictionalizing from the author, suspended disbelief on the part of an audience, because to theatricalize is to make life itself relative to the aesthetics of the theatre: to take a cosmic view, as it were, through the narrow keyhole of the stage. Calderón, however, in enacting through theatrical means a theological perspective on the world, also dramatizes what it means for theatre to exist as theological action. His theatre (in contrast to existentialist turns in contemporary use of metatheatre, without denying the divisions between theatre and life), prevents the possibility that an audience might retain an objectifying distance from the stage: to be entertained but not moved by the Authorial intent which Calderón presupposes in his drama. To do otherwise would be to dissolve the theatrical representation of life seen from God’s perspective into mere image. Casting his audience as actors, actors as characters, and characters as bearers of authorial intent, far from making them servile to the temporary “put on” of the stage aesthetics of “play”, rather calls into being theatre as a concretized expression of the theological drama in which God reveals himself in action. In Calderón’s theatre, therefore, *dramatis personae*—here again including both those who act for the characters and those for whom they are acted—are imaged truthfully and to the extent that his aesthetics assume divine perspective to be primary, creative, and enlivening of human action: meta-theatre thus making way for theodrama.

### 4.1.2c Calderón’s theological dramatics

We have shown that in Calderón’s theological theatre, distinctions between life/theatre are never sublated and that the theatrical act remains a secular attempt to stage something of the theological drama. There are no grounds in his Christian drama for confusing acting and “acting” (the very fallacy on which Jonas Barish thought to have indicted Tertullian). To this end, audience and performers contribute to the theatrical event out of the resources of their own existence—i.e., actors don their parts, and the audience enjoys the performance as a *comedia*, understood most fully as ‘a play on life’.\(^{76}\) At the same time, actors and audience perform their roles in

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\(^{76}\) The artificiality of drama/comedy as dominant dramaturgical divisions is shown up by the variety possible on the ‘play on life’ in Calderón’s repertory, depending on their medium and purpose, to include comedies of confusion, gallantry and courtly love dramas, *zarzuelas* (musical shows), pastoral
common: actors play the roles they are given in the drama, an audience participates as nothing less than characters existing outside the drama but inside the “theatre” event. This external/internal perspective is a feature of Calderonian dramaturgy that resonates also with proponents of metatheatre. Contrary to twentieth century (non-theological) movements in theatre, however, Calderon’s dramatization of existence resists dissolving reality into mere images captured by the representational act: Calderon’s is not a theatre for theatre’s sake.

Tertullian had suspected theatre of rupturing representation from reality, thus “proving” that theatre was pure artifice and, therefore, entailed an idolatrous acquiescence to the drama’s draw on the imagination. For Tertullian, the very notion of representation (‘simulacrorum’) was theologically offensive (arguably, wary of the ritualistic claim that performing the theologically-motivated play obligated the god, in one way or another, to “perform”). Theatre therefore came under the charge of idolatry because the image itself, whether concretized in media or, again, ‘in picturings of the imagination’, was considered mankind’s primary sin, ‘cum tota substantia eius mendax sit’ (the making of which is mendacity) leading the creature away from the Creator:

Idolatry is the chief crime of mankind, the supreme guilt of the world…. For even if every sin retains its own identity and even if each is destined for judgement under its own name, each is still committed within idolatry. […] The idolater is at the same time a murderer[:] whom has he killed? Not a stranger nor an enemy, but himself. …With what weapon? Affront to God. […] But …the daemon had brought into the world the makers of statues, portraits [imaginum] and every kind of representation, […] this primitive practice so pernicious to man… Thenceforth every form of art producing an idol in any way became a summit of idolatry.77

In light of Tertullian’s singular stance against images as such, however, it bears pointing out, as von Balthasar has done thoroughly, that image is insufficient a medium through which theological truth may be apprehended. Von Balthasar

idylls, ‘sword and cloak’ plays, Christian reworkings of mythological themes, shows on the lives of the saints, sacramental pageantry, heroics, etc. In any case, as Brandt reminds us, ‘the distinction between the different genres is not always clear [hence] these plays were called autos (i.e., ‘acts’). […] Allegorical plays, similar to English… morality plays, …were called farsas sacramentales[,] but] farsa is not to be rendered by the word ‘farce’ any more than comedia, the characteristically Spanish three-act play that disregarded the unities and mixed comedy with tragedy, should be translated as ‘comedy’. Calderón de la Barca, The Great Stage of the World: an allegorical auto sacramental, p. ix.

77 Tertullian, De idolatria, II.1.1, 3.2 respectively.
indicated that a genre more involving, particular, social and anticipatory\textsuperscript{78} is required if we are to speak truthfully of God’s action, internal to his Trinitarian movement, and externally, Incarnate in Christ. For von Balthasar, therefore, theatre lends itself most aptly for the work of theology because “The ‘forms’, ‘pictures’, ‘symbols’ which an ‘aesthetics’ can present… are insufficient in themselves to interpret revelation in its absolutely unique, definitive form and in terms of a theological ‘universal validity’.\textsuperscript{79} Even if we suspect that von Balthasar, in his own right and in Quash’s critical exposition, makes a claim too great for theatre to bear comfortably—in what sense can theatre give expression to ‘the ways of God’?—we can understand more fully that theatre, as a place where word is concretized into action, is given precedence in his theological phenomenology of divine/human encounter. As Quash has put it succinctly,

Von Balthasar is able to observe drama’s unique suitability for giving expression to the ways of God; the form as well as the content of God’s revelation of himself to us. This is because the self-revelation of the living God also has to do with ‘what-is-going-forward’…. For von Balthasar that which is revealed to us in Christ is not, in [Francesca] Murphy’s words, ‘a luminous icon, crystallized into immobile perfection. It is the beauty of an action. It shows the dramatic movement within the Trinity to us’. […] God’s life itself, then, as revealed to us, is somehow dramatic. Equally, our relationship to that life, because it has inescapably dramatic features, is singularly well-expressed in the terms which drama offers….\textsuperscript{80}

Calderon’s age, of course, assumes Christianity in a way which was not possible for Tertullian or Augustine (and which is not possible in our arguably post-Christian context). This means that emergence of divine perspective in the aesthetics of the secular stage casts the moving images of theatre in a new light.

Lacking Calderon’s theoretical understanding for inserting theatre into the theological sphere,\textsuperscript{81} we can postulate that his theological understanding of Salvation

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{78} As summed up by Quash, \textit{Theology and the drama of history}, p. 37.
\item \textsuperscript{79} Ibid., p. 38.
\item \textsuperscript{80} Ibid., pp. 37-38.
\item \textsuperscript{81} A fact exploited by Barbara Kurtz in developing her thesis that the Calderonian text itself provides theoretical reflection on the dramaturgy which sustains the allegorical drama:
\end{itemize}

…Calderón left no treatise on allegory; indeed, he produced no single, sustained piece of writing on the subject…. What he did leave us are dozens of comments on allegory scattered throughout his allegorical \textit{autos}. One of the curiosities, and one of the charms, of Calderon’s \textit{autos} is the frequency with which the personified characters pause in the midst of their spiritual and theological travails to discourse learnedly, and often at some length, about the
in God’s self-revealing love for humanity in Christ and in the history of the Church, demanded a dramatizing witness in the form of theatre. We have seen, on the other hand, how the world-stage metaphor compelled Calderon’s thinking beyond the immediacy of the material stage; that theatre effectively asserted itself as a locus for working out the implications of the world as God’s world. Moreover, the real divisions between existence/performance, theology/dramaturgy, Church/theatre and so forth are given true dimensional depth when the theatrical event as a whole plays up to an Authorial ‘horizon of meaning’. So, Ben Quash, following the Balthasarian understanding, speaks of theatre’s opening to the theological plane thus:

There is, as I have argued, a vital unframeability to the dramatic experience. But the admission that ‘the end we do not know’ cannot, for drama to work, be just an admission of resignation. It must rather be the admission of an ongoing, consuming involvement in a work of interpretation by which the audience invests itself, in some way, in what the outcome of these events will be. Without anticipating – we might say, without hope – there is no drama.

Von Balthasar is also absolutely committed to the importance of the audience’s hopeful orientation to a horizon of meaning in its experience of drama: it is here, above all, that he sees the worldly ‘phenomena’ of drama (which for him, in this case, are theatrical plays) pointing towards an essential feature of theodramatic relation of the creature to God. The theatre, he says, ‘holds fast to the question’ of how human existence relates to what is ‘all embracing’ (das Umgreifende). ‘And so long as the question continues to be put, we can still hope for an answer. To that extent the theatre, in the background, is making its own contribution to fundamental theology’. On [this] basis… (gleaned from consideration of the [theatrical] ‘phenomena’) it may be concluded that drama as an art form is uniquely positioned to manifest complex, plural, multiply interpreted truth in changing circumstances.

In this view, the drama of existence and its manifestation in theatre, are (but) consequent to their meaning in Divine perspective. Calderon’s theatrical self-awareness, then, is defined by the tensility of theatre as a metaphor for the world, and by a faithful and suitable response to God in and through the theatre. Calderon’s accomplishment as a theological dramatist, therefore, was to choreograph the action of the auto along the contours of action-metaphors, thus creating on the stage with

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82 To reconfigure von Balthasar’s metaphor, *Theo-Drama* I, p. 265

83 Quash, *Theology and the drama of history*, p. 35, citing TD1, p. 20.
the unseen assurance that the substance of acting/“acting” could only be appreciated in the fullness of divine seeing.

In this sense, for von Balthasar, Calderon’s drama represents some of the earliest theological encounters with theatre. His *Theo-Drama* resonates with Calderon’s theological exploration of the world-stage through a theatre in which author, actors and audiences converge to dramatize life in perspective of the God who dramatizes himself in the person of Christ and, in his Spirit-inspiring action in the world.

Von Balthasar understood the dynamics of the Calderonian stage as something of an inevitable development in the history of Christianity. He held that insofar as ‘life manifests a fundamental urge to observe itself as an action exhibiting both meaning and mystery’, Christian audiences learned to accept theatricalization in language made visible and in pictures brought to life as an immediate experience of tensions and resolutions that play out in the drama of existence; to accept, therefore, that something authentic is effected in the theatrical act:

As human beings, we already have a preliminary grasp of what drama is; we are acquainted with it from the complications, tensions, catastrophes and reconciliations which characterize our lives as individuals and in interaction with others, and we also know it in a different way from the phenomenon of the stage (which is both related to life and yet at a remove from it). […] The task of the stage is to make the drama of existence explicit so that we may view it. For the stage drama… transforms the event into a picture that can be seen and thus expands aesthetics into something new (and yet continuous with itself), while at the same time it is already translating this picture into speech.85

It must be emphasized that while von Balthasar remained as certain about the future of theatre as he was optimistic that the history of drama would yield an analogy of action for theology, his particular use of ‘picture’ and ‘mirror of life’ metaphors for the theatre also tend to undermine the theatre’s potentialities for presenting the drama of existence truthfully. To his mind, theatre could only reflect reality indirectly, depicting life, therefore, ambiguously and imperfectly. In the end, for the Catholic theologian, what remains authentic in theatre is its ‘fundamental urge’ to say

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84 TD I, pp. 78-79, cited in Nichols, p. 19, my emphasis.
85 TD I, p. 17, cited in Ibid., p. 11.
something truthful about life, apart from which he reserves the right to hold the act itself to theological suspicion.

His exposition of theatre nevertheless presses towards an understanding that when pinning its aesthetic dimensions on the theological warrant for existence, theatre can present visibly something of the supra-realism of the God who is both above the drama of life and also within it. In this sense, the drama of God’s action in the world is the logos to which a theatre like Calderon’s bears witness: it is the Tatwort, the ‘effective deed’ from which his theo-drama takes its meaning. For von Balthasar, then, the drama of existence can only be understood in view of God’s self-dramatization in the world:

The Father seems to remain above the play since he sends the Son and the Spirit; but in fact he could not involve himself more profoundly than by thus sending them: ‘God so loved the world that he did not spare his only Son, but gave him up for us all’… The Son dedicates himself to the world’s salvation just as eternally as the Father does; from before all time, he pledges himself to bring the world to the Father, through his Cross, for the good (the ‘very good’) of the world. And even after accomplishing his earthly mission, when he seems to ‘wait’ for the end, he fills this period of waiting with his kingly and even bellicose activity. Thus, having overthrown the last enemy, he acts as Judge, subsequently to hand the kingdom over to the Father. As for the Spirit, the incorruptible ‘witness’ who registers all things objectively, he is also the ‘love of God poured forth’ throughout the entire drama; he is profoundly involved from within, right to the very end, and ‘with sights too deep for words’ he moves the tangled drama on towards its solution, ‘the glorious freedom of the children of God’.

In this sense, Calderon’s auto theatricalized the world in perspective of theological realities: that God exists, that he reveals himself to mankind in the Son

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87 TD III, p. 514. Ellipsed scriptural reference as follows: a John 3.16 and Romans 8.32, b Hebrews 10.13, c 1 Corinthians 15.25, d Revelation 19.1ff., e Romans 5.5, f Romans 8.22ff. Nichols takes this passage as something of a manifesto central to von Balthasar’s understanding of what the drama entails theologically. In effect, it also becomes the measure by which von Balthasar judges the authenticity of the theatrical act. Hence, if theatre is or has been the expression of life’s urge to see itself reflected truthfully, and if in doing so theatre can point to the supra-dramatics of the world in divine perspective, then theatre may be a worthy resource for theological apprehension. Cf. Nichols, pp. 132-133.
thus calling for the particularity of the Christ-centred life; that the Spirit bears witness to this thus leading to conversion. Theatre as secular spectacle, therefore, becomes ‘effective action’ for theological reflection. Aidan Nichols, following von Balthasar, makes this point in terms arguably more accessible from the point of view of the dramatist when he writes that the theatre is ‘the linguistic portrayal in graspable form of the drama of existence itself’,

> Where better to look, then, not only for a speculative grasp of the divine irruption into existence which is the dramatic event of the Word of God, but also for encouragement to us personally to enter into relations with the theodrama and play out our rôles by way of response to that singular divine action which spans the successive covenants of creation and Old and New Testaments, and leads up to their prospective consummation at the eschaton, the end of time.\(^{88}\)

The significance of Calderon’s drama is precisely that it leads the actor in his drama – both as audience participant and as stage performer – to consider the theatricality inherent in the fact of a world which exists but in divine perspective. Theatre, because it entails action, cannot be performed in mere contemplation of moving images; in raising the spectator to partake in its own perspective on life as a dramatic event, it cannot but demand that the participant consider her life thereafter in light of the sublimity afforded her by the view. Calderon’s drama, moreover, in its theological particularity, raises the theatre itself above its own resources for (metatheatrical) speculation. It raises the theatre, that is, to object of theological action, hence to theo-drama in the most defining sense of the term.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., p. 12.
If the “for us” of the Cross is recognized to be inclusive, mankind is part of the drama of the Cross whether it wishes to be or not. The Church of Christ, knowing this mystery and believing in it, is consciously a part of it, particularly since, on the night Jesus was betrayed, he himself endowed her with this knowledge in the form of an action that ensured her involvement: “Do this in memory of me.” In her actions (drama, that is, “doings”, from the Greek drao), the Church is always related, at least indirectly, to the Paschal drama. As a result, the celebration of the Eucharist has often been described as a dramatic action.¹

THE QUÆM QUÆRITIS AND ANTI-THEATRE THEATRICAL THEORY: A THEODRAMATIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE (SECULAR) THEATRICAL ACT

I. APPROACHING THEATRE’S SECULARITY THEOLOGICALLY

1. The problem of theatre’s origins in archaic religion

Our attempt to gain theological insight on the theatrical phenomenon in light of theories of the secular stage is inevitably complicated by the prevailing view that theatre’s origins are in religion. The theory has been so compelling as to define the theatrical genius of twentieth century directors such as Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Handke and others who have emphasized theatre’s appeal as pseudo-religious ritual, or as ritual without religion. The theory has it that the theatre of antiquity, having ‘evolved’ from Dionysiac ritual, retained a religious instinct, in its genetic make up, as it were, evident in the serious orientations which theatre took in its tragic form.¹ Then, late in the late tenth century, following a period of theatrical dormancy—variously attributed to disappearance of classical dramatic texts, ecclesial/state suppression, social marginalization of actors, lack of professional cohesion, etc.—theatre is said to have been re-formulated from ritual elements of Christian worship in a manner analogous to the religious origins of the archaic

¹ We have already alluded to the fact that historically comedy was not seen as competent in presenting the Greek sense of life’s ‘inevitability’, that is, its seriousness. Comedy was seen, roughly, as the dramatization of what could be, whether in the obviously derogatory sense of entertaining wishfulness or, less obviously, in the sense of a hope-filled imaginary, hence as the art of life as if. In antiquity, neither orientation was considered to equal tragedy’s supposed presentation of life as is. Cartledge sees evidence of comedy’s second-class status in its very origins, in the fact that comedy writers were invited to participate in the Dionysia theatrical competitions some fifteen years after tragedy’s initial inclusion.

 Those scholars who wish to argue for a strong intrinsic connection between the worship of Dionysus and tragic drama are obliged therefore to make their case in other terms, insisting for instance on the common factor of alienation… aided by such artificial devices as masks. Dionysus’ connection with comedy was much more obvious, indeed etymological; kômos meant literally song accompanying the quintessentially Dionysiac wine-fuelled kômos or programme of the… Dionysia festival….†

Comedy’s etymological link to Dionysiac feasting is not unsupported (Aristotle claims this, with some qualification, in the Poetics, 1448a). There is no sense in Cartledge’s statement, however, that he overcomes the prevailing view that comedy’s ‘entertainment’ begs for the ‘realism’ of the tragedy. Aristotle, who was much closer to the events, does not make so much of the etymological connection (cf. Poetics, 1448b.1). He does affirm essential distinctions between tragedy and comedy (i.e., ‘…poets [being] drawn by their natural bent towards one or the other’), though partly in virtue of lauding comedy’s superiority over the popular ἰαμβοκ (iambic or lampoons, 1449a.1). Aristotle, Poetics (trans. Fyfe). †Paul Cartledge, The Greeks: a portrait of self and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 193ff.
drama. Whatever religious instinct is attributed to the theatre of antiquity, in other words, is applied analogously to the period during which a recognizably Christian theatre appeared in Europe.

For the purposes of our study, arguments for or against theatre’s historic beginnings in religion, however interesting they are in themselves, remain largely immaterial. What is important is that from the present perspective, the assumption of a religious genesis in theatre necessarily and problematically subsumes “theatre” — i.e., *the realization of human instinct to dramatize existence in live action* — under a theological arc which a contemporary, secular stage is unable to accept as such.²

The task of understanding theatre and its import for theology is made particularly difficult by the fact that drama’s appearance in the liturgical setting of the tenth century did not elicit theoretical reflection from those who scripted and performed these dramas, or from (worshipping) ‘audiences’ for whom the drama was composed. It would appear that scripting aspects of the Christian narrative in allegorical tropes (later, in more theatrically developed plays) became sufficiently justified in Church practice as to generate a tradition of theologically purposeful theatre lasting well into the sixteenth century *bien avant la lettre*. The York Mystery Plays, for example, were performed every year for two-hundred years from as early as 1376 until their suppression with the advent of Protestant Reform in England (1568); they would not be revived for another four centuries, in 1951 at the Festival of Britain when patron guilds were recreated as secular arts societies for this express purpose.³

² In her excellent essay on the socio-political and dramaturgical implications in transposing Greek tragedy to the contemporary setting, Edith Hall is surprisingly scant in her treatment of the religious dimension, indicating that although productions of Greek tragedy have been in fashion as of the past thirty years, it is approached invariably without reference to its religious import. See Edith Hall, ‘Why Greek tragedy in the late twentieth century?’ in Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh, and Amanda Wrigley, eds., *Dionysus since 69: Greek tragedy at the dawn of the third millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 1-46.

³ The tradition continued until the 1980s, with performances at the Museum Gardens, undergoing reform in the 1990s under the tutelage of funding guilds which recreated medieval wagon stages (1998) and expanded some of the plays into street processions (2002). A twelve-play cycle combining familiar and lesser-known scripts was last performed in July 2006. The Chester Cycle plays (1422) survived ecclesial suppression until 1577, and near-extant texts of the twenty-four original plays remain today. They too have enjoyed committed revivals, especially in the last two decades (with the formation of the charitable trust Chester Mystery Plays Ltd.). The plays have been performed by amateur actors under professional direction as recently as 2000 and 2003, with the next performances of the cycle of Creation to Last Judgement scheduled for Summer 2008. For
contemporary revival, however, the plays do not appear to have generated either theological justification or theatrical theory of significance.  

Von Balthasar suggests that in the Mystery plays, *entertainment* became their inner logic so that crowds responded primarily to the spectacular aspects of the drama; he asserts that for this reason, ‘the real peripeteia – Christ’s suffering on our behalf – could not be portrayed at all’ and in the end ‘these plays smothered in their own formlessness’. Although von Balthasar says this as an indictment of live drama as poor vernacular for communicating Christian truth, his pointing to the live engagement of the play probably explains as much as anything the lack of theoretical background to Christian drama: in the end, dramatic theories were not necessary; theatrical performances were. Be that as it may, the absence of authorial reflection on theatrical innovation in the Church makes it particularly difficult to deduce theological-dramaturgical aims that might inform our present study. Indications as to theological significance assumed in incorporating play-acting into worship are essentially lost to our present-day reading (apart, that is, from illustrative instruction invoked in such plays).

