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## **INCARNATION, CREATION, AND NEW CREATION:**

### **T. F. TORRANCE AND A THEOLOGICAL RE-VISIONING OF THE ARTS**

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T. F. Torrance's reflections could range across an impressively wide variety of fields and disciplines, and this was wholly consonant with his belief that a biblically-based, Nicene, trinitarian faith could be inexhaustibly fruitful for every aspect of life and culture. Yet despite this, he wrote virtually nothing about the creative arts. He had a lively appreciation of music and the visual arts, and his written and spoken rhetoric could soar to inspiring heights, but he never turned to the arts themselves as a topic of sustained theological interest. This essay is an attempt to show that the distinctive shape and contours of his theology have much to offer those who work at the intersection of the arts and faith, far more than we perhaps might at first expect. To demonstrate this, I am going to concentrate on four of Torrance's characteristic emphases and explore the potential of each to engage some of the commonest and most pressing themes in the current conversations between theology and the arts.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the T. F. Torrance Theological Fellowship at the American Academy of Religion, November 16th, 2018 in Denver, Colorado. I am very grateful for the discussion that followed the presentation.

We will discover that the traffic runs in both directions: from theology to the arts, and vice versa. Not only can Torrance's work provide considerable resources for those at work in the world of the arts (as practitioners or theoreticians); that world in turn can enrich, enliven, and deepen our conceptual grasp of the content of the theology he espoused, and of the methodological commitments his theology entailed. There is an intriguing parallel here with Torrance's engagement with the natural sciences. Not surprisingly, he believed theology had massive potential to illuminate scientific inquiry and exploration. But he was also convinced that through sustained immersion in the literature of the natural sciences (especially the philosophy of science), and through extended interaction with practising scientists, incalculable paybacks lay in store for the theologian. Science could provide theology with fresh conceptual tools and language, a host of methodological clarifications, and not least the chance to expunge numerous pseudo-problems that had bedevilled the history of theology. In other words, Torrance found that engaging with the physical sciences could enable theology to be more "rational": which is to say, following John Macmurray,<sup>2</sup> more faithful to the nature of its object of study. I believe that an analogous engagement with the practices and discourses of the arts can yield comparable benefits.

## 1) Christ and Creation

Even a cursory glance at a major work of Torrance's will show that he was impelled by a theological vision of the created world that is irreducibly Christological. Today, such a vision—or something very close to it—is not hard to find among constructive or systematic theologians. And there are many leading biblical scholars who have commended just such an outlook on exegetical grounds.<sup>3</sup> But in the 1970s, when Torrance was at the height of his powers, all this was a relative rarity in the halls of academic theology, especially in the UK. Doctrines of creation were often elaborated with only a passing nod toward Christology. So when in 1976, Torrance's son Iain

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<sup>2</sup> John Macmurray, *Reason and Emotion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1935).

<sup>3</sup> Richard B. Hays, "Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith: The Practice of Theological Exegesis," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1, no. 1 (2007): 5–21; Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010).

lent me a copy of his father's *Space, Time and Resurrection* just after it was published,<sup>4</sup> I was immediately struck by the way this theologian managed to combine a vista of breath-taking cosmic scope—from creation to new creation—with an unflinching concentration on the decisive particularity of Jesus Christ, divine and human. Torrance never underplayed the stubborn testimony of the New Testament: that the very *raison d'être* of the created order and its entire *telos* are to be found in Jesus of Nazareth, the one through whom and for whom God made all things, the one by whom all things hold together, and the one in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself through a human, crucified Messiah.<sup>5</sup> Expanding this in line with the Irenaean and Athanasian tradition he so lauded, Torrance insisted that the contingent order is to be understood resolutely in the light of the relation of the incarnate Son to the Father. Any reduction of the Logos to an impersonal principle, a pre-existing form or pattern of rationality to which God was somehow answerable *a priori*, was strenuously shunned. The Logos is none other than the eternal Son of the Father, and it is this Son who has become incarnate in Jesus Christ. Out of this relation of love intrinsic to the very being of God all things were loved into existence, and into this relation all things are being enfolded toward their final consummation, and End previewed in the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead. "The whole universe," Torrance writes, "is ontologically bound to the incarnate and risen Jesus".<sup>6</sup> And just because of this we can say that creation is "proleptically conditioned by redemption."<sup>7</sup>

The implications of this for the world of the arts are immense, indeed limitless. We can highlight two in particular. The first relates to what we might call *the "alreadyness" of the new creation*. It was axiomatic to Torrance that creation's renewal had *already* been established concretely in the humanity of Christ, risen and ascended. In Jesus the Messiah, the Creator has *already* broken into this age,

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).