It is impossible to say defensibly whether early forms of liturgical drama, for example, developed from and/or generated ideas that dramatization of Christian belief in some sense bears on God’s dramatizing perspective over the action and on action from those to whom this divine perspective is made evident in the flesh. We can only speculate in what sense the dramatizing event was thought to complement liturgical language and music already existing in the worship; or, indeed, how it may have added to ‘dramatics’ inherent to but previously underestimated in Christian

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4 For an attempted reconstruction of early Christian drama in light of theatre’s social function in the period and dramaturgical aspects as the staging of action, diversity of theatrical venues, the role of the audience in creating the theatrical event, etc., see the study by Henri Rey-Flaud, *Pour une dramaturgie du Moyen-Âge* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1980).

5 Balthasar, *TD IV*, p. 106.

6 It is regrettable therefore that in his erudite commentary on the monastic reform of the *Concordia Regularis* and how it defined anew the daily life in the monastery, relations with the outside world, as well as the liturgical office, Symons offers no remarks on the insertion of the trope into the Holy week liturgies. Cf. Bishop of Winchester St. Ethelwold, *Regularis concordia anglicae nationis monachorum sanctimonialiumque*, trans. Dom Thomas Symons, *The monastic agreement of the monks and nuns of the English Nation* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1953).
thought. Nevertheless, we might suspect with good reason that some advantage was
thus to obtain in introducing dramatic ‘play’ in the liturgical setting. Moreover, if
we do not take as a given that a form of theatricality would inevitably ‘evolve’ from
the ‘dramatics’ of representation in the Eucharistic Mass, the ambiguous nature of
*play* emerging amidst the seriousness (i.e., efficacy) of the Christian Sacrament
provokes inquiry about how theology can sustain dialogue with the drama. To that
end, we raise the problem of theatre and the Church from the perspective of its
earliest evidence in the tenth century.

5.1.1a  **Roots sacred and secular**

In the analytical commentary to his comprehensive collection of Medieval
play manuscripts, E.K. Chambers submitted a three-part theoretical model according
to which drama in the latter part of the tenth century

a)  originated in the Christian liturgy, and
b)  shifted gradually to the public setting, thus
c)  providing the basis for theatre’s modern manifestations as a secular art.

Chambers remarked that once the drama had been established as a
complement to the worship liturgy, ‘The condition of any further advance [in
theatre] was that the play should cease to be liturgic’. In identifying drama’s
eventual severing from the liturgy, Chambers then pointed to the fact that the use of
dramatic tropes in the Christian mass came as a relatively late innovation following
nearly a millennium of antitheatrical attitude on the part of the Church.

Chambers was, of course, right on this latter point of his account: the earliest
documentation of dramatic ‘play’ in Christian use is St. Ethelwold’s ‘Quem
Quaeritis’, a ‘theatricalization’ of the Gospel’s Resurrection narratives included in
the *Regularis Concordia* statement of reform for Benedictine monasteries in Britain
and the European continent (c.965-975). It becomes clear, however, that the
implication underlying Chambers’ emphasis on the lateness of the dramatic addition
to the Christian liturgy is the essentially *alien* character in play-acting introduced as a

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dramatizing medium for the worship. Chambers, in fact, needed to emphasize ontological distinctions between representation in the liturgical setting and representation in the theatrical sense in order to conclude that

a) the pairing of liturgy and drama was essentially arbitrary,
b) drama’s foreignness predestined it to make its way out of the Church,
c) only then to find success as an art-form in the secular world.

Chambers did not hesitate to add that drama’s ‘secularization’ was written into its restricted use as theological pedagogy, hence in its subsumption to the sacramentality of the Eucharist; thus we read,

Already, when Hilarius could write plays to serve indifferently for use at Matins or at Vespers, the primitive relation of repraesentatio to liturgy had been sensibly weakened. By the middle of the fourteenth century it was a mere survival. From ecclesiastical the drama had become popular. Out of the hands of the clergy in their naves and choirs, it has passed to those of the laity in their market-places and guild-halls. And to this formal change corresponded a spiritual or literary one, in the reaction of the temper of the folk upon the handling of the plays, the broadening of their human as distinct from their religious aspect. In their origin official for devotion and edification, they came, by an irony familiar to the psychologist, to be primarily spectacula for mirth, wonder, and delight.

In noting how liturgical drama made its way into profane spaces, Chambers is making another equally significant claim. According to Chambers, it was not the case that a form of drama already existing in the secular sphere found its way into the Church. His view is rather that drama of a particular sort emerged anew from some need to illustrate/enact theological images in the context of Christian worship. This is a key point in the argument: Chambers essentially implies that liturgical drama should not be conceived in the same way as drama found elsewhere; in this regard,

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8 The point may seem rather insignificant (and patently obvious) if we already accept that theatre and sacrament occupy distinct spheres. The point of this section, however, is to show why this is the case and how this might shape a theological approach to the secular theatre.

9 Chambers identifies Hilarius as a scholarius vagans, possibly English, possibly a goliard (a 12th-13th c. wandering scholar noted for verse compositions of ‘amorous and jocund’ character), pupil of Abelard, c. 1125, near Nogent-sur-Seine. Chambers, pp. 58.

10 Chambers repeatedly implicates Hilarius with the secularization of liturgical drama, noting of his Daniel and of the Suscitatio Lazari that

At the end [of] both . . . is a rubric or stage–direction, to the effect that, if the performance is given at Matins, the Te Deum should follow; if at Vespers, the Magnificat. Evidently the connexion with the church service, so organic in the plays of the more primitive type, had become of Hilarius almost accidental. Ibid., pp. 69.
he is at pains to defend the unique character of drama in Christian use. For example, regarding the earliest known theological drama, Chambers insists that

It must be borne in mind that the ‘Quem Quaeritis’ remained *imperfectly detached* from the liturgy out of which it arose. The performers were priests, or nuns, and choir-boys. The play was always chanted, not spoken. It was not even completely resolved into dialogue.¹¹

It is not difficult to hear embedded in the odd phrasing (i.e., ‘imperfectly detached’) the suspicion that drama, from its inception in the liturgical setting, already tended in the direction of secularization. Chambers’ intent is, in fact, to assert that secular theatre of the Western tradition, given its (presumed) origins in the Christian liturgy, owes its forms of representation to religion—the underlying implication being that *theatre, at root, is religious*.

Chambers therefore begins his study by making a case for an inherently dramatic system of representation in the Eucharistic worship, something which would eventually beget the dramatizing medium of theatre:

> The dramatic tendencies of Christian worship declared themselves at an early period. At least from the fourth century, the central and most solemn rite of that worship was the Mass, an essentially dramatic commemoration of one of the most critical moments in the life of the Founder. It is his very acts and words that day by day throughout the year the officiating priest resumes in the face of the people. And when the conception of the Mass developed until instead of a mere symbolical commemoration it was looked upon as an actual repetition of the initial sacrifice, the dramatic character was only intensified.¹²

The point concerning drama’s origins in religion and the implication that theatre by its very nature shares in the religious sphere, as we will see shortly, is widely contested. For the moment, however, it is worth pursuing Chambers’ well-grounded claim, evident from the earliest known liturgical *trope*,¹³ that dramatization of the sort appearing in the Medieval worship was an innovation of – and appeared in complement to – the worship liturgy.

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¹¹ Ibid., p. 35, added italics.
¹² Ibid., p. 3.
¹³ The OED defines “Trope” thus: ‘(n.5) In the Western Church, A phrase, sentence, or verse introduced as an embellishment into some part of the text of the mass or of the breviary office that is sung by the choir (…discontinued at the revision of the missal under Pope Pius V in the 16th cent.).’. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
5.1.1b The ‘Quem Quaeritis’

It is fairly certain that St. Ethelwold’s ‘Quem Quaeritis’ Resurrection trope, as well as being sung as part of the Paschal Mass, was also enacted in accordance with the prefacing ‘stage directions’, if not in the theatrical sense of actors taking character roles, then in some way that ‘personified’ the parts with actions and alternating voices.\(^{14}\) Again, we can only speculate as to why this was thought to be a fitting addition to the worship, and whether it was at all conceived in terms of dramatic performance. Nevertheless, the trope’s aesthetic departure from the traditional choral setting is patently obvious. So reads the ‘Quem Quaeritis’ (here, followed by a translation) to be performed after the third lesson ‘\textit{in die Sancto Paschae}’:\(^{15}\)

\[
\text{\textit{INTERROGATIO}}
\]
\textit{Quem quaeritis (in sepulchro O Christocol[a])}\(^{25}\)
\[
[\text{Quo decantato finetenus, respondeant hi tres, uno ore}]
\]
\textit{RESPONSIO}
\textit{Ihesum Nazarenum (crucifixum, O Caelicola[e])}.
\textit{ANGELUS} [\textit{Quibus ille}]
\textit{Non est hic. Surrexit sicut praedixerat. Ite, nuntiate quia surrexit a mortuis.}

\* \* \*

\(^{14}\) Though it must be stressed that the existence of a dramatic script, even one as precise in its description as Ethelwold’s does not prove that the action therein prescribed was ever performed. Ward, on the other hand, thinks it odd that Ekkehard, the historian at St. Gallen Benedictine monastery where the trope is thought to have originated, would have remained silent had the \textit{Regularis Concordia} not been applied as described. See, Adolphus William Ward, ‘The early religious drama: \textit{Concordia regularis}’, in \textit{The Cambridge history of English and American literature}, ed. A.R. Waller, W.P. Trent, J. Erskine, S.P. Sherman, C. Van Doren (Cambridge: University Press, 1907-21).

\(^{15}\) My translation of original Latin text as documented in Chambers, pp. 308-309.

\(^{25}\) Parenthetical variants added from the Dublin ‘Quem Quaeritis’ (14\textsuperscript{th} c.) in Ibid., pp. 315-318, as well as the ‘Winchester Troper’ from the Henry Bradshaw Society Publications cited in, St. Ethelwold, V.51, p. 50, fn. 2.
Then when the (Angel) who is seated sees the three (Marys) approaching, wandering about as if searching for something, he shall begin to sing sweetly and in a soft voice."

**QUESTION**

Whom do you seek (O followers of Christ)?

**RESPONSE**

Jesus of Nazareth (O heavenly ones).

**ANGEL** "He then shall say"

He is not here. He is risen, just as he foretold. Go, announce that he is risen from the dead.

Ethelwold’s instructions then read that ‘At this bidding, the three monks [representing the Marys] turn toward the choir exclaiming in recitative: “Allelulia. Resurrexit dominus!” The services for Maundy Thursday through Holy Saturday are similarly provided with dramatic sections enacting the deposition and burial of Christ’s body.

As should be evident, in the ‘Quem Quaeritis’ the choir is no longer concerned solely with the singing of the mass but also with the choreographed entrance of

four brothers dressed up, one of whom in an alb, dissimulating as if attending to something else, [so that he] reaches the sepulchre unnoticed where, holding a palm branch in his hand, he sits quietly [to wait for the Marys].

It is clear that something theatrical is envisioned in the scripting of this piece to be performed as part of the Resurrection Mass. Without committing to Chambers’ secondary interests in defending the origins of secular theatre in the liturgy, we need to ask what sort of drama becomes evident in the Church of this period.

### 5.1.1c Theatrical-religious vinculum

As Chambers had done some years earlier, Adolphus Ward also used the ‘Quem Quaeritis’ to make his case for theatre’s origins in the Church. He described

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17 Chambers, pp. 308-309, my translation.
19 My point is simply that committing to the idea that church drama is the progenitor of secular theatre almost inevitably leads to conclusions that theatre in and of itself attains to divine realities, religious experience, communion with spirit, and so forth. This idea, however, though extremely compelling from the perspective of the theatrical performer, tends towards either greater polarisation between Church/theatre or, perhaps even less helpfully, a collapse of the two into human modes of expression.
the rise of the trope in English monasteries in relation to similar developments in continental Europe (particularly at Flanders, Switzerland and France), reckoning that both settings were ‘joined together in spiritual unity through the domination of the Roman Catholic church’:

[F]rom about the tenth century, the production in churches of a certain species of alternating songs is combined with a sort of theatrical staging; …simultaneously with the progress of this staging, the texts of the songs were enlarged by free poetical additions….20

Following Chambers, Ward also placed special emphasis on drama’s secularizing move from the liturgical setting into public spaces, when ‘finally, a separation of these stage performances from their original connection with religious service took place, and they were shifted from the church into the open air’.21

Neither scholar considered, however, whether several centuries of dramatic play in the Church had left an imprint on any aspect of theology. If indeed it was the “dramatic” setting of the Mass in the tenth century which gave life to Ethelwold’s Paschal trope, the question of theology could have been raised on several fronts. For instance, did performing biblical scenes in personified form shed light on the Eucharist and the enactment of Christ’s bodily presence? More generally, did it promote reflection on God’s incarnate, self-personification in Jesus; or on the New Testament understanding of Christ, the living image of the living God? Did it contribute to views of Trinitarian action and the Spirit’s inspiration in the created world? Did it advance ideas of a response prudentum to the goodness of God’s creation in ars? And, perhaps, most obviously, did the use of dramatic representation in the liturgical setting illuminate a theological understanding of representation in the Eucharistic sense? Once again, the absence of relevant writing means that these questions are left mostly to speculative interest.

Ethelwold himself only confirms the commonplace view that dramatization in the Church served as ‘living books’ for illiterate laity, as a pedagogical means of communicating Christian belief. In preface to the instruction for Maundy Thursday, he writes an explanatory note justifying the trope as an instrument for illustrating Holy Week narratives to new converts and to those less knowledgeable of Scripture:

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20 Ward, ‘Concordia regularis’, p. III.1, my italics.
21 Ibid.
In order to celebrate on this day the deposition of the body of our Saviour, if anyone should think it worth following, we have decreed to replicate the worthy usage by certain monastics [of enacting Scripture] in order to strengthen the faith of the ignorant folk and neophytes.  

Taking into account the illustrative function of the trope, however, it would be difficult to conceive that performing the ‘Quem Quaeritis’ did nothing for the more biblically literate priests and monks who devised and took part in the play. It would not be unreasonable to infer, moreover, that at least as far as Ethelwold was concerned, underlying the enacted play and its task of providing instruction to the common faithful, were ideas of divine revelation through human creativity, even of the value of entertainment in play (e.g., in ‘dissimulating as if attending to something else’ as we read in the instruction for the actors).

The question of a dramatizing medium appearing in (or being imported into) liturgical worship is more involving than Ethelwold’s apologetic preface suggests, and certainly more encompassing than the explanation given by another monastic on whose choral ‘sequences’ Ethelwold seems to rely to establish prior ‘usum’ of a dramatizing mode of action. So writes Notker Balbulus (the Stammerer) – St. Gallen monastery, Switzerland, c. 881-887 – affirming the pedagogical value in deliberately ‘plotting’ Scripture into antiphonic verse:

Since I was young, and the lengthy melodies we sang, though repeatedly enough, nevertheless escaped my faithless memory, I often wondered in secret what I could devise to better retain them. Meanwhile, it so happened that a monk from the Abbey of Jumièges which had been recently devastated by the Normans came to stay with us, bringing with him a book of antiphons in which were some verses modulated to the [musical] sequences [that follow the Epistle reading]. Although they seemed pleasing enough, they jarred in the [hearing].

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22 Chambers, pp. 308-309, my translation. Cf. ‘Nam, quia ea die depositionem corporis Salvatoris nostri celebramus, usum quorundam religiosorum imitabilem ad fidel indociti vulgi ac neofitorum corroborandam, equiparando sequi, si ita cui usum fuerit uel sibi taliter placuerit hoc modo decrevimus’.

23 Schaff fills in some historical context on Balbulus as ‘the reputed author of the …Sequentiae, a class of hymns in rhythmical prose, hence also called …Prosae. […] This prolongation was called… sequential… because it followed the reading of the Epistle or the Alleluia. […] A further development was to set words to these notes in rhythmical prose for chanting. The name sequence was then applied to the text and in a wider sense also to regular metrical and rhymed hymns’. See, Phillip Schaff, History of the Christian church. Medieval Christianity: from Gregory I to Gregory VII: A.D. 590-1073 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1885), X.96.492.
Nevertheless, it was in adaptation of these that I began to write the likes of the ‘Laudes Deo concinat / Orbis undique totus / Qui gratias est et liberator’.24

But was there more to the dramatic mode than committing biblical lessons to memory? Moreover, having seen that a dramatizing medium became evident in the context of the Eucharistic liturgy,25 does this happen, as has been suggested, as a consequence of religion generating a dramatic frame in which to make present its own images of the world, from which, consequently, aesthetics for secular stage drama are born?

2. The problem of theatre’s origins in Christian liturgy

The approach typically applied to the question of Christian liturgy and the resurgence of theatre in the tenth century is derived from the supposed development of theatre of the Western tradition in the rites of the Dionysia (Greece, 6th century BCE). The theory of theatre’s origins in the feast of Dionysus, advanced by the Cambridge School of Anthropology (c.1900-1915), has subsequently been used to make sense of theatre’s ‘reconstruction’ – following the disappearance of earlier manifestations of drama – in the liturgical context of the Mass. Most recently, Eli Rozik has restarted critical argument on the subject, citing Gustave Cohen’s Le théâtre en France au Moyen Âge as most influential in leading subsequent theorists to trace a retroactive link between the appearance of theatre in the tenth century Church and the theory of the Cambridge School.

This latter theory, linking theatre to an ancient ur-ritual has been summarized in its clearest form thus:

Jane Ellen Harrison, a Classical scholar and the leading spirit of the so-called Cambridge Ritualists […] in 1912] tried to offer evidence in support of her claim that there was a pre-Dionysian ritual in which the Spring Demon (entaitos daimon) was worshipped. An ancient Ur-ritual of this kind seemed to explain

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25 Though, once again, not necessarily to the exclusion of contemporary drama outside the Church.
the reason why similar structures in which a deity underwent dismemberment, death, and resurrection, in a pattern corresponding to the annual cycle of seasons, could be found in many different religions…. The Dionysian ritual, accordingly, was an offshoot of the ancient sacrificial ritual to the Spring Demon. The dithyramb (hymn to Dionysus) was created in the Dionysian ritual and tragedy developed from dithyrambic poetry. Thus ancient Greek theatre originated in an ancient sacrificial ritual, in the ritual of the entaiotos daimon.26

Cohen capitalized on this idea and, in preface to his study on theatre in the Church, generalized it to say that it is an anthropological universal that ‘all religions generate drama by themselves and all rituals willingly and spontaneously take dramatic and theatrical shape.’27 Rozik is therefore correct to see in Cohen’s generalizing principle ‘the foundations for conceiving the ‘Quem Quaeritis’ as a particular instance of a universal law’.28

5.1.2.a Problem of origins

If, as Rozik suggests, Cohen (1926) was responsible for perpetuating the idea that ancient religion gave rise to theatre, then Léon Gautier (1886) must be cited as the earliest theorist to popularize the idea that connects (the appearance of) Church drama with future developments in secular theatre—an idea, as we pointed out, expounded later by Chambers (1903) and then Ward (1907). Evidently, mutually reinforcing theories emerging in this span of forty-years defined future proposals that even as the theatre of antiquity had originated in religion, so it was reconstructed, after nearly one thousand years of theological opposition to theatre, in the rites of the Christian sacrament. Rozik, however, dismisses this view as a romantic, retrospective reading without supporting evidence to commend it academically; in

28 Rozik, p. 132.
the end, he says, it shows a theatrical ideology at work but does not uncover theatre’s supposed ritualistic aims. He supports this claim by showing that the persistence of the Cambridge theory of theatre’s Dionysiac origins, the fact that it continues to influence both academic and lay approaches to theatre, relies on a purely speculative assertion.

The Cambridge theory takes Aristotle’s location of dramatic genre in the dithyramb – a Dionysiac hymn sung in antiphonic voice – and, as we saw in the description above, from there makes a direct connection to religious rites pre-existing the feast of Dionysus. However, the idea that by the time a recognizable form of dramatic representation came into existence, the liminal dithyrambic/dramatic moment still evinced religious vigour is indefensible. Moreover, although the theory does not rely exclusively on Aristotle’s aesthetic theory, it does gloss religious essence over his tracing the dramatic mode of action to dithyrambic song. Aristotle’s Poetics, however, never make the leap between tragic genre and the religious character of Dionysiac feasting, a fact which calls into question the notion of theatre’s origins as religious.

Some of the confusion no doubt originates in Aristotle’s contention in the Poetics that serious drama—in his terms, the tragedy—had a gradual development:

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29 Ideological as in the case of Chambers who inferred an ontological vinculum between theatre and the Mass in order to ‘show’ that because religion generates drama, theatre is therefore religious in nature.

30 Advanced principally by Jane Ellen Harrison, Gilbert Murray and Francis Macdonald Cornford.

31 Rozik defines the dithyramb more prosaically as ‘a kind of serious and sublime choral storytelling poem, devoted to narratives of gods and/or heroes’. Rozik, p. 109.

32 Formally referred to as the Cambridge School of Anthropology theory (CSA), its complexity is not relevant in this context, except to mention that, lacking extant evidence of dramatic representation in pre-Dionysiac rites, it draws cultural parallels with Ancient Near East cults—of passion, death and apotheosis commemorated partly in ritual dance (sacer ludus) for spring rituals of fertility and renewal—to posit ur-ritual originating all dramatic genres. A summary of the principal authors, their specific contributions towards formulating the CSA, as well as the implications for contemporary secular dramatic theory is found in Eli Rozik, The roots of theatre: rethinking ritual and other theories of origin (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002). See also a compendium of the relevant texts in Robert A. Segal, The myth and ritual theory: an anthology, Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998).

33 Jumping, as it were, over the dithyramb’s more direct influence on drama’s development. Rozik also points out that the only remains of dithyrambic performance date from the fifth century BCE, already some one hundred years after the tragic form is known to have become established (c. 500 BCE). Rozik, ‘The origin of theatre’, p. 112.

34 And indeed possible attempts to articulate theatre as ritual without religion.
Whether Tragedy has as yet perfected its proper types or not; and whether it is to be judged in itself, or in relation also to the audience – this raises another question. Be that as it may, Tragedy… originated with the authors of the Dithyramb, the [comedy] with those of the phallic songs, which are still in use in many of our cities. Tragedy advanced by slow degrees; each new element that showed itself was in turn developed. Having passed through many changes, it found its natural form, and there it stopped.\textsuperscript{35}

However, tragedy’s development only enters Aristotle’s discussion as a consequence of its having already appeared on the choral stage, either relatively spontaneously or in some unknown process of assigning responsive parts to individual choristers as a means of communicating story. It explains, in other words, how drama developed after it was identified as a distinct genre, but not how it came about in the first instance. Aristotle, therefore, does not attribute ritual motivations to the dramatic mode of representation (anymore than he envisions a role for religion on the stage).

In this light, Rozik follows Pickard-Cambridge’s (1927) argument against the Cambridge theory\textsuperscript{36} arguing that any ‘link between dithyramb and Dionysiac ritual was severed in the early stages of the former’s development’ such that it becomes impossible to show Dionysian influence on the dramatic genre’s appearance. Nor does it tell us whether a dramatic medium—i.e., a vehicle for enacting fictional worlds—could have been identified in the ancient rite.\textsuperscript{37} Rozik’s conclusion is that there is no warrant for seeking a natural vinculum between theatre and religion, Christian or ancient; furthermore, that attempts to explain and/or justify theatre by assumed metaphysical, sacramental, mystical or spiritual properties are simply misguided. In light of Rozik’s demonstration of problems inhering in the accepted theory that theatre originates in and sustains a religious impulse, it is important to follow along his line of argumentation on similar claims made for modern secular theatre and liturgical drama in the tenth century.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{35} Aristotle, \textit{Poetics (trans. Butcher)}, IV.


\textsuperscript{37} Rozik, ‘The origin of theatre’, p. 111.

\textsuperscript{38} At present, Rozik is virtually alone in this area or research, though it bears mentioning the recent appearance of an online academic journal reconsidering this and related subjects with refreshing insight: cf. \textit{The Journal of Religion and Theatre}, Lauren Friesen, ed.; published by the Religion and Theatre Focus Group of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, Michigan Technological University, Department of Fine Arts (available on \texttt{http://www.rjjournal.org/}).
5.1.2a Belief and “belief”

As Eli Rozik has ably pointed out, the question of theatre’s reconstruction in Christian ritual is spurious, partly because, as with the Cambridge theory, it is not demonstrable, but principally because the theory presumes that religious belief and “belief” in the theatrical sense are one and the same. Thus, Rozik proposes a sober (and unromantic) understanding that

the medium of theatre is a method of signification (categorization) and communication, which affords means for the representation and description of worlds, especially fictional ones. In this capacity the theatre medium may reflect any intention and be employed for any purpose, including purposes that contrast those of ritual. For example, whereas one of the secondary purposes of ritual is to reaffirm the beliefs that nourish the community, theatre can be employed for either reaffirming or refuting them. [However,] the latter function cannot even be imagined in the context of ritual. 39

With this understanding, Rozik is also departing intentionally from Richard Schechner’s theory (1977) which holds that, in fact, both ritual and theatre coexist as phenomena of ‘performance’. Schechner’s attempt at a ‘unified field theory’ for human action describes performance as encompassing a continuum with

a) religious ‘efficacy’ on one end—i.e., as a means to effect change—and

b) gratifying ‘entertainment’ on the other—e.g., fun, distraction, critical appreciation, aesthetic contemplation, etc.

For Schechner, the most concrete fact about ritual and theatre events is that they share in one another’s performative means. 40

Our immediate purpose, however, is to understand the possible impact of theological interaction with dramaturgy emerging from secular, contemporary theatre. It is therefore important to insist on an unambiguous distinction between the sacramental ‘stage’ and the scenic stage. We continue, then, to follow Rozik who reasons that while in theatre actors and spectators alike are aware that “pretence” is

the medium through which fictional worlds are made present, ritual is wholly
dependent on the participants’ belief that something real is effected in the
performance—e.g., through prayer, in the baptismal sacrament, in the Eucharistic
feast.41 Rozik’s understanding of the Eucharistic Mass may be problematic
teologically, especially when he asserts that the performance of the Mass ‘Cannot be
conceived as an enactment of the crucifixion, but as the actual thing’; that

From the very beginning, the Christian faith considered the Mass a real sacrifice
[for] its underlying intention was not to represent or describe the crucifixion,
but to reincarnate the experience’.42

These problems aside, Rozik’s differentiation between representation in the
theatrical sense and belief entailed in the worship event raises questions concerning
Christianity and the secular medium of the stage. This is not to reject the idea that
theatrical activity may be incorporated into a worship event; only to insist that
liturgical drama such as the ‘Quem Quaeritis’, although participating seamlessly in
the sacrament, never ceases to be theatrical and may be explained apart from its
liturgical setting.43

Rozik’s claim that ‘Close analysis of the description of this performance reveals
a fairly good acquaintance with all aspects of theatre art and a level of
sophistication’ may be exaggerated in the end. The point is made, however, that the
theatricality of the ‘Quem Quaeritis’ may be understood as ancillary but not
equivalent to the sacramentality of the Eucharist.44

41 On this ground, Rozik rejects equally Kirby’s shamanist theory of theatrical origins, and certainly
to the extent that in the healing ritual, ‘[t]he spirit is assumed to eventually control the shaman and
from this moment on its behaviour is his own’. Such behaviour essentially excludes ‘as if’ actions.
So, ‘[w]hereas the shaman’s performance can be conceived in terms of “honest” or “fraudulent”, the
actor’s performance cannot’. Rozik, ‘The origin of theatre’, p. 120. Cf. Ernest T. Kirby, Dionysus: a
study of the Bacchae and the origins of drama (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms Int., 1982 [1970]);
42 Rozik’s description of the Eucharist relying, admittedly, on Benjamin Hunningher, The Origin of
43 Rozik arrives at this position and its corollary that theatre cannot absorb ritual into its performative
activity without loss to either by deploying his argument along two lines: 1) the narrowest possible
sense afforded in an understanding of sacrament as the representation of real beliefs of a faith
community, and 2) a technical definition of theatre as a dramatizing medium for ‘the representation
and description of worlds, especially fictional ones’(Ibid., p. 107). This leads him to conclude against
‘the claim of [theatre’s] spontaneous recreation ex nihilo’ in the liturgical setting, opting instead for a
theory of external theatrical influence on liturgy, a point which is of negligible concern here. Rozik,
Such clear distinction between the theatrical act and liturgical praxis on technical grounds seems logical, especially if we set aside Schechner’s idea that both theatre and sacrament entail performance along some common continuum. For one, it makes sense of the simple fact that theatre and religion operate in separate spheres; these may intersect – e.g., when theatrical means are used to reinforce belief in liturgical worship – yet without losing their distinction. We can deduce from Rozik’s dichotomy that theatre by its very nature abhors acts and objectives bearing primarily on realities other than those corresponding to fictional worlds. Introducing realia, as such and undifferentiated from its normal setting, into the scenic act calls into question theatre’s pretence to reality. For example, when a piece of scenery falls during the play performance, or a lighting instrument falters mid-act—even in the audience’s momentary uncertainty whether the incident entails part of the act—something of the theatrical effect is disturbed with non-representational reality.

The very object of theatre is, we would submit, to set apart time/space and acting persons from their normal contingencies to entertain realities made possible in personages coursing through events under the witness of their creators—players as well as audiences, directors and authors, technicians and designers, etc. To this effect,

> The audience accepts the basic convention of theatre that an actor enacts a character, displaying indexes of action that reflects, not on himself but on the enacted other. Therefore the nature of his performance cannot be perceived as fraud, but as essential to his art.⁴⁵

This is simply to reiterate the paradox in which dramatic tradition accords the stage privilege to enact falsehoods for the sake of the truthful aims of the theatrical act.⁴⁶ In theatrical impersonation, moreover, the line separating the actor from the

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⁴⁵ Rozik, ‘The origin of theatre’, p. 120.
⁴⁶ Plutarch immortalized this peculiarity of dramatic play on reality, relating that the irony drew notice from Solon, the legislator of Athens, when attending a dramatic presentation by Thespis:

> Thespis, at this time, [was] beginning to act tragedies, and the thing, because it was new, [was] taking very much with the multitude…. Solon, being by nature fond of hearing and learning something new, and now, in his old age, living idly, and enjoying himself, indeed, with music and with wine, went to see Thespis himself, as the ancient custom was, act; and after the play was done, he addressed him, and asked him if he was not ashamed to tell so many lies before such a number of people; and Thespis replying that it was no harm to say or do so in play, Solon vehemently struck his staff against the ground: “Ay,” said he, “if we honour and commend such play as this, we shall find it some day in our business.”†
character portrayal cannot be dissolved without also dispelling the theatrical effect. If the act of theatre is achieved by drawing an audience into the dynamic taking place between the actor and his character-other, introducing undifferentiated ‘reality’ into the event\textsuperscript{47} dispels the effect. By corollary, so long as the worship ritual is sustained in the belief that participation therein attends to divine realities, it cannot be incorporated into theatre’s ‘as if’ play on reality without collapsing the distinction between character/fiction and actor/reality.\textsuperscript{48}

In this light, we would have to conclude that as a medium for communication, theatre may indeed be used for theological aims—e.g., illustrating biblical narratives, reinforcing belief, inculcating doctrine, theologizing through participatory action. So we read in the \textit{Concordia Regularis} Ethelwold’s description of a dramatization to complement the Benedictine liturgy for the morning of Easter Sunday. Even without evidence that full-blooded “impersonation”, in the [theatrical sense] of an actor enacting a character who is not himself’ occurs in Ethelwold’s ‘Quem Quaeritis’,\textsuperscript{49} it is evident that personification of the Angel and the three Marys of the Easter narrative is envisioned in the description. Similarly, Notker Balbulus’ earlier collection of \textit{Sequentiae} “plot” the choral setting, the actions of the reader and the lesson into a developed dramatization on

the custom of prolonging the last syllable in singing the \textit{Alleluia} of the \textit{Gradual}, between the Epistle and the Gospel, while the deacon was ascending

(Thespis, recorded as the first winner of the drama prize at the Great or City Dionysia – c. 530s BCE – is credited with having invented the tragedy by adding a plot to the choral song as well as the 
\textit{hypocrites} or protagonist made to answer the chorus concerning some tragic dilemma.) Cf. Cartledge.  
\textsuperscript{47} Such as Solon’s moral protest (see preceding note).
\textsuperscript{48} Rozik phrases this in terse aesthetic terms:

\begin{quote}
Ritual can \textit{employ} the medium of theatre as one of its components, but theatre cannot employ ritual because it \textit{is} a medium. Theatre can \textit{describe} a given ritual, or parts of it, but a ritual cannot describe a theatre production because it \textit{is not} a medium.\textsuperscript{†}
\end{quote}

That said, theatre’s engagement of ‘as if’ realities is reinforced by forms of theatre which exploit aesthetically the fictional aspect of the theatrical event itself. I have in mind the dramatization of the grotesque in plays of Alfred Jarry (c.1896), simultaneous layering of multiple actions in Dada performances (Tristan Tzara, Richard Huelsenbeck, Raoul Hausmann, 1918-1923), the plays of Bertolt Brecht which cue audience reaction throughout the performance with printed pancarts. These theatrical forms, in contrast to traditional drama proposing that the stage play mirrors life (as is or could be), work as dramatizations of the fact that the primary reality of theatre is its engagement with fictional possibility. \textsuperscript{†} Rozik, ‘The origin of theatre’, p. 139, original italics.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p. 135, added emphasis.
from the altar to the rood-loft (organ-loft), that he might thence sing the Gospel.\footnote{Schaff, X.96.492. Corroborated by Notker Balbulus regarding the stricture on musical notation for the \textit{al-le-lu}—yet without prescribing notation length for the final syllable, \textit{ia}:}

By contrast, though, liturgical worship presents belief through an event pointing away from itself—sacrificially, as it were—for the sake of theological realities which, while mediated in “performance”, are ultimately self-revelatory and therefore beyond religion’s phenomenal initiative. The worship event can incorporate a theatrical act into its activity. However, the fact that liturgy shapes and is shaped by belief that something real is thereby effected—God is worshipped, the faith of the community is reaffirmed, forgiveness and blessing are invoked—does not allow sacramental activity itself to shift into theatrical mode (at least not without raising questions \textit{viz.} its claim on metaphysical/spiritual realities).\footnote{This latter conclusion bears specially on our study of Calderon’s theatre, particularly on the claim that in incorporating a theological perspective into his drama, Calderón breaks through the representational limits of the stage to show a theatre which only works in view of a more encompassing perspective of God and his theatre of the world.}

Defining distinctions between the theatrical act and the performance of the sacrament tells us that in theatre, human gesture, physical space and their shaping in word come together ‘as if’ the world itself were made real through the performance of such actions. Only in this sense is dramatic performance authentic, for ‘When I watch a performance of Hamlet, I am not watching an imitation, or a reproduction, of the play. Indeed, I am not watching a representation of the play at all. I am watching the play. Hamlet is there, on the stage’.\footnote{In making this case, David Saltz is also supporting Nicholas Wolterstorff who makes the point that the play only exists in the performance, hence that ‘A copy of the script is not a copy of the drama. The drama has no copies. All it has is performance’ (8). Wolterstorff, \textit{Works and Worlds of Art} (1980), cited in Saltz, ‘Is the play the thing?’ p. 2.} In sacrament, on the other hand, the particular shaping of action and space in the Word effects and is itself evidence of the world ‘as is’ in God’s dramatizing perspective. This definition takes us back to von Balthasar’s view (encountered in Ch. 1) that ‘sacrament [may be] understood as a real “representation”, effecting what it represents—[namely,] its perfected truth in concrete human life’, for which reason, ‘what [sacrament] brings forth is both more
and less than itself”. It recalls also George Steiner’s insight on the sacrament’s efficacious translation – its making present – of theological narrative into action:

The truth-functions of the revealed in Christianity, such as Transubstantiation…, lead a double life. They are, at once, and for the literalist believer, narratives of verity; and they are the *translatio*, the ‘carrying-over’ of systematic inexplicability into the more elusive, intermittent and self-querying inexplicability of mythical narration. Observe how this dynamic of ‘translation’… of the modulation from postulate form into free form is itself inherent in what meanings we are able or willing to attach to the passage of real presence into bread and wine….

Clearly, both theatre and sacrament enact something real in and through their particular modes of action. Any attempt to synthesise theatre and sacrament by collapsing their distinctions, however, would be inauthentic to either form of action. Theatre in itself is not sacramental, thought its secularity does not prevent it from adding to the liturgical act; Christian worship, on the other hand, is not theatre though it may dramatize aspects of the liturgy including the beliefs of a faith community. Therefore, whatever insight may be drawn from theology’s interaction with theatre will have to disengage from unhelpful notions of theatre as a religious event; that is, it will have to understand theatre primarily and properly as a secular mode of representation.

5.I.2b  Worship as theatre

A theological approach to theatre as a secular art, however, is frustrated by the recurrence of mutually reinforcing versions of the idea that, owing to common origins, theatre and the Church in the end share equally in human instinct for representation. These are consistently and problematically propagated by both Church and theatre. Jana Childers, for example, exploits the idea in her

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53 Balthasar, *TD I*, p. 93, original emphasis with intercalation of ellipsed phrase.


55 Homiletics professor and dean of San Francisco Theological Seminary (Graduate Theological Union). The published description of her performance preaching course—‘Preaching Performance Worship as Art’—explains that ‘The approach of the course is to view preaching and theatre as close cousins […] highlighting the need for ‘liveliness’ in worship and proclamation’, and proposes that ‘students will study, perform and participate in acts of worship and preaching as art and theatre’, a widely accepted format which Childers has taught in seminaries throughout North America. Childers credits inspiration for her approach to the hermeneutics of interpretation applied to the Johannine metaphor of ‘the word becoming flesh’ in Alla Renée Bozarth[-Campbell], *The Word’s body: an incarnational aesthetic of interpretation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997 [1975])
publications and practical theology postgraduate seminars which propose a theatrical approach to homiletics. Although in principle cautioning against untenable confusion between the task of the preacher and that of the acting professional, Childers nevertheless makes a case for understanding the preaching tradition of the Church as a variant of theatre; that preaching, in her words, is the ‘closest cousin’ to theatre, and that in this sense both are inheritors of a ‘common wealth’. On this basis, Childers teaches theatrical techniques intended to call preaching back to its (presumed) origins in the theatrics of live performance with the claim that

drama and homiletics each have at their root the agonistic [i.e., drive to action]. …While theatre is widely understood as “imitation of action” (Aristotle), […] preaching may be considered agonistic in [that] preaching interprets conflict-laden texts and applies them to conflict-laden situations. The birth, death and resurrection narratives which are the focus of Christian preaching and which gave rise to the early medieval passion plays are every bit as “conflictual” as the Dionysian dithyrambs from which sprang Greek theatre.

Childers cites also theatre’s affective engagement as something to be mimicked in preaching – both arts, she asserts, are mimetic – so as to create an emotional ‘space where the listeners can be open to change, shaping a moment when the congregation can say a yes or a no that comes from more than the cerebrum’.

Quoting English Restoration actor Thomas Betterton who chided Christians saying that “Actors speak of things imaginary as if they were real, while your preachers too often speak of things real as if they were imaginary,” Childers conveys

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†Cf. Drew University, Madison, NJ, Theological School course catalogue, July 2006 (available on depts.drew.edu/cue/documents/summercat06/DMIN_ST06.pdf).


57 Ibid., p. 11.


59 Ibid., p. 3. Childers is not wrong to suggest that preaching and worship share an element of the dramatic, even that ‘without a strong line of dramatic action, a worship service feels erratic, flat, or dead’.† Her central focus on dramatic elements as Conflict, Rising Action (complication), Reversal (anagnorisis), Denouement (peripeteia) in homiletics is sufficiently warranted; her assumption that this means that theatre and Christian worship arise from the same dramatizing ‘instinct’, however, is not. †Childers, Preaching as theatre, p. 127.

60 Childers, ‘Making connections’, p. 3.

61 Childers, Preaching as theatre, p. 34.
her concern for preachers of the Gospel to take seriously the performative delivery of their message. Her use of theatricality ‘in the pulpit where the preacher operates as an actor—assuming a personae’ is intended to give presence and voice to the individual as a communicative agent; in her words, ‘to uncover the best’ performance in the preacher.62 Childers, however, in attending exclusively to dramatic technique in homiletic communication, merely perpetuates the theory that theatre and religion are mutually reinforcing in their performative origins and goals. In doing this, her theory fails to expound more profoundly dramatic dimensions of the Logos in proclamation to which von Balthasar directs our attention when he writes that the Church exercises her mission ‘between two impossible poles: preaching to the world purely from without and transforming it purely from within’.63

Childers’ error in encouraging preachers to adopt a personality that expresses ‘the most natural you’64 is in fact brought to light in her own abbreviated citation from an essay on the subject of ‘Preaching as Worship’ by P.T. Forsyth, the full original passage which reads—

The preacher has often been compared with the actor, and often be has succumbed to the actor’s temperament, or to his arts. But there is a point of real analogy. The actor creates a part, as the phrase is; but it is only by appropriating a personality which the dramatist really created and put into his hands. And that is what the preacher has to do. He has to work less with his own personality than with the personality provided him in Christ, through Christ’s work in him. He has to interpret Christ.65

Childers uses the citation to support her linking of theatre and the worship event as genitive variants of an archaic performative instinct. However, a close reading of Forsyth’s passage, including the (italicized) phrases which Childers elides, in fact shows an emphasis on the primacy of the Poet and of the actor’s role in interpreting Him: on the fact that ‘the preacher’s originality is limited’ because, as Forsyth puts it, ‘the actor’s is a voice which is forgotten, while the poet’s is a voice that remains’.66 In effect, there is no need to cite common origins for theatre and

62 Ibid., p. 60.
63 Balthasar, TD IV, p. 465.
64 Childers, Preaching as theatre, p. 60.
66 Forsyth, p. 90.
preaching in order to establish a ‘minstrelsy’, as Vanhoozer has put it, in the
enactment of the Word in the world; the believer’s apprenticed ‘rehearsal’ to which
Craigo-Snell calls us; and indeed von Balthasar’s theodramatic perspective afforded
by the drama of Salvation. For, as Forsyth reminds us, the Poet’s imagination
inspires imminently and sufficiently so that ‘By the very Spirit that moves him, [the
preacher] speaks not of himself. […] He is not the light; but he bears witness to it.
He is not a creative word; it is enough to be a living voice’.