<sup>5</sup> Jn. 1:1; Heb. 1:1; Col. 1:15–20.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 107.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 204.

the age of sin, suffering, injustice, and death; *already* snapped the chains that hold the world back; and *already* raised and exalted this same Jesus from the dead, re-creating his lacerated, dead, decaying human body to enjoy an unimaginably new mode of life. In this light, numerous aspects of artistic making and engagement can be re-thought. Take, for example, the language of “prophetic”, much beloved in current theology and the arts discourse today. The term is often used to stress that artists need to be agents of social critique, exposing and undermining oppressive forces at work in society at large. This is undoubtedly a legitimate and vitally important part of the vocation of many artists.<sup>8</sup> But a heavy dependence on prophetic rhetoric, if not carefully situated theologically, can lead all too easily into forms of critique that have neither a positive source nor a fruitful end. When the Hebrew prophets delivered their stinging invectives against social corruption it was above all because of a prior belief in God’s covenant commitment to his people—the “alreadyness” of an irrevocable pledge, from which, of course, stringent obligations followed. The fierce words, the exposure of exploitation and tyranny, were energized at root by divine faithfulness, God’s loving dedication oriented ultimately toward reconciliation. Likewise, the intense rhetoric of judgement we find in, say, the letters of the New Testament is fueled primarily by the conviction that in Christ, the God of love has *already* decisively unmasked and disarmed the principalities and powers, *already* shown that “their time is up”. The last judgement is at heart the outworking of the first. Grounding the prophetic dimension of an artist’s calling in God’s prior gracious acts in this way will likely lead to an art that is far more severe and searching than any merely self-generated attempts at unmasking and denouncing wrong, and far more likely to lead to lasting healing and *shalom*. Among hundreds of contemporary examples of this at work, the art of African-American artist Steve Prince stands out for me: his remarkable evocation of an animated hope in the midst of the death-dealing horrors of Hurricane Katrina comes to mind as a paradigm of “prophetic art” today.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> On this, see Willie James Jennings, “Embodying the Artistic Spirit and the Prophetic Arts,” *Literature and Theology* 30, no. 3 (2016): 256–64.

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.eyekons.com/steve\\_prince](https://www.eyekons.com/steve_prince)

A sense of the “already” is likewise also sorely needed, I suggest, in contemporary discussions of *beauty*. Doubtless, the concept of beauty needs to be engaged at some stage by a theology of the arts. But I suggest we need to be wary of theologies of the transcendentals (such as beauty, truth, goodness) that bear little relation to what has been secured already in Christ, in advance of any beauty-seeking action of our own. If we are to speak of created beauty (or, indeed, God’s beauty) by employing the classically cited qualities such as radiance, diverse unity, perfection, attraction, and so forth, these will need to be constantly re-configured around the dynamic of Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. So, for example, those of us engaged in the theology-arts conversation speak much of material beauty—whether the beauty we perceive in the created world or the beauty we bring about through art. But we tend to speak much less of the beauty of the new creation “bodied forth” in Jesus Christ, which is surely the measure and paradigm of the beauty intended by the Creator. In the one conceived and empowered by the Spirit, born in a stable, hounded to a shameful death, vindicated by God on the third day, raised as a “spiritual body”, and exalted to the right hand of God—in this very concrete human being the stuff of the earth has been made new, brought to its divinely intended, dazzling (beautiful) culmination. We have here a way of conceiving beauty that has colossal re-formative power, not least in enabling us to eschew the sentimentality that so often creeps into beauty-talk.<sup>10</sup>

A second series of implications of Torrance’s Christologically integrated theology of creation for the arts relate to its highly conspicuous *eschatological thrust*. Indeed, we have just touched upon this. In keeping with prominent strands in the New Testament, Torrance regards the raising of the crucified Jesus as an advance performance, a preview not only of the “spiritual body” to be given to those in Christ, but of the final re-making of the entire space-time continuum,

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<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Begbie, *A Peculiar Orthodoxy: Reflections on Theology and the Arts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), chs 2 and 3. Hans Urs Von Balthasar asks: “How could we ... understand the ‘beauty’ of the Cross without the abysmal darkness into which the Crucified plunges?” Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics. Vol I: Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), 117. See also David Luy, “The Aesthetic Collision: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Trinity and the Cross,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13, no. 2 (2011): 154–69.

confirming God's primordial pledge to sustain this world and not let it go.<sup>11</sup> This is the logic behind John's almost hyperbolic re-visioning of Isaiah's "new heaven and new earth" in the book of Revelation: Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the one encompassing creation *and* new creation in one.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, the idea that a Christian artist may on occasion be called to evoke or portray the eschaton is likely to be widely scorned today, even dismissed altogether, and for quite understandable reasons: it could easily be seen to encourage escapism, Platonised images of heaven, over-neat closures, hegemonic triumphalism, and so on. But when encountered as an embodiment of God's future, a taste of the renewed earth in the midst of this physical world, such art may well have a crucial place in sustaining such a thoroughly material hope. One of the most convincing to my mind, and which avoids the pitfall of portraying the eschaton as a return to Eden, is a painting by the Balinese artist Nyoman Darsane. It takes its cue from Revelation 22, where a perpetual stream flows from God's throne nourishing the tree of life. Darsane welcomes us into the verdant landscape of his own homeland of Bali, but in a richly augmented, expanded, excessively abundant form.<sup>13</sup>

Another way in which this eschatological momentum can find its way into the arts is when artistic practice itself becomes, or is regarded as a foretaste of, the eschatological future. In his vast study of singing in the first thousand years of Christianity, Christopher Page notes a "narrow stream" of thought in the early Church in which "the use of the [singing] voice is [regarded] as one of the principal continuities between the states of bodily life on either side of the grave."<sup>14</sup> Singing *as such* becomes a provisional advance performance of the final "new song" of the

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<sup>11</sup> Of the many works that could be cited, *Space, Time and Resurrection* is the book that first comes to mind as exploring most powerfully this dimension of Torrance's vision.

<sup>12</sup> In my view, Torrance's sermons on the Apocalypse contain some of his best writing. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Apocalypse Today* (London: James Clarke, 1960).

<sup>13</sup> See Victorian Emily Jones, *The Jesus Question: Jesus the Dancer Part 7: The Art of Nyoman Darsane*, <https://thejesusquestion.org/2012/03/25/jesus-the-dancer-part-7-the-art-of-nyoman-darsane/>, accessed April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Page, *The Christian West and Its Singers: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 49.

redeemed. In this connection, the professional soprano and theologian Awet Andemichael can write of singing as “a bridge between our created selves and the new creation.” In singing the Sanctus, she says, “it as if the veil between this in-between place and the fully-new creation were rendered permeable.”<sup>15</sup> Along related lines, it is not far-fetched to see dance at its best as an “advanced echo” of the resurrected “spiritual” body of 1 Corinthians 15: a body reaching towards its ultimate animation by the Spirit (of which more below).<sup>16</sup>

Torrance’s alertness to the eschatological is also critical when considering the transformative power of the arts. “See, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5). The new creation does not obliterate the material world, but—in a way that stretches our intellectual imagination to its limits—re-configures it, re-makes it as new. Artists, of course, are adept at taking what has been distorted and twisted, stained and spoiled, and re-fashioning it into something of radiance and promise. This is the re-creativity we see when a musician like Jacob Collier re-harmonizes music that others dismiss as moribund and best left to die.<sup>17</sup> It is the re-creativity on display in a sculpture commissioned by the British Museum in 2005, “Tree of Life”, made entirely from de-commissioned weapons from the Mozambique civil war, alluding to the tree of life in the new creation of Revelation 22:2.<sup>18</sup> And—pre-eminently—it is the re-creativity that Paul struggles to articulate in 1 Corinthians 15:35–57 when he writes of our resurrection bodies in the world to come. Echoing the Gospels’ narratives of Jesus’ resurrection appearances, and in keeping with Jewish tradition, he finds himself speaking of the physicality of the new body. But this cannot be the mere continuation of the bodily life we know now. As Torrance put it so memorably, with the resurrection of Jesus (and by implication with ours), we have a “*new kind of historical happening* which instead of tumbling down into the grave and oblivion rises out of the death of what is past ... This is temporal