5.1.2c Theatre as worship

The view of religious/theatrical origins may be equally perpetuated from the
side of theatre, usually with generic appeals to religion. For example, a special
edition of the journal American Theatre dedicating articles to the presence of
religious themes in contemporary drama—from Tony Kushner’s Angels in America
(1993) to Terrence McNally’s Corpus Christi (1998)—did not fail to indicate that the
dialogue between religion and theatre goes back to supposed historical origins in
Dionysiac ritual. Walter Kerr, in a critical reflection of Richard Schechner’s
contemporary adaptation of Euripides in Dionysus in 69 (1969), is cited for evidence
that

[The theatre] remembers, plainly, that it came out of a religious or ceremonial
impulse, out of mythic rite and sometimes out of god-induced ecstasy. To find
itself again, to find a new way of being itself, it must go back to its sources,
beyond Euripides as much as Albee, beyond form and even coherence into the
dim intuited groping by means of which flesh became spirit and spirit flesh.

Margaret Miles, for her part, taking up the commonly assumed link between
theatre and religion, is persuaded that both share an implacable foe in mass media
technologies which vie for the attention of potential worshippers/theatre goers.
Because both ‘seek to create community and to provide the images and languages
that attract, maybe even compel, thought’, she adds, both theatre and religion need to
be reconciled to the fact that they ‘are and have been always sibling rivals rather than
implacable foes’. Miles says this, of course, in light of the dilemma faced by

67 Ibid., p. 90, my italics, final phrase reordered for emphasis.
68 C. Welton Gaddy et al., ‘The spirit and the flesh: Christianity, Judaism and theatre—Raising the
question: can theatre be worshipful and worship theatrical?’ American Theatre 17, no. 9 (November
69 Ibid., p. 96, my emphasis.
contemporary Christian dramatists\(^{70}\) that “the theatre community has trouble seeing how you can be a Christian and do theatre; and Christians cannot see how you can be involved in theatre and be a Christian”.\(^{71}\) Clearly, Miles wants to encourage a conciliatory movement in both directions. Granting, however, that both Christian worship and theatre share representation in some analogical sense—focused most keenly, as we have argued, in the ‘world theatre’ metaphor—there is still nothing to show that an understanding of theatrical/liturgical modes of representation benefits from the shared origins which are so widely presumed. There is even less to sustain the implication frequently drawn that a synthesis of biblical worship and theatre is both desirable and possible.\(^{72}\)

Another contributor to the collection of essays, C. Welton Gaddy, though still holding to the idea that theatre and religion originate in the human impulse towards mystery, asserts more convincingly that

> Alongside a similar energy pervasive in religion and theatre stand strategic points of commonality. Both theatre and religion participate in a search for truth[,] …both religion and theatre pay attention to the nonrational, as well as the rational, dimensions of life. Neither shies from the reality of mystery.\(^{73}\)

That said, the fact that his claim rings true to experience, that while ‘[while] divine worship at its best is high drama[,] …theatre at its best evokes a reverence that is closely akin to worship’,\(^{74}\) does not address incisively Rozik’s question as to why this should be so. Rozik’s conclusion, having shown the problems underlying notions of theatre as a religious event, urges insight into the fact that there is something ultimately compelling for academics and practitioners alike, Christian or not, in understanding theatre in terms of faith/religion:

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\(^{70}\) Articulated by director Art Hutcheson at the Christians in Theatre Arts conference (2000) and cited in Ibid., p. 20.

\(^{71}\) Cited in Ibid.

\(^{72}\) To my mind, this is precisely the error Bradley makes in his theological engagement with the stage musical. E.g., Bradley sees in the popular musical a contemporary (secular) “proclamation of the gospel [which] is far broader and more infections than are our efforts in the church”. He therefore concludes that, taking its cues from the musical hall, the goal of worship in the church should be reconceived as ‘giving the audience what they have come for—a good night out’. Ian Bradley, *You've got to have a dream: the message of the musical* (London: SCM Press, 2004), pp. 5 et al., 226.

\(^{73}\) Gaddy et al., p. 17, 18-19.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., p. 19.
It is indeed possible that this metaphorical aura reflects a genuine nostalgia for primeval ritual or communal participation, which is so lacking in modern and post-modern society. Whatever the answer, I believe that the true object of research should be not the supposed ritual origins of theatre, but the actual necessity for such a theory and the misguided devotion to the idea of an umbilical link between ritual and theatre, other than the possible use of this medium of theatre for the sake of ritual purposes.\(^7\)

In the end, though, we must question whether organised sets of methods have been developed with which to explore the question.\(^6\)

### 5.1.2d Theatre as religion

The fact that the question remains largely unexplored, however, has not prevented theatre’s persistent appeal to religion and its construal as religion, even in the so-called post-modern, post-Christian twentieth century. The idea of theatre as a religious/spiritual event was in fact pushed to its limits by at least one contemporary dramaturge; his attempted ‘revival’ of theatre’s presumed Dionysiac character infused his actor’s training with religious foundations intended to concentrate the ‘spiritual’ experience. This, he felt, was most central to the actor/audience engagement in theatre.

Theatrical avant-gardist Jerzy Grotowski (1934-1999), arguably more liberally than any of his contemporaries, exploited theatre’s archaic associations with religion to sustain his performance-laboratory experiments to define ‘the spiritual and scenic technique of the actor as the core of theatre art’.\(^7\) In 1960s communist Poland, Grotowski delved deeply into the presumed religious origins of theatre as proposed by the Cambridge School in order to impoverish theatre to what he considered its ‘spiritual’ essentials. Thus, his Laboratory Theatre focused specifically on ‘the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, “live” communion’.\(^8\) Grotowski’s drive towards the centrality of the live actor-audience exchange in theatre, moreover,  

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\(^7\) Rozik, ‘The origin of theatre’, p. 140, added emphasis.

\(^6\) One can only suspect that this is partly why Schechner and others, such as Max Harris, have turned to anthropology for developing recognized methods toward the study of theatricality in religious practice, and the theatre’s appeal to religion. A non-anthropological, Christian account of theatre’s grounding in God’s redeeming presence in creation is found in Harris’ initial publication: Max Harris, *Theatre and incarnation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005).


\(^8\) Ibid., p. 62.
appealed overtly to theatrical phenomenology as a religious experience entailing a function of body and psyche,\textsuperscript{79} both individual and communal.

Allowing that he was motivated partly by a desire to resist theatre’s homogenization into modern televisual media and film aesthetics—in other words, by the need to give a theatrical, live-action account of theatre—his seminal manifesto \textit{Towards the Poor Theatre} deliberately and provocatively courted religion in favour of a theatre of the spirit,\textsuperscript{80} even if through what he referred to as a \textit{via negativa}, ‘tempted by elementary and archaic religious and national taboos’:\textsuperscript{81}

This element of our productions has been variously called… “the dialectics of mockery and apotheosis,” or even “religion expressed through blasphemy….” […] The theatre, when it was still part of religion, was already theatre: it liberated the spiritual energy of the congregation or tribe by incorporating myth. The spectator thus had a renewed awareness of his personal truth in the truth of the myth, and through fright he came to catharsis. It was not by chance that the Middle Ages produced the idea of “sacral parody.” But today’s situation is much different. [S]pectators are more and more individuated in their relation to the myth as corporate truth or group model, and belief is often a matter of intellectual conviction. […] Group identification with myth—the equation of personal, individual truth with universal truth—is virtually impossible today.\textsuperscript{82}

Nevertheless, ‘even with the loss of a “common sky” of belief and the loss of impregnable boundaries’, Grotowski thought that the actor’s passage from person to stage persona, a Promethean profanation of bodily/psychic boundaries, ‘returns us to

\textsuperscript{79} In brief, Grotowski’s theatre attempts ‘to get at those psychic layers behind the life-mask’ for ‘if we strip ourselves and touch an extraordinarily intimate layer, exposing it, the life-mask cracks and falls away’. Ibid., p. 64. I am conscious that treating Grotowski’s ‘craft’ (which is how he referred to his method) in such abbreviated terms creates the appearance that he perpetuates a dualist suspicion that the body is a cover-up for a more real, spiritual nature in the person. A more thorough study of the rigorous physical training Grotowski devised for actors, however, would dispel this false impression, though this clearly lies beyond the scope of my doctoral thesis. For an exposition of the complex dimensions of body/spirit in Grotowski’s actor, see Thomas Richards, \textit{At work with Grotowski on physical actions} (London: Routledge, 1996); as well as Lisa Wolford and Richard Schechner (eds.), \textit{A Grotowski sourcebook} (New York: Routledge, 1997).


\textsuperscript{81} Grotowski, p. 61.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p. 64.
a concrete mythical situation, an experience of common human truth’. His integration of Kathakali – a classical, ritual dance-drama of Southern India – into his search for a contemporary (European) theatre suggested to him, among other things, the actor’s availability to ‘spiritual process’ in the creation of the dramatic person. Inspired also by rigorous physical/vocal training techniques developed for the Peking Opera and Japanese Noh theatre, Grotowski theorized that the “the actor in the act of giving himself” climaxes in spiritual interpenetration with the audience thereby forming the acting community. For the actor, this meant a mastery of the body/mind such that during the act of representation “…the time-lapse between inner impulse [toward action] and outer reaction… are concurrent: the body vanishes, burns [and] the spectator sees only the visible reflection of spiritual impulses’.

For Grotowski, theatre begins as a human impulse towards communion (cf. Childers’ ‘common wealth’). His actor’s training attains to the ‘dialectics of human behaviour’ historically privileged by sacrament and the religious experience so that theatre becomes

an utter opening to another person in which the phenomenon of “shared or double birth” becomes possible. The actor is reborn—not only as an actor but as a man—and with him, I am reborn. […] What is achieved is a total acceptance of one human being by another.

For Grotowski, it was not merely the case that religion and theatre have to do with one another, but specifically that one proceeds from the other: ‘A man in an elevated spiritual state’, Grotowski wrote, ‘uses rhythmically articulated signs, [and] begins to dance, to sing’, and therein lie the origins of theatrical representation.

Ibid., p. 63.

Grotowski’s goal towards the expression of psyche/spirit is not for doing away with the body in the act of representation. His “craft” aims rather towards ‘an eradication of blocks’ which embodiment poses for the actor. For this to happen, Grotowski writes, “The requisite state of mind is a passive readiness to realize an active role, a state in which one does not “want to do that” but rather “resigns from not doing it.”” Ibid., p. 61, original emphasis in main text. Cf. “Grotowski thinks that Artaud’s proclamation that “actors should be like martyrs burnt alive, still signalling through the flames” contains the “whole problem of spontaneity and discipline, the conjunction of opposites which gives birth to the total act… [which is] the very crux of the actor’s art.”” Citing, Grotowski, as per, Schechner, Performance studies, p. 54.

Grotowski, p. 65.

Ibid., p. 61. Grotowski conceived this development (as have others) in terms of religious ecstasy preceding the theatrical act. His vision in Towards The Poor Theatre may be understood as a theatrical retrieval of what he considered a spiritual kernel in man. Grotowski’s Catholicism remains an elusive element in his theatrical vision, though a contemporary eulogized him provocatively saying
Grotowski’s overt move toward theatre as religious experience means that his work is unavailable for our theological understanding of theatre as a secular means of action. Even at the height of his Teatrę Laboratorium,\textsuperscript{87} Grotowski’s reliance for his dramaturgy of a religious stage on the Cambridge theory was already being relativized by Richard Schechner’s alternative theory of performance (published in a series of essays dating from the early to mid 1970s)\textsuperscript{88} as occupying nothing more than some middle ground created between entertainment and ritual.\textsuperscript{89} (And, from our perspective, posing inevitable conflict between theatre and religion/theology.) Likewise, Michael Hinden’s critical survey of literature which had accumulated on the Cambridge theory, stressing its speculative and inconclusive nature, cast serious doubt on the theory’s possible usefulness for a contemporary stage; thus he joined the great deal of clamour—more than enough—in recent years concerning the issue of whether tragedy did or did not originate in Dionysian ritual, and whether, if it did, such information has any real bearing on our understanding of the plays themselves and on our general awareness of human motivation.\textsuperscript{90}

Hinden’s study pored over critiques of ritual approaches to theatre ‘as a manifestation of twentieth-century cultural malaise, a disguised attempt to restore “the possibility of religious experience in a world that has abandoned faith.”’\textsuperscript{91} He also compiled theories which successfully undermined (though could not disprove) the Cambridge theory in order to conclude on an a-religious, halfway point. From this vantage, representation in theatre meant that ‘the artistic process imitates the shaping function of the mind through struggle, suffering, and revelation, by means of that Grotowski was ‘more than a Catholic reaction to the successful nativity plays of the atheist Brecht’ [Holger Teschke, ‘Jerzy Grotowski, 1933-1999. Theatre Vol. 29, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 4-15]. On the specifically Catholic (and political) origins of Grotowski’s ascetic vision for the theatre, see Allen Kuharski’s move towards a posthumous reassessment of the Polish director in ‘Jerzy Grotowski: ascetic and smuggler’. Ibid., 10-15.

\textsuperscript{87} Presently known as Ośrodek Badań Twórczości Jerzego Grotowskiego Puszczenia Teatralno-Kulturalnych / Centre for Study of Jerzy Grotowski’s Work and for Cultural and Theatrical Research.


\textsuperscript{89} Which is not to say that Schechner dismisses Grotowski; far from it. He recognizes, for example, Grotowski’s genius in creating “ritual” spaces designed specifically for his neo-sacramental performances, hence making the ‘play’ an all-encompassing (‘spiritual’) event. It does mean, however, that in Schechner’s critique, Grotowski, by occupying a middle ground, reinforces the performance poles as play/entertainment ≠ ritual/sacrament. Cf. Schechner, Performance studies, p. 59.

\textsuperscript{90} Hinden, p. 357.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
which primordial chaos is reduced to apprehension’.\textsuperscript{92} For Hinden at least, contemporary theories of the stage made it possible to understand theatre as a way of apprehending human struggle through an aesthetic scope without the need for religion or appeal to the sacramental.

This secular model of theatre, then, quite helpfully avoids the obvious suggestion of religious efficacy in the Cambridge theory; that is, of theatre’s presumed ritual and sacramental reach (we might say ‘overreach’) for the divine. In our attempt to instantiate a theory beginning directionally with God’s dramatic action in the world which then implicates theatre as part of a human response appropriate to the event, we will have to dismiss notions of theatre’s ecstatic expression as religious. Our engagement with the theatrical act, if it is to have serious bearing on theological action, cannot begin with the actor’s declamation toward the gods: like the stalls over which they hang, they too are populated but by mere mortals. In this sense, Theo-drama begins not with the human impulse for theatre or religion \textit{per se} but with God’s action \textit{pro hominibus} dramatized most concretely in God’s entrance onto and restoration of the world stage, an action which, in requiring audience participation on the part of mankind, defines existence Theo-theatrically. Our move towards theological dramatic theory, therefore, requires disentangling ourselves from overriding notions that the theatrical act—unqualified by a theology in which God’s command performance draws actors from the stalls, the wings, and even from the pit—attains to the religious.

\textbf{5.1.2e Modes of representation}

Far more persuasive, then, is Naomi Seidman’s contention that theatre, as a secular art, shares in religion’s modes of representation. Theatre and, in her particular case, the Jewish faith are said to have common interest in the representation and preservation of what she calls ‘ritual memory’. For example, given that theatre and religion share ethnographic description, Seidman cites Solomon Ansky’s \textit{The Dybbuk Or, Between Two Worlds} (1920), as a piece of drama which cultivates religious representation. Seidman, far from assuming a theatrical amalgamation with the faith, sees in the play’s wedding ritual an authentically dramatized representation (the presentation anew) of a performed tradition in a

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., p. 371.
threatened Eastern European Jewry.  

Seidman avoids the crude parallels of Childers’ arguments; the implication in her citation of theatrical affinity with performance in religion is rather that performance in either sense requires a congregation/audience to act both as individuals and in common with those inside and outside the performance space.

In this respect, an equally convincing argument for approaching theatre from a theological position is articulated in Martha Nussbaum’s description of how the ancient tragedian engaged audiences in theatre’s performative means in the expectation of a communal exercise of human faculties, intellectual and affective alike, with which to cultivate life’s drama in representational form. Nussbaum writes that in Greek theatre,

To attend a tragic drama was not to go to a distraction or a fantasy, in the course of which one suspended one’s anxious practical questions. It was, instead, to engage in a communal process of inquiry, reflection and feeling with respect to important civic and personal ends. The very structure of theatrical performance strongly implied this. When we go to the theatre, we usually sit in a darkened auditorium, in the illusion of splendid isolation, while the dramatic action—separated from the spectator by the box of the proscenium arch—is bathed in artificial light as if it were a separate world of fantasy and mystery. The ancient Greek spectator, by contrast, sitting in the common daylight, saw across the staged action the faces of fellow citizens on the other side of the orchestra. And the whole event took place during a solemn civic/religious festival, whose trappings made spectators conscious that the values of the community were being examined and communicated. To respond to these events was to acknowledge and participate in a way of life….

If there is, therefore, a dramatic analogy in theological thought and the worship practices of the Church, it is not to do with inherently religious impulses in theatre but rather in theatre as a mode of representation. This is of course complicated by the potential conflict, outlined by Eli Rozik, between theatricality—i.e., stage pretence—and a theological understanding that Christianity is centrally shaped by the personification of the Truth (and we have seen how this question plagued both Tertullian and Augustine’s understanding of theatre, but also how it leads von Balthasar to resist a full engagement with theatre as a performed art). However, when Rozik speaks of ‘pretence’ as the hallmark of the theatrical

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performance, the assumption is, of course, that such pretence or feigning is done knowingly and not at the expense of truth.

The theatrical performance, we said, draws the world’s reality into its representative modes of action; it engages acting persons as if the entire world were the stage. The Shakespearean actor Laurence Olivier articulated this most succinctly when he noted that ‘The actor should be able to create the universe in the palm of his hand’. In the liturgical setting, however, performance cannot be theatrical if its means of representation (word in action) makes present the Word’s truthful action in the world. The contrast between dramatic action and the theological act, therefore, could be defined in terms of their grasp on the ‘theatre of the world’ metaphor. For while the particular eloquence of the theatre is in incarnating the concept (as Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre proclaimed) that totus mundus agit histrionem, its greatest fulfilment is found in the theological idea that God grants the world a dramatizing perspective on itself from within His own incarnate resources—i.e., theo-drama. Von Balthasar, again, is most enlightening in this regard: the preaching of the Church, and by implication, its homiletic expression, insofar as ‘the Church [is] open to the world, which in principle already belongs to Christ’, must evince Christ’s perspective extraneous to the world. However, because the Church is also in the world and therefore ‘also jointly responsible for it’, post-Resurrection preaching of Salvation cannot remain external but must arise materially from the world: ‘this message must permeate it like leaven, becoming disseminated throughout it’. Our adoption of von Balthasar’s theological dramatics in this respect leads us to conclude that the Church can only pursue her task effectively if she herself is enraptured by the drama which images the world from above, and imprints itself on the world from within.

As we saw in the case of the ‘Quem Quaeritis’, therefore, theatre comes into play in the preaching of the Church though not because both are performative ‘cousins’ in the sense to which Childers appeals. The theatrical act, as a mode of representation, enters the sacramental stage because in witness to the Gospel, even as she speaks

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96 Balthasar, TD IV, p. 464.
97 Cf. Ibid., p. 465.
from without, the Church is also at pains to act out its intimacy with the world. This is what in the modern expression is called “inculturation”, in von Balthasars deployment of the term, meaning that ‘[t]he cultural materials that exist in the world must be taken up and adapted’ by the Church, ‘albeit critically’ and not as a ‘forced imposition of Christianity onto a reluctant substratum’. It must be shown, therefore, that when Christianity engages theatre, it does so because the ‘world theatre’ in which the scenic stage makes us its players is genuinely consummated in God’s incarnate action in Christ and his self-witness in the eucharistic action of the Church.