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<sup>15</sup> From an essay to appear in Jeremy Begbie, W. David O. Taylor, Daniel Train, eds, *The Art of New Creation: Trajectories in Theology and the Arts* (Westmont, IL: IVP, forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Aquinas’s remarkable reflections on the agility of the glorified body seem very apt here. See “On the Agility of the Bodies of the Blessed,” in *Summa Theologiae*, Supplement, 84.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtmY49Zn4l0RMJnTWfV7Wsg>

<sup>18</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree\\_of\\_Life\\_\(Kester\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree_of_Life_(Kester))

happening that runs not backwards but forwards.”<sup>19</sup> The body of this age is constantly breaking up, decaying every day, prone to sin, and spinning down to death. But the resurrection body is the body of this dying age re-made, re-materialized into something barely describable: a “spiritual body”, animated, revived by the Holy Spirit: a “hyper-physical” body, we might say.<sup>20</sup>

## 2) Vicarious Humanity

A second and closely related leitmotif in Torrance’s output is that of the vicarious humanity of Christ,<sup>21</sup> and it is one with numerous ramifications for the way we conceive of and practice the arts. Here we concentrate on just one area of current interest: the way we theologize the vocation of the artist. The notion of “creativity” has received a considerable amount of attention in recent Christian writing.<sup>22</sup> It is a concept that is commonly attached to the arts today, and usually without so much as a second thought. Virtually all current theological writing on the arts will speak of “the creative artist”, “the creative process”, human “creativity”, and suchlike. Yet it is worth recalling that in Christian antiquity and for most of the medieval period, creator language was rarely used of artists. God might be spoken of as an artist, but not the artist as a god-like creator. Underlying this hesitation, it seems, was the biblically grounded conviction that only God truly creates, for only God creates out of nothing; artists work with pre-existing materials.

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<sup>19</sup> Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 88–9. Italics original.

<sup>20</sup> In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, Anthony Thiselton argues that to translate *aphthartoi* as “incorrupt” (15:42, 50, 52–4) fails to bring out the force of the original. He urges us to translate the word in terms of “decay’s reversal.” Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1272, 1296–7. The true negation of running down—the degeneration, emptiness, and fruitlessness of our current bodies—is not simply “running on” (survival) but “running up”: “*a dynamic process of ethical, aesthetic, and psychosocial flourishing, purpose, and abundance.*” Idem, 1296. Italics original.

<sup>21</sup> For an excellent treatment of this theme, see Christian D. Kessler, *The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Reality of Salvation* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> For a recent example, see Makoto Fujimura, *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).



It was from around the end of the fifteenth century that divine creator language started to spill over into the human sphere, and become attributed to artists in particular. There was therefore something of what Trevor Hart calls a “linguistic trespass”,

whereby Renaissance humanists transplanted *creare*, *creator* and *creatio* from the hallowed ground of Christian liturgy and doctrine (which hitherto had been their sole preserve) onto the soils of art historical and art theoretical description in the sixteenth century—to refer now not to divine but to fully human activities and accomplishments.<sup>23</sup>

This trespass was many-sided and complex. But among other things it laid the ground for what would become a characteristically modern portrayal of the artist as one who aspires to a God-like freedom over the world, as if detached from the particularities of time and space—and in some versions, as one who is called pre-eminently to master and control nature (or paint, sound, stone) to his (and it usually was “his”) pre-determined purposes.<sup>24</sup> With this went an exaltation of novelty and originality—which of course gestures toward God’s *creatio ex nihilo*. (It is not hard to see parallels here with patterns of thought in the natural sciences which implicitly characterize the physical world as at best indifferent, and at worst hostile to human flourishing, and thus needing to be tamed and controlled.) An extreme version can be found in some of the early nineteenth-century Romantics, where the artist, standing apart from an often hostile world, comes to possess colossal powers traditionally attributed to God, with an infinitely abundant imagination and the ability to forge a quasi-divine redemption.

Many understandably recoil when faced with anything like this, especially those of a strongly Protestant disposition. It is insisted the artist is entirely human, finite, and creaturely, no less prone to sin than anyone else, and must be firmly cut

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<sup>23</sup> Trevor Hart, *Making Good: Creation, Creativity and Artistry* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 124. Italics original.

<sup>24</sup> For an especially illuminating account of these developments, see Roger Lundin, *From Nature to Experience: The American Search for Cultural Authority* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), chs 3 and 4.

down to size. Creation-talk belongs to God alone and any slippage of that language into the creaturely sphere opens the door to idolatry of the worst kind.<sup>25</sup> The intention is that by demoting the artist God will be accordingly re-promoted.

The problem with such a reaction, of course, is not only that it swerves dangerously close to assuming a Nestorian Christology, but that it implies a zero-sum metaphysics: in which divine and human agency are set off against each other as *inherently* at odds, vying for the same space. Torrance's ceaseless stress on the fullness of the humanity of Christ, enhypostatically rooted in the eternal Son, is among other things, a way of affirming that God's agency is not intrinsically opposed to, or exclusive of, human agency. This is in large part the Christological backbone to Trevor Hart's exceptionally fine book, *Making Good: Creation, Creativity and Artistry*,<sup>26</sup> much of which echoes Torrance. Hart insists that God does not merely permit his creatures to make and fashion art, but actually calls, inspires, enables, and equips them to do so. God's renewal of all things is undertaken in such a way as to not exclude human (re-)creativity, but include it—and this, not because God is to be deemed powerless without us (as if God lacks what we possess), but because God freely and graciously wills it to be so. And all this finds its ultimate grounding in the hypostatic union of divine and human in Christ (a far more secure strategy than appealing to the pre-lapsarian *imago Dei*).<sup>27</sup>

As Rowan Williams has recently stressed in his penetrating study *Christ the Heart of Creation*,<sup>28</sup> Jesus is presented in the New Testament as embodying and

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<sup>25</sup> As Calvin Seerveld puts it, except for inspired Scripture, "literature and art is wholly human, not a whit divine." Calvin Seerveld, *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature* (Toronto: Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship, 1968), 37.

<sup>26</sup> Hart, *Making Good*.

<sup>27</sup> Many theologies of creativity have taken their cue from the "image of God" in Genesis 1, commonly by arguing that we are made in the image of a creative God. But apart from the fact that this is unlikely to be what the author of Genesis 1 had in view, it short-circuits Christ—the one who *pre-eminently* is the *imago Dei* (Col. 1:5; 2 Cor. 4:4). Hart urges that "the most natural and adequate "home" for an account of human creativity is precisely the overlap between the doctrines of Trinity and incarnation, rather than any free-floating account of our creation in the image and likeness of God (the doctrinal locus where it has more typically been addressed)." Hart, *Making Good*, 87.

<sup>28</sup> Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

enacting both a free, saving initiative of the God of Israel, and a fully human response of dependence upon this very same God. Many of the pathologies in the history of Christology are due to ignoring this “non-competitive” metaphysics. Divine agency cannot “compete” with human agency for the same ontological space because it is not that sort of agency, and as soon as one imagines that it is—that divine and created agencies are two instances of the same type, potentially striving for the same territory—one is prone to multiple errors. This, in my view, can be read as a thoroughly convincing extension and development of Torrance’s thinking.<sup>29</sup>

But Christ’s humanity, Torrance urges, is not only full, it is also “vicarious”: that is, Christ’s response to the Father is *on our behalf*, preceding any response we make (once again the theme of “alreadyness” comes to the fore). It follows that the fullest human creativity we can perform is that which comes about through sharing in the humanity of Christ, in whom God’s creativity has been enacted and the new creation established. To be “creative”, then, is to share by the Spirit in the life of the risen and ascended human Christ who himself *is* the concrete embodiment of the new creation. In and with Christ, we are given to “voice creation’s praise”.<sup>30</sup> We have here, then, a theological undergirding to a vision of artistic creativity that neither elevates the artist to quasi- or semi-divine status, nor assumes that the more creaturely an artist is, the less God will be directly involved in her work.