5.1.2f Theological dramaturgy

In order to explore freely some key secular theories of the stage, it is important to establish that understanding theatrical action in terms of performance aesthetics supports the idea we have borrowed from von Balthasar of a theological dramatics. The central tenet in these theories—collectively referred to as anti-theatre for reasons which shall become clear below—is that theatre, whether or not it is recognized as such, exists in all places and at all times. Theorists associated with anti-theatrical dramaturgies have emphasized the idea that theatricality extends between mundane representation of action and the highest forms of representation in

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98 In an inversion of the common usage of inculturation in missiology, as the adaptation of the presentation of the Christian Gospel for specific cultures, von Balthasar writes that

Inculturation threatens to adapt Christianity to the existing culture; the salt of the gospel is in danger of losing savour. Amalgams are formed between Christianity and secular culture; at times this produces marvellous cathedrals of art, of philosophy and of piety, yet it is not clear whether these are a pure expression of the gospel.

Admittedly, though, von Balthasar’s understanding of the Church as a structure can be problematic on this point as it cannot avoid conflict between ‘the gospel message is embedded in the structures of ‘the “missionized” culture’ and ‘the movement of the missionary Church’. Nevertheless, through his use of the category, von Balthasar category understands that 1) the God of the Bible does not prevent himself from being identified with cultural structures—e.g., Israel and its history, the liturgy of Temple worship, Roman crucifixion and its humiliation, etc. And, 2) that in imaging himself through these cultural structures, God does not annihilate them but gives them form (trans-forms them) as genuine acts in the theatre of revelation. So, Israel’s national particularity, as is its Law and liturgical language—in Jesus of Nazareth—are glossed with the comedy’s fulfilling promise that ‘all’s well that ends well’. On the tragic side, the loss that the Cross entails, because it is not just any man who is crucified, but it is Jesus the incarnate God crucified, is greater than could have been imagined. This makes sense of von Balthasar’s claim that ‘it is not correct to say that Christianity has abolished tragedy through its preaching of grace; at most it has abolished certain forms of tragedy’, namely pagan views that would define existence by its tragic aspects. From the view of theological dramatics, the question should then arise whether theologically, the absolutizing architectonics of tragedy/comedy are sustainable in light of the drama of Holy Saturday, playing out between the tragedy of the Cross and the comedy of Resurrection. Cf. Balthasar, TD I, p. 120. §Balthasar, TD IV, pp. 464-65. †See specially, Achiel Peelman, L’inculturation: l’eglise et les cultures (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer 1995).
religious ritual and sacrament. This approach to the stage will root our theological dramas in the incarnate secularity of human action in witness to and as instantiation of God’s dramatizing action in the world.

To that end, theories of the secular stage will find accord with our adoption of von Balthasar’s vision for coinherence in theology and drama. For even with his Damoclean ‘question mark’ placed over the usefulness of theatre for theological reflection, there is an instinct in von Balthasar’s dramas in which would see in theatre, not some mendacious form of pretence, but the import of realized stage action on reality. This instinct leads him to (what Artaud had already identified as) the theatre et son double in the theatre of life as the basis for ‘raising of the many-sided intramundane drama to the level of theo-drama’, a theatre in which ‘man is startled out of his spectator’s seat and dragged onto the “stage” [such that] the distinction between stage and auditorium becomes fluid, to say the least’. This fluidity between theatre and existence, as between analogy and revelatory action, redeems von Balthasar’s otherwise literary understanding of drama. In terms of his theological-dramatic understanding of God’s self-mediating presence in Jesus, this means at least two things. On the one hand, it means that in Jesus, ‘the content itself is already the expression of God’; on the other, that theology, our thinking after God, takes forms not in a variety of ‘styles’ ready to hand’ (systematics, exegesis, homiletics, etc.), but in ‘a style which develops in the creative process of giving form to this unique content’. Theology, then, at once rehearses obediently ‘the expression of revelation imprinted on the believer’, and it makes present in a ‘creative, childlike, free sharing’ the expression of the Holy Spirit in Christ, in the Church, and in the world.

Conversely, apprehending divine action in static forms can only arrest the impact of the revelation on the theological person. Among the myriad of theological strategies which freeze the action to suit their static framing, von Balthasar lists the misrepresentation of divine revelation

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101 Ibid.
• in the epic of “God in himself contemplated as the formal object [such that] all the rest has value and meaning only in so far as God is expressed and represented therein, insofar as it is transparent to God and returns to God’. 102

• in the lyric mode of “God’s revelation’ at the centre [so that] the shimmering radiance of glory falls on the mediation itself: …so God is rather discerned as he is displayed in the orders of the world and of salvation, …or [he is discerned] as the one who has found the culmination of his self-being in the other, in man, in Jesus Christ’. 105

• in the undramatic ‘secular resources of style [in their ‘bewildering variety’], as they are utilised for human utterance in poetry and prose, in rhetorical and didactic, and are [appropriated] for use by the theologian’. 104

These, of course, are only a few of the possibilities, to which Von Balthasar adds the inevitable proposition of the materialist/existentialist awe of paradox: that ‘between the glory of the divine revelation and its imitative expression there can be achieved no kind of convincing correspondence’. 105 None of these, however, correspond to the revealed God of the Bible but to some ‘Unmanifest’ other. 106 In the end, none of them are sufficiently dramatic in the light of God’s self-revealedness in Spirit as in flesh. Or, in von Balthasar’s wry turn, ‘[w]ere that all, then the Word of God would not have become flesh’. 107

But because ‘there are more things in heaven and earth’, 108 and because Christian proclamation through sacramental participation in the death of Christ and his Resurrection implies incarnational action (I Cor. 11.17-26, Rom. 6.4, Eph. 2.5, Col. 1.24), the theatre’s enfleshed representation shows us fidelity to form and creative freedom. ‘In human self-expression, in its highest form in the work of art, the will to express itself not only freely creates suitable form; it incarnates in this very form its freedom’. 109 Theatre – literally – dramatizes the form of action, that is,

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102 Ibid., pp. 22-23.
103 Ibid., p. 23.
104 Ibid., pp. 24, [26].
108 As Hamlet puts to Horatio, Act I, scene 5.
109 Von Balthasar is pointing to the case when art shows evidence of the highest form of human expression, and not that it is so per se; when the artist is apprenticed to process and form, neither of which “are simply released by a mechanical necessity; they too are ‘freedom manifesting itself’”. It is the artist’s freedom apprenticed to and shaped by the freedom of form—excluding thereby
its shaping by and of the actor. In Christian understanding, it shows that theological action after revelation opens out sacramentally, therefore, by incarnate means, unto a realm ‘where Christ is embodied in terms of individual personal life and where the... Church transcends herself in the direction of the true Kingdom of God’ of which she is both witness and instantiation.\(^\text{110}\)

If the theatrical act is so foreign to sacramental forms of expression that they share no analogy (as per Rozik, but also the earlier dramatic theorists Ward and Chambers), then at question is also \(\text{θεολογεῖν}\) as human doing and expression of efficacy in God’s act of self-representation. Therefore, in contrast to Steiner’s tragic model which, to paraphrase him, posits mankind naked and ‘unhoused’ between menace and unrealized grace,\(^\text{111}\) acting from a theological centre—and here, we include acting in the theatrical sense—attests to the Christian drama in which God homes and heavens humanity in the economy of his self-personification in the flesh.

By analogy, the self-expression of divine freedom in the history of salvation and its written witness, the Bible, has a bodily manifestation, which, …precisely as it allows full scope to the sovereignty of divine freedom, does not bind it to the form, but on the contrary brings it to view and to freely lived exposition. […] And yet this game with forms in no way expresses contempt on the part of the divine spirit for the limitations of secular forms of expression; its high-point, the Incarnation of the Word, proves the opposite: an absolute acknowledgement and sanctioning of the created vessels of expression, a total harmonisation of content and form, and this precisely in the making manifest of the divine freedom. […] The content is itself already the divine expression: the divine glory proclaimed in mundane terms; and the forms of expression are subject, on their side, to the laws of free, human power of fashioning.\(^\text{112}\)

The only action responsive to the Christian drama, therefore, is incarnational, the most tangible models for which we have in the arts, and specifically in the actantial forms of representation in theatre.

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\(^\text{110}\) Balthasar, TD I, p. 92.

\(^\text{111}\) Steiner, Real presences, pp. 218-219, my italics. Though valuing provisionally Steiner’s tragic vision, expressed in his compelling but epitaphial ‘Tragedies end badly’, I am questioning his making grace penultimate to the inevitability of tragedy. Cf. ‘Oedipus does not get back his eyes or his sceptre over Thebes’. George Steiner, The death of tragedy (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996 [1961]), p. 8.

II. **ANTI-THEATRE: A CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE SECULAR THEATRE**

1. **Anti-theatrical theatre, a secular theory of performance**

   So far, we have been able to set aside contemporary ideas that theatre exists in relation to performative phenomena that include sacramental action. Moreover, although we have suggested that the mode of representation most helpful for a theological-dramatic dialogue is defined by the secular stage, we have avoided a working understanding of theatre entirely in terms of its secular (non-religious) performance aesthetics. The theatre of the latter half of the twentieth century, however, has been most notable for generating dramaturgies that redefine accepted notions of the theatre in terms of its presence in action. In essence, all aspects of these dramaturgies were latent in their orthodox predecessors—i.e., in the performance aesthetics of literary drama and genre theatre identified most closely with tragedy, comedy, irony, romance and their permutations. In the performance spaces of post-War Europe and America, however, particular aspects of traditional theatre (aspects which continue to generate plays for the mainstream stage)\(^{113}\) were expanded into theatrical movements focusing on the aesthetics of live performance.

   Relative perspective gained on the close of the last century now makes it possible to appreciate the contribution of these dramaturgies which have emphasized the secularism of ‘theatre as theatre’ though without releasing their own claim on the world theatre metaphor. These theatrical movements have been broadly and collectively identified as ‘anti-theatrical theatre’ to indicate that – relative to commercial, mainstream theatre – they have emerged (in performance more than in publication) largely as redefinitions of the theatre. For this reason they have worked primarily from the margins. Anti-theatrical dramaturgies, or simply *anti-theatre*, exploiting the inherent ambiguity in the question of where life ends and theatre begins, will present most clearly theatre’s bearing on theology and on Christian modes of representation.\(^{114}\)

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Our omission of this discussion has been necessary in order to accommodate distinction between theatrical representation and the enactment of belief in the liturgical setting in no uncertain terms. Most importantly, this has allowed us to dismiss commonplace ideas that theatre in its most serious aspects owes its particularity to a religious instinct. We have seen how this idea plays out theologically, but also its recurrence amongst apologists for the serious theatre. In this regard, George Steiner (though, as cited above, insightful on the passage of sacrament from representation to real presence) simply acquiesces to a more nuanced version of drama’s “ontological” links with religion. The question of drama’s origins in religion lies just beneath his perpetuation of the familiar idea that the dramatic genre exhibits maximal seriousness in the tragedy. The tragic genre, for Steiner, is adumbrated by a ‘Logo-centric order’ and therefore surfaces as an inherently theological problem:

Epic poetry and tragic drama are articulate within a declared or simply assumed ‘other-worldliness’. They are altogether inseparable from the postulate of “more things in heaven and earth”. Tragedy, in particular – and it may be, until now, the most eloquent, concentratedly questioning of all aesthetic genres – is God-haunted…. It posits man unhoused at those cross-roads where the mystery of his condition is made naked to the ambiguous intercessions of menace and of grace.\textsuperscript{15}

Our interaction with Rozik’s aesthetic theory of theatre, however, has allowed us to overcome the need for ontological connections between dramatization in theatre and theology’s dramatization in the life of the believer. It overcomes also related concerns that enacting interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and theatre defrauds their particularity. Making the differences explicit, in other words, enables us to approach theatre, regardless of its thematic content or religious perspective, for its secular action aesthetics.

Nevertheless, Rozik’s proposition that theatre is a communicative ‘medium’ (\textit{techne} in the Aristotelian sense) demands an account of \textit{live performance} as the

\textsuperscript{15} Steiner’s point that the tragedy is inevitably seen as a question for theology (i.e., in the appeal to divine justice) is a reworking of the Aristotelian model (after Plato) in which the tragic genre is understood in terms of its grasp on life’s tragic nature, and vice versa. Steiner, \textit{Real presences}, pp. 218-219, my italics.
medium through which theatre achieves its ends. Theories of live performance espoused by the likes of Schechner (1934-), Augusto Boal (1938-) Eugenio Barba (1936-) and other proponents of the anti-theatre can no longer be left to one side. We will explore these dramaturgies, therefore, in order to establish that the theatrical act, far from requiring qualified understanding as pedagogy, as life’s mirror, as ritual, etc., is an authentic engagement in life and that this is where theology’s dialogue with theatre originates. That said, in anticipation of our interaction with these dramaturgies of theatrical action, it would be odd indeed if we did not discuss them from the perspective of the performances which inform their theories. The interaction with anti-theatrical theory will therefore require detailed description of performances in their scenic manifestation, their impact on audiences, and other aspects relevant to the aesthetics of live performance. This, we hope, will only strengthen our case for understanding theatre as life played and therefore heard in a particular key.

5.II.1a Theatre/life in performance

We begin with Richard Schechner’s Performance Theory, our interest being in his understanding of theatre as a specific kind of activity which occurs alongside other human forms of doing. In contrast to Eli Rozik who seeks the sharpest distinctions possible between the theatre as representational action and sacrament as making present through action, Schechner’s search for a unifying theory of dramatization leads him to performance as the (anthropological) category under which human doing/making in whatever sphere must be understood. Rozik’s theory diffuses presumed opposition between the dramatic act and theologically motivated representation because both theatre and sacrament, although open to mutual reinforcement, in phenomenological terms, operate after their own manner, hence without competing for space in each other’s sphere. Schechner dissolves equally effectively presumed tensions between theatre’s secular dimension and theological/religious interest. He achieves this by contextualizing dramatic performance and the performance of sacrament in a representational continuum.

If Rozik represents a theory of discontinuities between theatre and sacrament, Schechner’s is a theory of their continuities. This means that, unlike Rozik for whom theatre and sacrament, though mutually attracted, never converge, Schechner allows for the possibility of overlap between the two. Despite their differences, however,
Schechner also arrives at his understanding of continuities between the dramatic act and sacrament by avoiding the problems associated with the common genesis typically assumed for theatre and religion. For Schechner, performance locates all human activity at some point on a continuum of representation ranging, as we have said, from gratifying *entertainment*—e.g., critical appreciation, aesthetic contemplation, distraction, fun, etc.—to *efficacy* in sacramental action—i.e., that which effects change through representational means. Therefore, setting aside the question of theatre/religion’s origins, for Schechner, the most concrete fact about the theatre event and religious ritual is that performance is a means common to both—that both have shared commonality as modes of performance.¹¹⁶

What Schechner’s *Performance Theory* confronts most directly is the fact that, given the diversity of representational performances evident throughout the world, there can be no universal agreement on what separates theatre from other forms of human activity. What constitutes theatre in one cultural setting, moreover, cannot be presumed to exist in another comparative setting; no theatrical form of representation can be understood universally. This means, partly, that Schechner’s theory of performance explains the range of activity spanning dramatic entertainment and liturgical action through concrete evidence of performance phenomena: movement, sound, use of material props, relation of text to action, shaping of environment, and so on. Most importantly, his attempt to unify under an interactive theory¹¹⁷ all activity relying on participatory representation means that theatre and sacrament, each in its own way, implies the other as a distinct mode of participatory action.¹¹⁸

Theatre may therefore be defined entirely in secular terms, and the worship sacrament in language proper to its setting, yet neither gives up its particularity for acknowledging that the other exists in some shared sense as functions of representation. Consequently, acts intended for aesthetic appreciation (e.g., theatre) and those directing belief toward the efficacious act (e.g., liturgy) are understood as

¹¹⁸ Though they may not anticipate the ideas that motivate the other’s action.
modes of action which coexist and may, as the ‘Quem Quaeritis’ shows, overlap without manifesting conflict. Affinities between theatre and religious ritual are therefore emphasized, as are their phenomenological differences, without submitting either sphere to the constraints of the other.

Schechner’s ground breaking studies of performance and theatre quite rightly argued that the relevance of the widely accepted Cambridge theory (that theatre performance as disseminated in the Western European tradition developed with greater or lesser certainty from ritual) could not be substantiated given the literary, anthropological, archaeological and ethnological evidence of contemporary performance practices. At best, it served as a speculative prototype for an ur-drama, but not as the basis for scientific study of theatre as such. Schechner’s concern to identify commonality holding together such performed practices as specific and as varied as the public tearing down of the Berlin Wall, Easter Mass in St Peter’s Square, England’s performance against Australia to win the Ashes cricket tournament, Moreno’s psycho-drama, Wagnerian celebration at the Wiener Staatsoper, etc., elicit elements essential for all participatory forms of dramatization, namely, actor, script, stage and time. All the aforementioned modes of performance share in an analogous sense elements of story, the manipulation of space/time, and the participation of the human actor.119 In this view,

Ritual is one of several activities related to theatre. The others are play, games, sports, dance and music. The relation among these… is not vertical or originary – from any one to any other(s) – but horizontal: what each autonomous genre shares with the others; methods of analysis that can be used intergenerically. Together these seven comprise the public performance activities of humans. […] Sometimes rituals, games, sports, and the aesthetic genres (theatre, dance, music) are merged so that it is impossible to call the

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119 For this reason, the novel, film and painting do not amount to performance, while the musical score, the play-script, the worship liturgy have their meaning in expectation of their performances. Along with performance particular to traditions of European origin, Schechner cites evidence of storied representation in non-Western modes of enactment: exorcism with fire in Sri Lanka (p. 92), Balinese ketchak dance (both authentic and that performed for the tourist trade, p 141), gestural acting (focused on hands, wrists, fingers, eyebrows, mouth) in Kathakali theatre of India (p. 312), etc. Interaction with Schechner in this thesis is limited to his view of performance as defined by the actor, stage and scripted action, thus preventing me from straying past the performance traditions closest to my own. Schechner, Performance studies.
activity by any one limiting name. That English usage urges us to do so anyway is an ethnocentric bias, not an argument.\textsuperscript{120}

If theatre—defined in Schechner’s anthropology as ‘the enactment of story by players’\textsuperscript{121}—can be studied through a unifying theory of performance in practices which include but are not limited to formal stage drama, then the theologically motivated sacrament can be located along a web of practices that cultivate story represented by actors in specially designated spaces. It is possible then to see how the modern rock concert (with its own echoes of the Dionysia) and the Eucharistic feast share in common something rather than nothing. Their distinctions, on the other hand, are denoted by (mutually reinforcing) extremes on the performance continuum. Both conditions may be illustrated in this manner:

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
\draw[->] (-2,0) -- (2,0);
\draw (-2,0) node {ENTERTAINMENT} -- (2,0) node {EFFICACY} node {PERFORMANCE};
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

Any action, therefore, which has a share in the entertainment/efficacy scale is said to entail performance. The rock concert, as the vast majority of theatre of the European tradition, is valuated highly for entertainment—i.e., aesthetic contemplation, intellectual appreciation, affective participation—but far less as a vehicle for individual or communal change. Obviously, dramaturgies or individual plays emerging from this tradition which aim for a greater share on the efficacy scale (borrowing, for instance, uses of language evident in religious ritual)\textsuperscript{122} are exceptions which reinforce the pervasiveness of the norm. On the other end of the spectrum, the Christian worship liturgy, seen strictly from Schechner’s

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., p. 7, my emphasis.


\textsuperscript{122} For example, Artaud’s guttural chants (\textit{Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu}, 1947), Brecht’s para-liturgical address to the audience via printed signs (\textit{Die Dreigroschenoper}, 1928), or Brian Friel’s cantatory repetition of Gaelic place names (\textit{Faith Healer}, 1979).
anthropological lens,\textsuperscript{123} entails activities the performance of which effect change. The entertainment factor in these activities is intrinsically low and they are considered successful to the extent that they provide a setting for ‘communion’, and only secondarily as occasions for contemplating the realia of the event.

In the end, Schechner’s contribution to our theological dramatics is an understanding that functions of theatre are (to echo Wolterstorff’s thesis of art \textit{in action}), as varied as the purposes in and for which they arise.\textsuperscript{124} In other words, it proposes that the theatrical act may occur everywhere, at all times and with any given motivation that would bring together an ‘actor’, a ‘story’ and a ‘stage’. It is worth illustrating, at this point, how Schechner has tried to demonstrate the fluidity of the theatrical act through the use of a specially constructed space for \textit{Makbeth} (The Performance Group, 1969). Conscious that in traditional theatre, the space is a central element which is taken for granted, in this production, Schechner sought emphasis on the interactivity of performance and space by creating a ‘performance environment’ that would integrate actor, spectator and action into shared space. In this way, he defied that traditional convention of dividing the stage from the stalls which has the effect of framing discretely action/actors from spectators, as well as theatre event from the non-theatrical world outside.

The theatre space for \textit{Makbeth} is emptied of its traditional seating and converted into a multi-layered space made of modular sections taking full advantage of the width, length, depth and height of the physical theatre. The use of multiple staging areas (engineered somewhat like Scandinavian flat-pack utility cupboards within an

\textsuperscript{123} Schechner’s study, far from keeping to Christian traditions, delves deeply into rituals of non-Christian origin. Running throughout Schechner’s \textit{Performance Theory}, for example, is the study of shamanism in which the reception of the god(s) into the assembly is enacted in the shaman-priest’s dance/trance/chant through a ‘liturgy’ and the efficacious use of ‘props’. Schechner’s anthropology, however, while it allows him to see the particulars of the performance—so, the combinatorial dynamic of story realized through the application of masks, paint, dance, music, weaponry, fetishes, and other elements of the ritual performance—it does not allow him to theorize about spiritual/theological realities these might constitute. Neither does Schechner pretend to such interest, focusing rather on codifying the grammar of performance. This, of course, poses no obligation for our study of dramaturgy and its bearing on the theological drama, though my noting it should thwart the possible implication that my interaction with Schechner’s performance theory is but an excuse to dismiss the value in his exclusively anthropological focus.

\textsuperscript{124} Nicholas Wolterstorff, \textit{Art in action: toward a Christian aesthetic} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).
enclosed black-box space) means that the action shifts unpredictably around ‘this open but secretive castle’ (unpredictably, that is, from the spectators’ perspective though not for the actors whose blocking is thoroughly rehearsed).\textsuperscript{125} Audiences are instructed in advance that they are invited to share in the performance space, and to move about with the actors, or even walk through the action provided that they do not disturb or ‘change’ the performance. They are advised that

\begin{quote}
If you are noisy or [interfere with] the performer’s movements, you can [destroy the effect]. If you take off your shoes so that you… move from carpeted area to carpeted area, you can intensify your own and our experience. […] Think of yourselves as witnesses…. [If] something happens – you go see what. But you can’t interfere or change what’s happening.\textsuperscript{126}
\end{quote}

Schechner encouraged movement with and through the action to add a further dimension of kinetic fluidity to the theatrical action, an inspiration originating in Medieval Mystery play pageant (or as we saw, in the moving platform performances of Calderon’s \textit{auto}). The play’s sequences are shifted following the designed contours of the space, hence horizontally, and vertically. Moreover, because there is no up-stage and down-stage, the audience’s perspective from which the action is viewed shifts constantly with their movements. This dynamic is allowed to exert maximal influence on the action by making the ‘set’ the only space available to performers and audience alike; the audience thus moves through the set both observing and becoming part of the action.

It should be obvious that there is also a socio-political statement made in this adaptation of \textit{Macbeth}. Traditional seating arrangement, hierarchically relative to the action, privileges vantage points nearer to the stage (a hierarchy shared with sporting events, orchestra concerts, and the traditional worship space). One of Schechner’s goals with the implementation of modular playing areas was to reapportion performer/audience access to the action—freeing proximity to the ‘playing field’ independent of the cost of admission. Having overcome the traditional commodification of dramatic action, Schechner’s theatre extended his audience a calculated, though not entirely predictable measure of responsibility for creating the performance. Actors therefore played amongst and around spectators, but most

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item\textsuperscript{125} Schechner, \textit{Performance studies}, the full description is found on pp. 59-63ff.
\item\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., p. 61.
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\end{footnotesize}
importantly along with them. For example, audience members spontaneously took part in the banquet scene by sitting at the table with the performers; everyone formed the cortege which leads Makbeth to his coronation, and so forth. Even without involving the high degrees of preparation for spontaneity of performance improvisation, Schechner’s playing environment freed actors and audiences towards collaborative creativity. Therefore, by complicating the flow of dramatic action, traditionally conceived as moving uniquely from stage to audience, Schechner created a production that entertained even as it provided actors and audience a new understanding of theatre; namely, that the theatrical act happens as a consequence of a communal sharing in story, space and action, in ‘the theatre’ as in life.

5.II.1b Theatre without borders

Theatre may assert itself everywhere, at all times, yet it goes largely unrecognized. That is to say, it is recognized almost exclusively in its traditional settings, in dramatic entertainment and theatre spaces designated for this express purpose. As Schechner has shown, however, the theatrical act may go unnoticed in its passage through common space. Versions of anti-theatre arising from the 1960s onwards have developed the idea that the theatrical act creates its own borders (aesthetic, cultural, actantial, etc.) as an expansion of Artaud’s concept that from the perspective of the scenic stage, the theatrical act precedes its ‘double’ in the theatre of life.127 These anti-theatrical dramaturgies have emphasized the degree of autonomy with which theatre asserts its boundaries.

The self-delimiting nature of theatre has been developed by the likes of San Francisco Mime Troupe which, recovering Italian renaissance performance techniques—physical comedy, exaggerated gestures, carnivalesque plots, masks and stock characters, unrefined but direct dialogue, etc.—created performances specifically for non-theatrical public spaces: parks, public gardens, on the street, market places, etc. Their particular interests developed around creating cultural alternatives to war, essentially creating from the aesthetics of commedia dell’arte theatre so-called guerrilla theatre, the name referring to camouflaged, invisible acts of theatre.

Theatre historian and theorist Marvin Carlson traces the idea of theatre weaving itself into life’s fabric to Georges Gurvitch (Essais de sociologie, 1939, predating Victor Turner’s 1950s theatrical anthropology of conflict), whose dialogical approach to society and its théâtralité foresaw the rise of “theatrical representations camouflaged in real life, without the members of the group suspecting what is happening”.128

Guerilla and other forms of ‘invisible’ performance have made evident the inherent ambiguity in performing an act ‘as if’ it were no less real than the act it represents. They have fulfilled what Gurvitch described as acts designed “to stimulate collective actions, freeing the public from precise and structured social cadres and inciting them to participate in the play of the actors and to extend it into real life.”129 Theatre’s propensity for passing unseen from stage to life may be best illustrated in what is possibly the first published script for ‘guerrilla’ theatre. The piece is unsophisticated in its technique and patently motivated by a propagandist agenda (set during one of the peak periods of public demonstration in opposition to the American war in Viet-Nam). It nevertheless shows the need to identify a theatre which could effect in reality what it represents in its action.

[The Setting: Lafayette Park, directly across from the White House, Washington DC.]

A man arrives in the park carrying a largish (4’x6’) canvas and all the accoutrements of a Sunday painter. He sets up his easel across from the White House, and begins to sketch the building. He is quite friendly to all onlookers and especially friendly to the park police, with whom he has as many pleasant conversations as possible. He works…as if to produce a work for the public library. […] What is important is to establish beyond a doubt his legitimacy [as a painter] in the park…. Over the course of the next few days the painting begins to take shape and the painter’s presence becomes a colourful local phenomenon. […] Now, slowly, the painting begins to transform into a scene appropriate to the subject matter. On the White House balcony babies are napalmed, from the roof [ballistic missiles] emerge. Fragmentation bombs are exploded on the lawn maiming the (black) visitors. […] The painter becomes a mirror reflecting the inner truth behind the marble façade.130

The author, offering no critical guideline on the ethics implied in befriending figures of authority (i.e., the park police) and gaining public trust so as to enact a

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128 Carlson, p. 431.
129 Ibid., p. 432.
political viewpoint, reveals his unilateral aims (underscored in italics) in suggesting that this performance entails a ‘reveatory’ event for—and not the unwelcome provocation of—those witnessing the event. Nevertheless, the point is made that commonplace theatricality is exploited in favour of an ‘unseen’ performance evincing recognition of and change from one condition to another.

Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal developed similar ideas into a theory of theatre’s unseen passage through aesthetic, social, culture, or political borders. His thesis subverted what he called the Aristotelian ‘coercive system of tragedy’ which renders static categories of theatre’s function in the world (i.e., theatre as imitation of life’s inevitability). His description of performance games, actor’s training, improvisational staging, and especially techniques for non-actors who identify with undramatic categories (poverty, oppression, illiteracy), shifts the theatrical act from its rooting in entertainment and articulates the efficacy of theatrical performance (i.e., in its movement towards real change). Boal describes his Invisible Theatre as consisting of

the presentation of a scene in an environment other than the theatre before people who are not spectators. The place can be a restaurant, a sidewalk, a market, a train, a line of people, etc. The people who witness the scene are those who are there by chance. During the spectacle, these people must not have the slightest idea that it is a “spectacle,” for this would make them [passive] “spectators”.

Boal’s invisible theatre, however, while exploiting everyday theatricality – weaving itself, therefore, into patterns of social intercourse – reveals itself with deadpan irony in a process visible to all participants. His theatrical pieces created first with and among impoverished communities (in South America) are designed to bring into the light the various ‘roles’ his audiences are subject to relative to the

\[\text{131} \text{ Ibid.}\]

\[\text{132} \text{ Augusto Boal, Theatre of the oppressed, trans. Charles A. & Maria-Odilla Leal McBride, Teatro del oprimido y otras poéticas políticas, 1974 ed. (London: Pluto Press, 1998). This collection represents the thought of Boal (published in essays c.1972-1979), detailing techniques for a theatre which parallels the emergence of theologies of liberation.}\]

economic and political ‘theatres’ in which they live. Boal has maintained that his invisible, unannounced theatre runs counter to guerrilla’s ‘theatricality’ (his critique being that the latter still relies on the formal distancing of actors from spectators):

In the Invisible Theatre the theatrical rituals are abolished; only the theatre exists, without its old, worn out patterns. The theatrical energy is completely liberated, and the impact produced by this free theatre is much more powerful and longer lasting.

Boal nevertheless shares in guerrilla’s anti-theatrical aims to expand theatre’s possibilities from the margins and in perspective of how theatre effects in action ‘the transition of the symbolic to the actual by releasing the constructed reality of… dramatic intention, completely out into the actual reality’. Invisible/guerrilla performance breaks free from the formal artifice traditionally dividing theatre from reality. It points to the limits of theatre valued primarily for entertainment and posits a théâtre engagé, hence overtly aesthetic, specifically cultural, politically dissident, economically ascetic, socially relevant, intellectually atheistic; but mostly, in being openly theatrical, asserts itself as a fundamental means of engaging reality.

5.II.1c Communal participation

Eugenio Barba has created—in dialogical exchange with Schechner and his theory that theatre takes place in any given setting and Boal’s work on theatre of undefined borders—a performance theatre group dedicated to the idea of theatre as a locus of communion. As with other forms of anti-theatre, Barba’s theatre captures

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136 Ibid., p. 147, cited in, Morelos, p. 81.
137 Morelos, p. 81.
139 Formally termed the Third Theatre for reasons not relevant to this study. A thoroughgoing academic approach to Barba’s dramaturgy is found in a dissertation by (Irish playwright) Antoinette
most sharply the secular moment in which theatre of the Western tradition has found its identity. Like other forms of anti-theatre, Barba’s performances with Odin Teatret (Holstebro, Denmark)\(^{140}\) emphasize theatre’s propensity to break free of its aesthetic contingencies as “theatre” and cross over into the ‘theatre of life’ as a mode of representation. Barba’s focus on theatre’s essential movement between life and the stage delivers a dramaturgy of audience/actor participation as communion. For Barba, the actor exists in a dialogic relationship with an acting company; they, in turn, with the acting collective which is the audience. This theatrical community then performs in union with the culture around them, and so with humanity. Barba’s dramaturgy presses the idea of theatre as a participatory, communal event to its limits; we will therefore explore this as a dramaturgy for Communal Participation.

Barba’s motivation in theatre is theatre’s movement from live act to life’s drama, a movement he understands primarily as participatory, from the perspective of an actively engaged, imaginatively responsive audience. Barba conceives of theatre as an intensification of life, so ‘moving’ in its action as to draw into itself the spectator’s own need for lifting, in common with the stage performers and other audience participants, up to the dramatic moment. Recalling the genesis of this notion of theatre as life in a grander moment, Barba writes of his first experience of the theatre, of being awed, as a child, by the confluence of reality and the live stage:

The hero was played by …a very popular Italian actor. But it was neither he nor the other actors who impressed me, nor the story which I followed with interest but without amazement. What impressed me was a horse. A real horse. It appeared pulling a carriage, according to the most reasonable rules of scenic realism. *Its presence suddenly exploded all the dimensions which until then had reigned on that stage. Because of this sudden interference from another world, the scene was torn asunder before my very eyes.* […] That horse was the first verse of a song that I did not then know I would sing.\(^{141}\)

The incarnation of life on the stage, both violent for its unexpectedness and aesthetically ‘amazing’, of a reality incomprehensibly real according to the terms in

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\(^{140}\) The group exists, in fact, as two conjoined entities, Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium where new work is devised and developed, and Odin Teatret which represents the company’s identity for performance in public; for convenience, I will simply refer to the group collectively by the latter name.

which the stage representation attempts to concretise the real, describes Barba’s fascination with the possibility of an inbreaking of external dimension in human relations.

Barba’s vision of theatre as making present life in modes of realia leads him to seek ways in which humans sustain ‘real presence’ with ‘the other’, including the ‘invisible presences’ mediated by memory of a community’s ancestors – the dead but ‘true, diverse interlocutors’ – including those of the theatrical community. Of his theatrical productions, Barba writes

The flying houses which I have built with my companions from Odin Teatret… are inhabited by ancestors whose presence is invisible but concrete. Every time there is a problem to be dealt with, a difficult step to take, or a new situation to decipher, my thoughts turn to how Brecht behaved, to what Artaud said, to what actors did at the time of the Renaissance and during the Religious Wars. I think of Moscow, Stanislavski. […] It is true, those were different times. But our times too are ‘different’, if we compare them to the times we yearn for.

If Schechner’s anthropology of theatre is correct to posit theatre as a cultural universal, then Barba is not wrong to insist that acting in the communal setting of the theatre interrogates the quality of human interaction in a community as ‘not only love of the other [but] the need to know oneself’ in this love, and particularly in the modern ‘stew of cultures, where old borders creak, disintegrate or become sclerotic’. Barba writes speaking of himself as the actor that, in the theatre as in life, ‘only by measuring myself against others can I give a meaning to the route and find my identity’.

Every theatre is part of an historical and cultural context from which it cannot escape. Theatre can, however, possess a diversity, an energy of its own by means of which it can translate, in its particular way, the mould of the world it is part of, re-inventing and even inventing it. […] Perhaps it suffices to remember the old saying: the theatre must be a mirror. But the mirror is not only the

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142 Ibid., p. 150.
143 Ibid., p. 149.
144 Ibid., p. 147.
145 Ibid., p. 148.
146 Ibid.
performance. The mirror is the whole […] the men and women who cultivate it, their relationships, their boldness. ¹⁴⁷

This horizontal dimension in Barba’s theatrical ‘interculturalism’, is never abstracted from his suspicion that human discourse in theatre is intersected by an unseen vertical dimension. Although not proposing religious dimensions to his theatre, neither does Barba want to deny the possibility that the theatrical act may in some sense be shaped by the quality of an ‘offstage’ voice which he himself has learned to ‘unlearn’. ¹⁴⁸

That said, Barba approaches theatre as an essentially human impulse for community, as a way of being in and responding materially to the human other, hence entirely from ‘below’. However, Barba also speaks, again in highly personal terms, of a theatrical vision shaped at a young age, as a participant in the rites of the Roman Catholic Mass. He describes, an opening into God’s dramatizing perspective, and at the same time, an adult scepticism driving his humanist vision for the stage. Nevertheless, the memory of the Eucharistic ritual has its place in his theatrical openness to ‘thaumaturgical’ contemplation,¹⁴⁹ particularly in the sensorial participation in the Eucharistic worship:

There is a boy in a warm place full of people singing, fragrant odours, vivid colours. In front of him, high up, is a statue wrapped in a purple cloth. Suddenly, while bells ring, the smell of incense becomes more pungent and the singing swells, the purple cloth is pulled down revealing a risen Christ. […]

I was deeply religious. It was a pleasure to the senses to go to church, to find myself in an atmosphere of darkness and candle light, shadows and gilt stucco, perfumes, flowers and people engrossed in prayer. I waited for moments of intensity: the elevation of the Host, Holy Communion, processions. Being with

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 148-149.
¹⁴⁹ Eugenio Barba, ‘En las entrañas del monstruo’, trans. Judy Barba, Salutatory speech on the occasion of honorary doctorate conferred by the Instituto Superior de Artes, 6 February 2002 (March 2002), p. 3. As with most of Barba’s writings, this element in his dramaturgy is not formulated through systematic argumentation. Barba the dramaturge writes from a deeply personal vision of theatre as human spontaneity conditioned by the particulars of actor/actor exchange. Personal anecdote and story are, for Barba, central to his approach to a theatre rooted in humanity’s communal embodiment in the flesh and the perpetuation of memory. It is, in the end, a committed understanding of why, humanly speaking, we need theatre. See, specially ‘Building a small tradition’ in Jane Turner, Eugenio Barba (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), pp. 2-40.
other people, feeling a bond with them, sharing something, filled me with a sensation which even now resonates in my senses and in their subconscious.  

The perspective emerges from a personal store of sensate memory; it is descriptive of Barba’s initiation into what he understands as ‘the culture of faith’ and does not amount to an argument for thinking theologically about theatre. His attachment to the communal aspect of performance, however, as well as the religious memory evident in his theatrical writing, speaks for a theatre which does not begin and end with man alone (see APPENDIX C).

We have seen that a theological interaction with theatre must begin with an understanding of the theatrical act as a mode of representation which in itself makes no claims on divine revelation. To confuse, for instance, belief in the sense sustained in Christian sacrament and belief enacted through the theatrical act only aggravates the perception that theatre and the Church are necessarily at odds. It has been imperative, therefore, to disengage definitively from presumed notions of theatre as an inherently religious event. Our study of the ‘Quem Quaeritis’ has shown that the liturgical setting can integrate the theatrical act into its modes of representation without raising theatre to the status of sacrament or diminishing belief in the theological sense to the enactment of “belief”. We have also shown that, even as it makes evident the truth of the world stage, theatre creates its own boundaries, resisting, therefore, predetermined ideas as to its forms and purposes. Our interaction with anti-theatrical theories of the stage, therefore, has made it possible to make at

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151 Ibid.

152 Barba’s ideas, a great deal of it in letters to theatrical colleagues the world over, remain irenic and resist systematization. He explores Christianity, for example, through youthful impressions of a world discovered through the senses, including the drama of prayer’s ‘intention-action taking flight’ and the ‘projection of the whole of oneself’ after it. For this reason, Barba has a place in our theo-dramatic enquiry. Ibid., p. 3.

153 Hence, his openness to the possibility that theatre might be addressed from outside its own resources (perhaps even ‘from above’). In his commitment to theatre as a locus of communal exchange, Barba has developed models of ‘performance bartering’ (after gift exchange in tribal ceremony) by which his company performs for theatre groups in foreign countries in exchange for their performances in Odin Teatret’s hometown of Holstebro. Cf. Eugenio Barba, ‘The genesis of theatre anthropology: The local and personal as source of intercultural inspiration’, New Theatre Quarterly X, no. 38 (May 1994): 167-173. Limits of space prevent us from developing more fully the significance in Barba’s extensive cross-cultural borrowing of dramatization techniques, including representational patterns from religious drama. However, a description of how Barba’s theatre arises from the dynamics of community in order to create wider connections with culture is provided in APPENDIX C.
least three unassailable conclusions about secular theatre: 1) that theatre is a real act and therefore asserts itself in all places and at all times, 2) that in its engagement of action, theatre determines the forms in which it effects the representation of reality, and 3) that theatre moves its participants towards an act of communion. With this understanding to hand, we now move towards a brief demonstration of how theology’s interaction with theatre can help make greater sense of participation in Christian forms of representation as instances of God’s dramatizing action. And, finally, towards questions which, given our theological interaction with the drama, impose themselves for the future of theo-drama.
The Christian martyr is submerged in the tide of nameless martyrdoms, the voice of the Christian witness no longer penetrates those of the world of machines, and, to confuse the picture, many a non-Christian plays the role that is intended for the Christian. […] But no one, Christian or non-Christian, can live without undertaking the discernment of spirits. That is precisely why drama, as a representation of existence in its meaning (and it is covert meaning), is a possibility, perhaps even an urgent necessity for our age.¹

¹ Balthasar, TD I, p. 122.
Towards a Theological Dramaturgy for the Theatre: Vital Questions to Press the Dialogue to its Logical Ends

I. Theology as Performance Participation

The Christian faith is not a one-man show in which God takes to the world-stage to command acclaim from the stalls and gallery, and exits the theatre, not to be seen again until some final, yet-to-be-announced appearance. Nor does our theology conceive of humans as accessories in a play of puppets jerking on their strings at the whim of a master above; or—our lines voiced for us from behind a veil—as silhouetted figures in a shadow play (both scenarios having been suggested by non-Christian views of divine dramatics). The play, in fact, is ongoing; the action is here and now; moreover, it involves us. There is a positive urgency with which the Christian Script announces that all of us have been authored into life’s pageant and are therefore enjoined to partake in its action, each one’s talents adding to the performance of the whole.