### **3) Anti-reductionism**

A third current in Torrance’s work of considerable relevance to the arts is his lifelong resistance to reductionism. Indeed, this is one of his most notable *bêtes noires*. I take “reductionism” to be a pattern of thinking, a “thought-style,”<sup>31</sup> that seeks to restrict reality to one class of phenomena, and to confine all authentic knowing,

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<sup>29</sup> In the introduction, Williams cites Torrance with approval as a key influence. Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, xiv–xv.

<sup>30</sup> Jeremy S. Begbie, *Voicing Creation’s Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991).

<sup>31</sup> I borrow the term from Felski: Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 2.

description, and explanation to one basic type. It finds its best-known exemplar in the kind of naturalistic reductionism that excludes *a priori* the possibility of any reality beyond the physical world (such as God), and in addition insists that the nature and behaviour of composite entities can be entirely explained (perhaps even explained *away*) by examination of their constituent parts. Thus “higher-level” phenomena (e.g., biological organisms) can be entirely accounted for by examining phenomena at a “lower” level (e.g., chemical reactions).<sup>32</sup> Sometimes along with this goes the belief that the so-called “higher” disciplines will eventually be replaced by those that deal with the lowest levels (i.e., those that study the behavior of particles). Famously, Francis Crick could claim that “The ultimate aim of the modern movement in biology is in fact to explain all biology in terms of physics and chemistry.”<sup>33</sup>

Torrance consistently opposed all such schemes, and along with them what he regarded as the spurious assumption that naturalistic reductionism can be derived from, or is assumed by, the physical sciences. Drawing especially on Michael Polanyi (1886–1984), he advocated a multi-levelled ontology that he believed was far more securely supported by concrete scientific practice.<sup>34</sup> He approvingly cites Polanyi’s claim “that all meaning lies in the higher levels of reality that are not reducible to the laws by which the ultimate particulars of the universe are controlled”.<sup>35</sup> No level is self-explanatory but opens toward a higher level, and

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<sup>32</sup> For an excellent treatment of the issues involved, see Lynne Rudder Baker, *Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Francis Crick, *Of Molecules and Men* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), 10.

<sup>34</sup> See, for e.g., Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 102–4; idem, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), ix. He also developed a model of stratification that he applied specifically to theological knowledge; see Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 82–11. For commentary, see Alister E. McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 234–8; Benjamin Myers, “The Stratification of Knowledge in the Thought of T. F. Torrance,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 1 (2008): 1–15.

<sup>35</sup> Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order*, 20. The quote is from Michael Polanyi, *Scientific Thought and Social Reality*, ed. F. Schwartz (New York: International Universities Press, 1974), 136–7.

that to another, and so on.<sup>36</sup> Further, the contingent order *as a whole* does not carry its own explanation. Its secret lies beyond itself: “the universe constitutes an *open* system with an ontological and intelligible reference beyond its own limits which cuts the circuit of any possible closure of its internal processes re-entrantly upon themselves.”<sup>37</sup>

We might add that there are other kinds of reductionism Torrance also opposes, even if he does not always employ the term in doing so. For example, he resolutely rejects the kind of linguistic reductionism that holds that only the kind of literal and empirically verifiable propositions associated with the natural sciences are capable of mediating authentic truth and knowledge, and that these operate through a direct one-to-one correspondence with reality.<sup>38</sup>

What has all this got to do with the arts? A great deal, as it happens, since reductionist pressures have readily found their way into the arts, although they are seen not so much in artistic procedures as in the discourses and attitudes that surround them. This is evident, for example, in a host of attempts to explain the arts solely and entirely in terms of evolutionary biology;<sup>39</sup> or when a Rembrandt self-portrait is viewed as no more than a dressed up auto-biographical statement; or when a Mozart symphony is denigrated simply for its ineradicable attachment to European colonialism (or, indeed, when it is lauded by others for its supposed detachment from all things political and ideological). Although sweeping accounts of the arts of this sort often contain crucial insights, they invariably fail to convince

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<sup>36</sup> Of a piece with this is Torrance’s particular interest in Gödel’s theorem, which shows that any formal system is by its very nature incomplete, in that it cannot demonstrate its own consistency. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 87–8.

<sup>37</sup> Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order*, 36. Italics original.

<sup>38</sup> For his discussion of these and related matters pertaining to language, see, for e.g., Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, ch. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Hence the account of human culture advocated by Richard Dawkins, *The Extended Phenotype: The Gene as the Unit of Selection* (Oxford; San Francisco: Freeman, 1982). For far milder approaches, though arguably still over-stating the significance of the case being made, see Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes from and Why* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, & Human Evolution* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009; first U.S. edition).

when presented as catch-all theories.<sup>40</sup> What Torrance offers in these contexts is a way of unsettling the closed and enclosing habits of thought that sustain the reductive imagination—from the perspective of theology primarily of course, but also from the perspective of the natural sciences. His alternate imagination is nourished by a highly differentiated theology of creation grounded in Christology and the Trinity, one that arrests any drift towards monism, and seeks to do justice to irreducibly plural forms of created rationality and, linked with this, to quite distinct forms of intelligibility. In this way, he opens up a way of countering the reductive temptation to dismiss the arts as mere entertainment or emotive outpouring without cognitive content.

But we can say rather more about reductionism in relation to Torrance here, for this is one of those areas where the arts can speak back to theology. The arts, I suggest, can offer a concrete embodiment of, and witness to, the kind of counter-reductionism that Torrance is advocating on theological grounds, and in this way can greatly strengthen and enhance the exploration and articulation of those very grounds. I have expanded on this at length elsewhere.<sup>41</sup> The key point is that it has long been recognized that what we have come to call “the arts” appear by their very nature to be *inexhaustibly evocative*: that is, they have the capacity to generate and sustain multiple and potentially unlimited waves of meaning. Hilary Brand and Adrienne Chaplin memorably contrast Van Gogh’s famous painting of worn-down shoes with the two-dimensional picture of a shoe we might find on the side of a shoebox in a shoe store.<sup>42</sup> The latter answers to an immediate need and efficiently answers it; once the shoes are found on the shelf, the picture is superfluous. The Van Gogh painting (which as it happens has stimulated a strong

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<sup>40</sup> For one of the most penetrating critiques of bio-cultural reductionism in the social sciences, see Jean Lachapelle, “Cultural Evolution, Reductionism in the Social Sciences, and Explanatory Pluralism,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 30, no. 3 (2000): 331–61. And for the argument that fictional literature by its very nature presses against reductionism, see Christina Bieber Lake, *Beyond the Story: American Literary Fiction and the Limits of Materialism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019).

<sup>41</sup> See Jeremy Begbie, *Abundantly More: Theology and the Arts in a Reductionist World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023).

<sup>42</sup> Hilary Brand and Adrienne D. Chaplin, *Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts* (Carlisle: Solway, 2001), 123.

current of philosophical reflection)<sup>43</sup> is richly suggestive, and will likely be generative of further significance with each viewing.

This is emphatically not to claim that works of art are capable of “meaning anything”. But it is to say that the realities being engaged (objects, ideas, persons, or whatever) can become charged with multiple waves of significance that can never be fully identified or specified. In this way, art is capable of its own kind of reality-disclosure; that is, of faithfully opening up realities independent of the viewer but in a way that is clearly distinct from, say, scientific observation and discovery. This kind of “realism” in relation to the arts has recently been developed by a number of scholars under the banner of “aesthetic cognitivism,” a position expressed *in nuce* by Nelson Goodman: “the arts must be taken no less seriously than the sciences as modes of discovery, creation, and enlargement of knowledge in the broadest sense of advancement of the understanding”.<sup>44</sup> As far as theology is concerned (not least Torrance’s theology), at least two implications of such an account of the arts need to be registered. First, the arts stand as a stubborn testimony to the validity of modes of knowing other than those typically singled out by the reductionist as alone legitimate. Second, the arts at their best, I submit, stand as compelling witnesses to, and enactments of the fact that the finite world we inhabit is of inexhaustible significance, that it always outstrips our perceptual grasp. “What is the world that art takes for granted?” asks Rowan Williams in one of his writings. “It is one in which perception is always incomplete ...”.<sup>45</sup> That, I suggest, is a profoundly Torrancian sentiment, and one which at least begins to

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<sup>43</sup> Most famously (and controversially) by Martin Heidegger, “On the Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 143–212.