Bringing the world-theatre metaphor to bear in this sense on theological thought has sharpened our sense of the “dramatic” in its most serious and encompassing implications. This much, we have gained in insight following along von Balthasar’s understanding of ‘theo-drama’. It has been brought to light equally in the appeal to the dynamics of the Word in action as the force that enlivens the task of the Church (Vanhoozer). Furthermore, an understanding of faith as a performance interpretation of the Christ-centred life, has made evident the continual rehearsal and re-rehearsal which performing the Christian Gospel before a watching world entails (Craigio-Snell). In this theological drama, regardless of the role we take, the task requires both learning to see as Christ sees (that is, trusting in his unique overview of the stage on which we play), and playing our character-action with the committed intimacy with which Christ himself has played the human part.

This claim, of course, reflects also on the fact that doing theology is itself a means of adopting a Christ-centred perspective and of participating in our enfleshed means in Christ-like action in the world. Theology, in the end, is our thinking after God though given a perspective which, humanly speaking is not ours, but are

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1 Cf. my footnotes 128, and 126, Chapter 1.
nevertheless brought to in God’s act of self-personification in Christ. Gerard Manley Hopkins speaks of this perspective as a spark given to each creature in the fire of the Resurrection; his verse reads—

Across my foundering deck shone
A beacon, an eternal beam. Flesh fade, and mortal trash
Fall to the residuary worm; world’s wildfire, leave but ash;
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.2

Given this theodramatic sense of the Gospel, there is no question that God would be content to merely pull strings from above, or occasionally prompt lines from the wings to push along the action. It says to us, in fact, that it is in God’s nature to spark a command performance for (Rom. 8.31), with (Rom. 8.11), and through his creature (Rom. 8.26-27). Therefore are we made actors in the most meaningful sense possible: καὶ ὑμεῖς μιμηταί ἐγενήθητε τοῦ κυρίου3—and therefore is theology itself a form of action by which we take to the stage as imitators of God in Christ— γίνεσθε οὖν μιμηταί τοῦ θεοῦ.4

Theology, consequently, is the act of participating faithfully – Hopkins might say, burning between page and stage, in the theatre of God’s world. How this theology is performed is a matter of no less importance than our insight gained on doing theology as performance interpretation of God’s play. In this regard, von Balthasar and those who have taken after him have brought to our discussion both the literary drama and the idea of “the theatre” as a means of rendering a theology which is faithful to the dramatic heart of the Christian Gospel. Our own conclusion is for a theological engagement with those elements which make the theatre a ‘live’ performative medium. Could it be, for example that the imaginative transformation of scenery/props, script, actor and audience through the dramatic act illuminate the imaginative dynamics of human transformation under God? Might the performance dynamics of author, text and action (or actor, director and audience) elicit actantial

3 1 Thessalonians 1.6, ellipsed; Aland et al., eds.
4 Ephesians 5.1. Ibid.
models in terms of which to articulate and revitalize Trinitarian doctrine? Is it possible, even, that tackling these questions could pay dividends for both theology and the stage? Inasmuch as theatre of the contemporary period has found its identity in the secularism of aesthetics without religion, actors have never stopped speaking about their craft as a communal means for exploring the world in spirit and in truth. It is conceivable, therefore, that a theological encounter with the theatre as theatre, and not merely as a resource for metaphors, could generate a dramaturgy in which 'spirit' is located in the biblical Gospel through the secular language of the stage?

2. Theatre for theology

On one level, our own work has sought to further theology’s ‘discovery’ of drama and of the Welttheater as a resource for Christian thought. However, to the extent that von Balthasar has given us dramatic metaphors as a means for doing theology, we have also had to think beyond his engagement which limits itself to the literary aspects of the drama and avoids its phenomenal manifestation in the theatre. Our particular concern to expand the ways in which theology engages theatre into its action has meant, therefore, delving deeply into theories of the form and essence of the performed drama.

To this end, we have been able to rescue the theatre in Christian understanding

1) from the kind of invective against theatre represented by Tertullian, namely because, given the state of the theatre in his day—and given his own theological concern to voice the Christians’ unique role as witnesses in God’s world—Tertullian could not have envisioned a “theological dramatics” as such, and even less a Christianly-motivated theatre

2) from Augustine’s more nuanced but no less vitriolic attack on the stage, in his case, by showing that, given his task to render a theology faithful to the dramatic character of life under God, Augustine himself cannot suppress in his narrative the aspects most central to classical forms of dramatization; he cannot avoid shaping his Christian narrative into a theologically-dramatic form.

Our move towards a positive construal of a theological dramaturgy actually began with Calderón who did not merely raise the drama to the status of interlocutor for

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theology but enacted theologically through the secular aesthetics of the stage God’s
dramatizing perspective on the world. For the first time in the history of the Church,
a self-consciously theological drama plied its trade on the secular stage; and did so in
witness to God’s act of placing himself at the centre of the world-stage (hence we
understood it under the rubric of metatheatre). However, the fact that Calderón
could assume a Christian audience to make sense of the theological backdrop of his
plays meant that no theoretical support was needed for their staging. The precise
nature of theology’s dialogue with the secular aspects of theatre in Calderon’s period,
therefore, remains for us a matter of speculation.6 For this reason, our task to
instantiate a dramaturgy which makes sense of theatre theologically is a prolegomena
to unprecedented possibilities for theatre/theology dialogue which exist today.

Furthermore, we argued that drama’s association with religion and violent
entertainment in the first few centuries of Church history made theatre unavailable
for Christian consideration. Ironically, when dramatic play does manifest itself as a
practice of the Church (roughly from the origins of the ‘Quem Quaeritis’ to the end
of the Calderonian age) theoretical explanations do not seem to follow the
performance: it would seem that the theatrical performance in Christian hands was its
own justification, and made stage theory superfluous. We can say with certainty,
though, that in these eras, the significance of drama in the Church’s giving account of
God and of itself to the world was veiled behind the mystery of the Church as a locus
of sacrament. The autos, we are reminded, as well as the Mystery plays of the
English stage, were tied to the feast of Corpus Christi; the earlier ‘Quem Quaeritis’,
to the Easter liturgy. Christianity’s encounter with the drama, in fact, simply
subsumed theatrical forms of representation into liturgical sacramentality. However,
unlike the visual art which hangs on church walls for generations, or music which
perpetuates its own tradition of performance in sacred space (i.e., in the choir loft,
around the church organ), the live nature of theatrical play means that it cannot be
contained in any one setting or tied down to any one purpose for long. Unlike
playscripts, the theatrical performance cannot even be preserved. This means in part

6 Although a trace of the Calderonian auto, enacting aspects of the gospels in secular space, remains
in Holy Week processional plays to this day, no evidence remains that even in its time the sacramental
play had a lasting influence on the systematic task of theology. As von Balthasar pointed out, no one
has bothered to refer to ‘The Great Theatre of the World’ as a piece of dramatic theology. The same
may be said for the Mystery plays of the English stage. Though extant in contemporary revivals, they
have been taken up by historical and cultural interests and are not considered evidence of the Church’s
address to the world.
that theatre may be made to fit the shape of sacramental structure but, as we have shown in our interaction with Rozik’s secular theory of the dramatic act, theatre need not itself be a sacrament. In this regard at least, Cohen, Ward, and Chambers were correct to point out that Christian drama necessarily found its way out of the church; though in our reading, by way of reconstituting itself in its properly secular state, and not because the Church had gifted the world with an invention of its own. Nevertheless, the paradox of Christian attraction/repulsion to the theatre (in metaphors and as live representation respectively) only reinforces the ancient question: are the links between theology/religion and theatre anthropological accidents, or do they point to necessary connections, perhaps on the ways in which both can draw upon the representational aesthetics of the other? Moreover, can contemporary theories of the stage, though divested of religious pretence—or rather, given that they make no claim on religion—propose models for developing the self-understanding of Christian faith without becoming a threat to the faith?

3. **Theatre’s Secularity for Theology**

From this perspective, two aspects have emerged central to our theory that a theological encounter with the theatre is possible on grounds of theatre’s secularity. On one hand, the idea of a *theatrum mundi*, insofar as it provides an encompassing perspective on life from some higher ground, is the point on which both theology and theatre meet. Both apply themselves to the dramatic idea that the world is a stage and we are its actors.\(^7\)

On the other hand, we have learned that to speak of “the theatre” in such broad terms is a distraction for theology because theatre does not exist in undifferentiated form. The nature of theatrical performance, we have seen, is always particular; broad speculation concerning the theatre (as institution, as art movement, as a way of seeing the world, as metaphor, etc.) is a misapprehension of the multiplicity of dramatic manifestations historically, and of multifaceted aims and motivations behind such dramaturgical diversity. The twentieth century, however, uniquely and

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\(^7\) Whether or not they share in the metaphor equilaterally is not in question, only that the meeting is real and can be pursued as such.
unlike any other period in history, has identified in theatre at least three features most central to theatrical performances. These may be reiterated most helpfully as

1) **SPONTANEITY**: because theatre is a real mode of engaging life’s action, it asserts itself in as many places and conditions as are humanly available.

2) **PARTICULARITY**: because theatre, while originating principally on the scripted page, achieves its dramatizing action through the particulars of space, actors, props, set times, etc. Theatrical ‘play’, moreover, determines how these are brought into ‘as if’ relations and thereby, as meta theatre has shown, both ‘paradoxically fortify the real’, and ‘provide a resistant force against which performance can be measured’ as real.

3) **CAUSALITY**: because the play’s ‘thing’ as a condition of its medium is action; theatre does something. What it does most vividly is move actors and audiences, through a participatory means, towards action in communes. If the actor plays a character who lives in a world that includes the audience, it is precisely because an audience’s playing in the world includes the thespian’s self-giving as a particular way of engaging life in community.

These descriptions by no means exhaust the ways in which the secularity of theatrical performance may be understood. Even when limiting ourselves to performance traditions derived from European stock, they could be complemented, for instance, by additional definition of the relation between word and act. Nevertheless, to speak of theatre as spontaneous, particular and causal gives us safe passage through the varieties of dramaturgies which lay claim to our contemporary stage. It renders, moreover, an understanding of the theatre in its proper setting as a secular art form from which standpoint, as we are seeing, raises questions for the Church. *Can aspects of live theatrical performance—textual interpretation, acting and*

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8 Though not, as we have seen, exclusively.
9 Hodgon and Worthen, eds., p. 23.
10 This aspect which defines theatre most centrally did not escape Augustine as we saw above, Ch. 3, fn. 36. Nor did it escape commentary from Cicero, cf. Ch.2, fn. 29.
11 To revisit this definition from my Introduction; cf. States, p. 170.
improvisation, audience participation, etc.—offer models for bridging the distance between theological reflection and the concrete practices of faith?

4. **Desacrilized theatre for sacred space**

Treating theatre in its secular manifestation, by definition, has made it necessary to distend from it (unromantically but effectively) any possible implication that theatre’s rise above common form entails rivalry with Christianity for sacramental space. From a theological perspective, in fact, theatre, though no less assertive than its sacramental counterpart, appears far less ambitious than Christian forms of representation.

Dramatization, to refine a former definition, is the performance of an action in the manner of another action;\(^\text{13}\) *this* is the particular eloquence of the theatre. The German dramatist Peter Handke has put this in such stark terms as to say that ‘in the theatre light is brightness pretending to be other brightness, a chair is a chair pretending to be another chair, and so on’.\(^\text{14}\) The stage, in other words, draws from reality the elements of word, the human actor and space, and hands them back to the world in added form; it reconstitutes them with a corporeal presence not their own. The fact of this ‘as if’ otherness as the condition of the dramatizing medium was already evident in the ‘Quem Quaeritis’ performance interpretation for Easter Sunday. Its implications for the theological-dramatic exchange are particularly significant and bear noting at length.

We read in St Ethelwold’s liturgy that during the Gospel reading, a brother, vested in white, walks through the church nave *dissimulating* as if attending to something else and takes his place in the chancel, in a corner which ‘acts’ as the ‘sepulchre’. Meanwhile, three monks (later, nuns) dressed in copes enter *as if* looking intently for someone at the tomb. The play sections for Good Friday, as that which ends the

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\(^{13}\) The presence of an audience in this should be self-evident by now. This refinement of the definition given by States is important, cf. Chapter 1, footnote 163.

\(^{14}\) Cited in paraphrased form in States, p. 20. Peter Handke (currently, inheritor of Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble) showed this aspect of theatre most lucidly through his *Publikumsbeschimpfung* (1966), a theatre piece which pretended explicitly to be not theatre but reality, thus giving rise to ‘performance art’ as well as the American ‘happening’. See, Peter Handke, *Stücke. Bd 1*, vol. 43, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975).
Resurrection liturgy, make even more explicit the incorporation of a serious theatre – i.e., one showing ultimate consequences – into the sacramental worship. We would note in particular the play-acting of the cross as the body of the crucified Lord:

On that part of the altar where there is space for it there shall be a representation as it were of a sepulchre, hung about with a curtain, in which the holy Cross... shall be placed in the following manner: the deacons... shall come forward, and having wrapped the Cross in a [linen cloth], they shall bear it... singing the antiphons... to the place of the sepulchre. When they have laid the cross therein, in imitation as it were of the burial of the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, they shall sing the antiphon Sepultus Domino, signatum est monumentum, ponentes milites qui custodirent eum. In that same place the holy Cross shall be guarded with all reverence until the night of the Lord's Resurrection. [...]  

In effect, between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, the crucifix wrapped in linen remains veiled behind the curtain covering the 'sepulchre' where it has been laid in the play's 'first act'. At the final act, on Easter morning, following the short litany of the 'Quem Quaeritis' proper, the angel pulls back the curtain of the sepulchre.  

[The angel] as though calling back [the Marys] shall say the antiphon Venite et videte locum, and then, rising and lifting up the veil, he shall show them the place void of the Cross and with only the linen in which the Cross had been wrapped. Seeing this the three shall lay down their [censers] in that same 'sepulchre' and, taking the linen, shall hold it up before the clergy; and, as though showing that the Lord was risen and was no longer wrapped in it, they shall sing this antiphon: SURREXIT DOMINUS DE SEPULCHRO.  

The serious consequences of this resurrection play are then made explicit in the concluding coda:  

When the antiphon is finished the Abbot, rejoicing in the triumph of our King in that He had conquered death and was risen, shall give out the hymn Te Deum laudamus, and thereupon all the bells shall peal.  

It should be obvious in the sections marked in bold that the actions performed, according to our definition, in the manner of other action drives the dramatics of this first known instance of theological/theatrical interplay. Remarkably, the script does not refrain from prescribing to the prior how he shall play his part – i.e., ‘rejoicing’ and singing – before leading the congregation into the liturgy of the Eucharist. Here, the (secular) theatricality of acting ‘as if’ reinforces the fact that the liturgical setting enacts the drama most central to the Gospel. The liturgy, in its turn, invests in the

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15 St. Ethelwold, pp. 44-51 [§46-53].
secular element of this theatre its own share in theological realities of ultimate consequence.

From this, once again, questions arise, though this time, for the theatre in the light of theological reflection after biblical revelation. For example, might the dramaturgical notion of ‘character action’ gain in perspective through dialogue with the Christian claim that God himself ‘takes to the stage’, and is personified through the enactment of a particular character role in man? Do Christian ideas that personal transformation is made available through the appropriation of a character not properly our own (i.e., by ‘putting on Christ’) bring the work of the character actor into sharper relief? Does the Christian biblical commitment to discipleship in community corroborate the actor’s personal commitment to rehearse her part along with a community of players in order to understand the action of the play? Does our performance interpretation of the Christian gospel, moreover, reinvigorate and/or challenge classical notions of dramatic genre? For example, is the uplift of the comedy itself caught up in the pageantry of our post-Resurrection world? If so, is comedy the ultimate form of serious drama because in looking to the Resurrection, it takes into account implicitly the tragic dimensions of the Cross? And, finally, can contemporary Christian focus on participatory action in a ‘theo-drama’ suggest forms of sacred drama—or, for that matter of secular drama—not seen in recent theatrical movements?

DIVINE RECKONINGS IN PROFANE SPACES? In light of our proposal for a theological dramaturgy for theatre—and, if in this third millennium of Christian history the Church is to be reconciled with the theatre—all these questions, I suggest, must be answered in the positive: theologically and theatrically; academically and practically—enthusiastically, and not in opposition.
APPENDIX A: Reality at play in Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*

Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* follows the “ordinary” lives of the residents of a small town in early 1900s New England. The action is defined neither by the irreversible turns of the tragic nor the human longing for the happy ending of the comedy, but by the commonplace of ‘Daily Life’, ‘Love and Marriage’ and ‘Death’, as the play’s three acts announce to the audience. All of this happens in brief domestic moments and small neighbourly exchanges (around the kitchen table, conversing over the fence in the garden, in messages communicated by children from their bedroom windows). All of this, the audience is told from the play’s opening.

Breaking from theatrical convention of the period, Wilder created a STAGE MANAGER character who speaks directly to the audience. As the theatre doors open, we see the STAGE MANGER (‘hat and pipe in mouth’) furnishing the otherwise ‘empty stage in half-light’ with a bench, a table and three chairs, another table:

> [As the house lights go down he has finished setting the stage and leaning against the right proscenium pillar watches the late arrivals in the audience. When the auditorium is in complete darkness he speaks.]

**STAGE MANAGER**

This play is called “Our Town.” It was written by Thornton Wilder; ...In it you will see [names the principal actors and their characters], ...and many others. The First Act shows a day in our town....

> [A rooster crows.]

From this point on, the STAGE MANAGER’s presence is omniscient, throughout the play shifting between interaction with the dramatic characters (himself taking minor roles), and the *dramatis personae* in the stalls. His audience are asked to shed the pretence of a traditional theatre audience observing the action objectively, and to begin living according to truth dramatized in the play. This is summarized towards the end of the play in a brief exchange between the Stage Manager and the spirit of the youthful Emily who only in death realizes the loss of passing through life as an uninvolved spectator. ‘It goes so fast’, she mourns, ‘We don’t have time to look at one another.... Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you’. Turning to the STAGE MANAGER in tears, she then asks, ‘Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—Every, every minute?’ Her question, of course, is spoken vicariously for the audience; its answer is given by the STAGE MANAGER as one who has a commanding view over the action:

**STAGE MANAGER**

No. [Pause.] Saints and poets, maybe—they do some.

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1 Wilder.

2 Historically, changes in theatrical convention have been met with resistance from theatre audiences, sometimes violently (e.g., the riots caused by Charles Macklin’s performance of Macbeth, Covent Garden, 1772; by John Philip Kembel raising ticket prices at Covent Garden, 1809; or by J.M. Synge’s representation of Irish identity in *The Playboy of the Western World*, Abbey Theatre, 1904). Wilder’s dramaturgy, however, struck a chord with Broadway audiences in such understated manner that, although flaunting accepted form, was immediately acclaimed as turning ‘familiar facts[,] ...the simple events of human life into universal reveries... [b]y stripping the play of everything that is not essential’ thus giving it ‘a profound, strange, otherworldly significance’. Brooks Atkinson, ‘How they used to live’, The New York Times (New York, February 13, 1938).
APPENDIX B: Plato, Aristotle and Augustine’s ban on theatre
from the City of God

The relation between Augustine’s view of drama and an Aristotelian/Platonic perspective is particularly interesting on the point of what it means that the drama ‘moves’ an audience to participate in the drama through the affect. Aristotle’s theory of the tragic includes the view (contra Plato) that the experience of ‘pity and fear’ produced through the imaginary activities of reading or play-acting the drama enables the participant to face real-life suffering with greater measure of understanding. Lindsay explains this aspect of the Poetics thus:

Plato and Aristotle agree in holding that Pity is one of the principal emotions to which Tragedy ministers. The point at which they part company is where they begin to discuss the effect produced upon human life and conduct by the indulgence of this emotion in the mimicry of the stage. According to Plato, the emotion grows by what it feeds upon, and becomes more and more troublesome and deleterious in real life, the more we indulge it at the theatre: according to Aristotle, tragedy effects the ‘purgation’ of pity and its kindred emotions and tends to free us from their dominion in matters of more serious moment (Poetics 6.1449 et al). Aristotle hopes to effect by means of theatrical stimulation what Plato would attain by starving the emotions even in play.3

More significantly, however, from the point of view of construing theological-dramatics, Aristotle rehabilitates affective expression as an end in itself proper to the dramatic representation. For Plato, dramatic pathos is concrete proof of the theatre’s conspiracy against ‘the better part of human nature’ (τὸ δὲ φύσις βέλτιστον ἰμόν),4 particularly as he sees emotion in general as disabling to the soul’s rationality in the moment of suffering. Plato’s Republic does not therefore allow the dramatist whose ‘plaintive’5 art, through the arousal of ‘idle and cowardly’ emotion, dissipates the soul from a ‘rational and untrammelled’6 orientation toward reality.

For the dramatic poet, however, the Platonic assessment could not be less descriptive of the affective experience in drama. In the drama, suffering and, as Lindsay says, ‘its kindred emotions’ are hardly events to be borne soberly and privately, but are rather in themselves ends to be achieved in, with, through, and upon the hearers of the play. If for Aristotle, therefore, plot trajectory and character transformation are two principle goals of the tragedy, in introducing their triunity with pathos, he overcomes his predecessor for whom, most

4 Plato, Plato, trans. J. Burnett, [X.606a].
5 That is, arousing shrill irritability: ἄγεφορον κτητικός Plato, The Republic, [X.604e].
6 Unrestricted, that is, by the demands of wanton emotion. Lindsay has ‘prudent and quiet’ (308), while Shorey opts for ‘intelligent and temperate’. Plato, Plato, trans. J. Burnett, [10.604e].
perniciously, the tragedian, ‘crowding towards solution’, \(^7\) pitches the drama on alternately sustained and relaxed levels of affected emotion. Plato’s judgement on the dramatist is thus to deny him entrance to a city which is to be well governed, because he arouses and fosters and strengthens this [affective] part of the soul and destroys the reasoning part. Like one who gives a city over into the hands of villains, and destroys the better citizens, so we shall say that the imitative poet likewise implants an evil constitution in the soul of each individual; he gratifies the foolish element in it, …and he manufactures images very far removed from the truth.\(^8\)

It should be duly noted that while the ideal Republic does not tolerate the dramatic poet, in the \textit{Laws} (Book III), Plato conceives of a national compromise which might allow the dramatist in a pragmatic, restricted sense. Even then, however, art is only introduced as pedagogy of higher-order political values, moral virtues and ethical comport – the drama being valued primarily as a vehicle for logos – relative to which pathetic appeal to the emotions is considered base and sycophantic at best. In his compromise, then, Plato also sets up a hierarchical structure by which the polis can maintain censoring authority over the arts. Plato bemoans, for example, that short of restricting the way in which music influences the national character, compositions for popular entertainment debases virtue in the art-form by ‘popularizing’ (δημοκρατία ἐν αὐτῇ) what he thinks should really be an ‘aristocratic’ function of the choral groups of the Greek stage:

By compositions of such a [popular] character, set to similar words, they breed in the populace a spirit of lawlessness in regard to music, and the effrontery of supposing themselves capable of passing judgment on it. Hence the theatre-goers become noisy instead of silent, as though they know the difference between good and bad music, and in place of an aristocracy in music there springs up a kind of base theatrocracy [θεατροκρατία].\(^9\)

Plato’s more representative critique, then, is that theatre, through imagistic imitation of suffering, trivializes actual suffering worthy of affective “consideration” in the soul’s struggle to make sense of life.\(^10\) He holds, furthermore, that the tragic effect relativizes the

\(^7\) Phrasing borrowed from Thomas Carlyle: ‘Under all roofs of this distracted City, is the nodus of a drama, not untragical, crowding towards solution. …This day, my sons, ye shall quit you like men. …This day ye must do or die.’; in ‘Storm and Victory’, section VI, \textit{The French Revolution} (London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1911-13).

\(^8\) Plato, \textit{The Republic}, Book X, pp. 308-309.


\(^10\) The ellipsed section has it, in Lindsay’s translation, that the dramatization plays to the affect ‘which cannot distinguish between great and small but thinks that the same things are sometimes great and sometimes small’ (a verse rendered difficult by Attic reduplication: χαριζόμενον καὶ οὕτε τὰ μείζω
good when the undoing of virtue is cause for dramatic enjoyment (e.g. Alypius’ fall from
grace in Augustine’s narrative); the presentation of evil (mochrovß) being thereby ‘offered’
as good (carivzomai). If in Plato’s doctrine, therefore, human suffering is best endured with
objectivity of mind, impersonation in the drama panders a “double hearted” ethic\(^1\) by which
the person at once rationalizes life’s suffering while becoming deliberately vulnerable to
pathos and its irrational stimulation of emotion in the drama.

Augustine is all too familiar with this critique of the stage. The fact that dramatic
players, actors and audience participants alike, become enthralled in the affective disclosure
which the tragedy demands, for him, this means that the drama, far from being innocuous
_ play, serves to deviate human affections from finding their object in the love of God. If for
Augustine the theatre’s association with the Greco-Roman pantheon makes it an
irredeemable rival to a coherent and intelligible presentation of Christianity, dramatic appeal,
resisting a merely intellectually appreciative form of participation (i.e., entertainment),
involves the audience dangerously in more than ‘as if’, imaginative play. Augustine
therefore (ostensibly aligning himself with the Platonic view) deplores what he sees as the
stage’s rivalry of the real with the imaginary and exposes the scandal that the expression of
passion in the theatre dissipates the soul from affection for God. Speaking from personal
experience with the stage, Augustine affirms that it was ‘spectacula theatrica’ which ‘carried
me away, full of images of my miseries, and of fuel to my fire’.\(^2\) Augustine recalls for his
readers that while sitting before dramatic plays,

I rejoiced with lovers, when they wickedly enjoyed one another, although this was
imaginary only in the play. And when they lost one another, as if very compassionate, I
sorrowed with them, yet had my delight in both. But now I much more pity him that
rejoiceth in his wickedness [i.e., the spectator], than him [i.e., the character/actor] who

\(^1\) Borrowing the phrase from Spurgeon’s extrapolation of ἡλέκτω διαγιγνώσχοντι, ἀλλὰ τὰ αὐτὰ τὸ ἡμέρᾳ μὲν μεγάλα ἤγοιμένη, τὸ τὸ ἐκ λαθόται, εἰδώλα ἐιδωλοποιοῦντα, τὸν δὲ ἀληθοὺς ποίησα πάντως ἀφεστότα. To this extent one finds
contemporary articulation of this view in Neil Postman’s critique of ‘television-based epistemology’
and the definition of truth by virtue of communicative importance attributed to the electronic image.
_Cf. Amusing ourselves to death: public discourse in the age of show business_ (New York: Penguin
Books, 1986), et al.

is thought to suffer hardship, by missing some [romantic] pleasure, and the loss of some miserable felicity.\textsuperscript{13}

The thrust of Augustine’s turn against dramatic pathos is that, having as its object a scenic contrivance (‘\textit{fictis et senicis}’), the affective response to the drama amounts to contrived emotion—feigning with no correspondence in reality; a distorted exercise of the emotions for the sheer pleasure of being ‘moved’\textsuperscript{15}.

Certainly everyone wishes to enjoy himself. Is it that while no one wants to be miserable, yet it is agreeable to feel merciful [by displaying disingenuous compassion for the stage persona]? […] Is that the sole reason why agonies are an object of love? […] From a heavenly serenity [mercy] is altered by its own consent into something twisted and distorted.\textsuperscript{16}

For Augustine, the theatre simply incites the viewer to degenerate enjoyment of the presentation of the tragic, ‘tears and sorrow’ therefore becoming the very objects of pleasure.\textsuperscript{17} Such is the mendacity of theatre that when confronted with the tragic, the theatregoer is not moved to relieve the suffering, but merely to feel its grief vicariously. Enjoying the aesthetic distance afforded him by the stall, the spectator thus

applauds the actor of these fictions …the more he grieves. And if the calamities of those [stage-]persons—whether of [historical] times, or mere fiction—be so [poorly] acted, that the spectator is not moved to tears, he goes away disgusted and criticising; but if he be moved to passion, he stays intent, and weeps for joy.\textsuperscript{18}

\textit{True} compassion and sorrow, by contrast, having their source in actual, non-vicarious fellowship,\textsuperscript{19} Augustine says, are genuinely extended to others in view of their actual suffering, and not for “suffering” which is transposed (‘\textit{aliena et falsa}’) onto the representational stage for effect. ‘This certainly is the truer mercy’, he affirms, for in it, ‘grief delights not’:\textsuperscript{20} ‘Some sorrow, therefore, may be approved of, but none loved’,\textsuperscript{21} for

\textsuperscript{13} Pusey quite rightly translates \textit{perniciosae voluptatis} as ‘pernicious pleasure’; my crude intercalation simply intends to render the sense of Augustine’s passionate rhetoric in the context of the whole passage, i.e., that such passions are pernicious precisely because they correspond to the stage.

\textsuperscript{14} St. Augustine, \textit{Confessions (trans. E.B. Pusey)}, p. 34, III.2, my italics.


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} ‘\textit{lacrimae ergo amantur et dolores}’, ‘Tears and agonies, therefore, are objects of love’. St. Augustine, ‘Confessiones’, St. Augustine, \textit{Confessions (trans. Chadwick)}, p. 36, III.2.


\textsuperscript{19} Flowing from a \textit{vena amicitiae}, literally, a vein of friendship St. Augustine, ‘Confessiones’, III.ii.3.


he who manifests fraternal compassion would prefer that there be no cause for sorrow. It is only if there could be a malicious good will—which is impossible—that someone who truly and sincerely felt compassion would wish wretches to exist so as to be objects of compassion.  

For Augustine, the emotional response to fictive drama, quite ludicrously, in fact, justifies its own ‘miserable insanity’ of exercising the senses for the love of the sensual and not with the aim to please and be pleased in the love of God. This leads him to ask rhetorically,

Why is it, that man desires to be made sad, beholding doleful and tragical things, which yet himself would by no means suffer? yet he desires as a spectator to feel sorrow at them, and this very sorrow is his pleasure. What is this but a miserabilis insanitatem?

In saying this, Augustine, remarkably, repeats Plato’s moral objection to the enjoyment of the tragedian’s performance which we encountered earlier—

Is it right to look at a man being what we ourselves should not wish to be without shame, and so far from feeling disgust, to enjoy and praise the performance?

—along with the philosopher’s concluding tag that ‘it does not seem reasonable’ (οὐκ εὖλόγα ἑοικεν). Augustine, again, uses personal experience to redouble his point that theatre promotes feeling for its own sake and, therefore, takes away from enjoyment in God:

But I, miserable, then loved to grieve, and sought out what to grieve at, when in another’s and that feigned and personated misery, that acting best pleased me, and attracted me the most vehemently, which drew tears from me.

22 St. Augustine, Confessions (trans. Chadwick), p. 37, III.2. ‘For though he that grieves for the miserable, be commended for his office of charity; yet had he, who is genuinely compassionate, rather there were nothing for him to grieve for. For if good will be ill willed, (which can never be,) then may he, who truly and sincerely commiserates, wish there might be some miserable, that he might commiserate’. St. Augustine, Confessions (trans. E.B. Pusey), p. 34, III.2.

Augustine’s exposition of theatre and its pernicious pull on the believer is situated in a longer discussion on how God’s love can be supplanted by the very need to love and to be loved.

To Carthage I came, where there sang all around me in my ears a cauldron of unholy loves. I loved not yet, yet I loved to love, and out of a deep-seated want, I hated myself for wanting not. I sought what I might love, in love with loving…. For within me was a famine of that inward food, Thyself, my God; yet, through that famine I was not hungered…. For this cause my soul was sickly and full of sores, it miserably cast itself forth, desiring to be scraped by the touch of objects of sense. St. Augustine, Confessions (trans. E.B. Pusey), p. 32, III.1.

The theatre, being one such ‘object of sense’ proves, for Augustine, to be a compelling but false competing for a proper use of the senses in the enjoyment of God.

23 St. Augustine, Confessions (trans. Chadwick), p. 37, III.2. ‘For though he that grieves for the miserable, be commended for his office of charity; yet had he, who is genuinely compassionate, rather there were nothing for him to grieve for. For if good will be ill willed, (which can never be,) then may he, who truly and sincerely commiserates, wish there might be some miserable, that he might commiserate’. St. Augustine, Confessions (trans. E.B. Pusey), p. 34, III.2.

24 Ibid., p. 33, III.ii.2, my emphasis.


26 The point being that it thus draws him sinfully away from God:

Upon how grievous iniquities consumed I myself, pursuing a sacrilegious curiosity, that having forsaken Thee, it might bring me to the treacherous abyss…. I dared even, while Thy
Whether the tears called for in the drama are true to life’s suffering or mere affectation, there is no question for Augustine that there is a dramatic *intentio* which directs the spectator’s *affectio* toward feeling itself, hence into the “unnatural” experience of grief and its enjoyment. This inclination for the theatre, as was true for Plato, merely proves the vitiating nature of the source: where, therefore, can this aberrant love lead us, Augustine asks forcefully, if not ‘into that torrent of pitch which boils and swells with the high tides of foul lust, …into a precipitation of depravity?’

Augustine’s conclusion is simply that deriving pleasure from any source other than God is irreconcilable with the Christian life, so that even before taking account that ‘Theatre could not be assumed to be neutral about Christians or Christianity [for] it had been invented in a world that held Christians in contempt and put them on display for entertainment’, he drives a final nail to secure a coffin for theatre with the claim that the drama all but ‘moves’ the auditor toward its own aesthetic ends. Theatre is banned from the ‘city of God’, therefore, not only because of its corrupting influence on civility, although this alone would merit the proscription; dramatic play, in Augustine’s final estimation, corrupts whatever affective disposition the Creator might place in his creature through the presentation of and appeal to pathos.

*solemnities were celebrated within the walls of Thy Church, to desire, and to compass a business, deserving death for its fruits….*


28 Unlike Tertullian for whom a play’s mockery of the faith is proof enough of theatre’s depravity, the fact that Christians suffered scandal and bodily harm in the arena is of lesser concern for Augustine’s argument against theatre which is based largely on a theo-centric view of creation and redemption, and theatre’s perceived deviance from it. Dox, ‘The eyes of the body and the veil of faith’, p. 48.

29 Cf. Augustine’s continual affirmations that even amongst those who upheld civil authority was voiced strong opposition to the stage and its effects on public morals in St. Augustine, *The City of God* (trans. M. Dods), p. 36, I.31. The passage merits comparison with the indictment of the stage actors who, acting on behalf of the Roman authority, at the time seeking aid in defending the city from foreign invasion, placate the gods with ribald representations. St. Augustine, *The City of God* (trans. M. Dods), p. 70-71, II.27. Reacting against the excess of the propitiatory plays however, ‘so wanton, so impure, so modest, so wicked, so filthy’ were they, out of a sense of civil morality ‘the innate and praiseworthy virtue of the Romans disabled [the actors] from civic honours, erased [them] from their tribe, recognized [them] as polluted and made [them] infamous’. Augustine effectively shows that pantheon theology is to blame for requiring ritual fulfilment through immoral plays. In the end, however, in Augustine’s theology, both the mythical gods (‘fabulous theology’) and Roman morality (‘civic theology’)—and consequently the theatre which is inevitably in the employ of either of these theologies—are found unworthy of dialogue with Christianity. For, in his words,

> Both are base; both are damnable. But the one which is theatrical teaches public abomination, and that one which is of the city adorns itself with that abomination. Shall eternal life be hoped for from these, by which this short and temporal life is polluted […] – if with true crimes, how wicked the demons! If with false, how wicked the worship![?]

Both the Platonic reaction *against*, as well as the Aristotelian argument *for* the drama, and to the extent that Augustine responds explicitly or implicitly to these classical perspectives on the drama’s ultimate implications, presuppose that the stage drama is ontologically something other than reality. Even in its most “realistic” mode as tragedy, at best, the stage-play is only *felt* to be consistent with reality—a positive event for Aristotle, unethical for Plato, but demonstrably sinful counterfeit for Augustine. Clearly, a theological approach to the drama would have to define things rather differently, and probably along the lines of a coextensive grain along which the drama passes from life onto onstage representation and back such that the Christian may be vocationally responsive to God in and through the dramatic mode of action.
APPENDIX C: Eugenio Barba and Odin Teatret’s *Skibet Bro: The Ship Called Bridge*

Barba begins his work from the assumption that there is no dramatic ‘element’ which may be abstracted from life and transposed onto the stage through some means of representation (symbolic, gestural, semiotic, etc.). Barba’s actors, motivated by ‘autonomous meaning for their action of doing theatre’, take to the stage with the understanding that theatre comes about in its doing. For this reason, ‘scripts’ for Odin Teatret are essentially textless, emerging rather as ideas incarnated in the process of the acting company’s training: in their apprenticing themselves to the limits and possibilities of the body, and in learning to act as a community who can to respond to one another with improvisatorial sensitivity. Barba’s notion of ‘pre-expressivity’ as the foundation of the actor’s performance (though it has eluded academic definition) is best explained in terms of his understanding that the actor is made ready for the stage performance long before the show, in rehearsal, during training exercises, in the cultural milieu, through human intercourse in daily life, and so on. Only a commitment to pre-expressive action enables the actor ‘to be totally present and convincing on stage’. A descriptive analysis of Odin Teatret’s performance of *Skibet Bro* should illustrate how Barba shows theatre as a locus for communal life.

*Skibet Bro (The Ship Called Bridge, 1991)* was the principal event in Odin Teatret’s first Holstebro Festuge, nine days of performance activities including happenings, outdoor exhibitions, concerts, lectures and processions, eliciting collaboration from local and foreign theatre groups. A basic tenet of the Festuge, now a regular event, is ‘to bring together diverse local milieux which do not normally interact [such as] sport associations, cultural and educational institutions, churches and their parishes, ethnic and religious minorities, the military, the business and commercial milieux’. To that end, it was important to ground the performance events in the history and folklore of Odin Teatret’s host town of Holstebro.

*Skibet Bro* uses the town’s people and their seafaring heritage as raw material to enact the coming together the sub-divided communities. The nine-day project revolves around building a ship fifteen-metres long, modelled on ancient Viking craft, in the municipality’s

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30 Barba refers to this as the presumed ‘genius loci’ in what he calls ‘real performances’ (i.e., traditional theatre). Barba, *The paper canoe*, p. 146.
32 Barba draws deliberate distinction between his approach and Brechts’ *Verfremdung* (distantiation) techniques. Actor/person and actor/character are different states of being human—one is an inevitable consequence of the other. Barba, ‘En las entrañas del monstruo’, p. 9.
33 Created by Kirsten Delholm’s Hotel Pro Forma theatre group.
Barba and his colleagues encouraged different Holstebro community organizations to work together, many of them for the first time, promoting a meeting of cultures at the community as much as national level. […] Some of these were immigrant groups from the Middle and Far East that have settled in Holstebro and its surroundings, but most were local Danes who rarely met to share their interests.4

There is no advertisement announcing that a ‘ship building performance’ is taking place in the open marketplace: the core of actor-builders simply begin erecting scaffolding under which a ship’s framework slowly begins to take shape. The ‘audience’, those who begin to gather around the shipbuilding event, become part of the acting community, gradually and without formal invitation. As the construction phase gathers momentum (and as more people are required to finish the work), they themselves become protagonists of the theatrical event. This temporarily formed community embody dramatically their share in revitalizing the community.

Barba’s own description of this event that integrates into its action the town’s people and cultural legacy helps to understand his efforts to show theatre as a making of community.

In the middle of the car-park, a fifteen-metre long wooden ship was being constructed according to the elegant design of an architect: it was not seaworthy (it not being possible to build a real ship in only nine days and nine nights). Everything taking place there seemed to be in honour of the ship, without taking the spectators into consideration. The numerous small sub-cultures of Holstebro, once exposed, demonstrated that it was one’s next-door neighbour who was truly exotic [NB. as distinct from non-Danish, non-Western performers invited to the Festuge]. […] On the first few nights of the Festuge, there were not many people on the [car-park]. But as time went by, the place became the centre of the town, a sort of secular temple where the long, unsailable ship was slowly taking shape, and where, after this week, there would be nothing left other than the memory of what had been. In this asphalted, open air ‘temple’, a ship’s bell rang out every half hour, day and night, and ‘De store

34 Watson, p. 181, my italics. The emphasis on integrating the town’s immigrant population into their theatre was also at the heart of the first Festuge (1989), its theme, Vi modtog dem! (We received them!) being pointedly phrased in the first person (not as ‘They arrived!’). Odin Teatret explains that ‘the ‘Festuge’ dealt with immigrants in Denmark, both currently and in historical perspective, as well as their influence and participation in Danish cultural life’. This cultural emphasis is key to Barba’s theatrical anthropology which, as we have seen above, he describes partly as learning to see oneself in the particularity of the other. Press file available on odin.teatret.dk/workshops_and_events_at_odin/events_at_odin_frameset.htm
Skibet [a sailor’s song] was sung. Every four hours, day and night, horses, performers, cars, dogs, soldiers and other representatives of the invisible Holstebro appeared. […] On the last day, we carried the long ship to the park and buried it in true Viking style, while a tiny sailboat drifted up into the sky. The trees in the park were decked with crimson flowers and golden apples. Floating islands caught fire in the middle of the lake, while black-clad Death paddled the Trickster’s small boat across its still waters. A mother sat in the boat with her newborn child.35

In the first days of the performance, Skibet Bro is mere backdrop to, and raises no more interest than, a number of performances, many prepared by local societies such as the housewives’ union or fire brigade, taking place as part of the community festival. However, curiosity and attendance increasing through word of mouth and other community reinforcing activity meant that at the completion ceremonies, over seven hundred people took part in the burial procession.

At this height of the dramatic performance, participants became aware that their active participation—sawing and bracing planks, hammering nails into wood, applying paint to the ship’s exterior, and so forth—had been drawn into creating the reality of a self-mirroring performance. As locus of performance shifted from the core of Odin Teatret actors to those who joined in the construction, procession36 and burial ceremony, the gap between actor and spectator narrows progressively. The theatrical event therefore culminates (not by dissolving life/stage distinctions, but) with a tautening of the strings that tie the representational performance to reality.

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36 At which point everyone discovers that the ship is not for launching at sea but rather for burial.


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