<sup>44</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Harvester Studies in Philosophy (Hassocks, UK: Harvester Press, 1978), 102. On aesthetic cognitivism, see Christoph Baumberger, “Art and Understanding: In Defence of Aesthetic Cognitivism,” in *Bilder Sehen. Perspektiven Der Bildwissenschaft*, ed. Marc Greenlee et al. (Regensburg: Schnell + Steiner, 2013), 41–67; Catherine Z. Elgin, “Art in the Advancement of Understanding,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2002): 1012; John Gibson, “Cognitivism and the Arts,” *Philosophy Compass* 3, no. 4 (2008), 573–89.

<sup>45</sup> Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum, 2005), 135.

open out on to the theological.<sup>46</sup> Once the hard grids of a reductionist mentality are shaken, theological possibilities begin to look a good deal more plausible. As the Australian poet Les Murray puts it:

... God is the poetry caught in any  
religion, caught, not imprisoned. Caught as in a mirror  
that he attracted, being in the world as poetry  
is in the poem, a law against its closure.<sup>47</sup>

#### 4) Space and Time

And so, finally, to a fourth feature of Torrance's theology: his pioneering reflections on the nature and structures of space and time. Here I want to concentrate on the movement from the arts to theology, and on how one particular art form, music, can provide substantial resources for the theologian.

It is often assumed that music's greatest contribution to theology will be to offer experiences that in some manner abstract us from temporality (and with it, materiality). Music, we are sometimes told, is the most "spiritual" of the arts, the implication being it is the art least tied to space, time, and matter. I want to suggest that not only does this fail to take seriously music's basic embeddedness in spatio-temporal materiality, but that this very rootedness may well turn out to be its most significant theological feature.

As far as music's temporality is concerned, I have argued elsewhere that music makes possible a distinctive, and potentially healing and peaceable, indwelling of time as a dimension of the created world, and that this can help us resist the modern pathology of treating time as something to be escaped, or (more commonly, perhaps) defeated.<sup>48</sup> This, I submit, confirms the profoundly Christian

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<sup>46</sup> And this is the direction Williams himself pursues in his reflections on the arts; see Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, ch. 4.

<sup>47</sup> Les Murray, "Poetry and Religion," from *The Daylight Moon* (1987), *Australian Poetry Library*, <http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/murray-les/poetry-and-religion-0572031>

<sup>48</sup> For a much fuller discussion, see Jeremy S. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).



intuition of time as both real and primordially good. But along with this we should note what can be learned theologically from *the kind of temporality* that music displays. Immensely illuminating here is the work of Victor Zuckerkandl (1896–1965), a Jewish-Austrian musicologist whose work resonates in remarkable ways with Torrance.<sup>49</sup> Zuckerkandl observes that the most direct way in which Western music engages with time is through meter, the pattern of beats, grouped in bars, that underlies most music. These beats are arranged in waves of tension and resolution: they are not simply points on a timeline but dynamically interrelated to one another within a distinctively structured wave-field. Zuckerkandl makes a parallel claim about melody: each note is internally connected to what precedes it and what follows it; in every note, there is a carrying of what precedes it and a pointing towards its future. In this way, Zuckerkandl avers, time is disclosed not as a container or inert channel (the bowling alley down which notes roll), nor merely as a psychological or cultural construction (as in the Kantian tradition), but as an integral function of the interrelationship between concrete entities, and thus by implication an intrinsic dimension of the physical world.<sup>50</sup>

Aficionados of Torrance will note the strong consonance between this and Torrance's critique of receptacle notions of time, which he so effectively showed to be responsible for numerous cul-de-sacs in the history of theology, especially with regard to Christology.<sup>51</sup> Crucial here is the importance of acknowledging time as intrinsic to the world God creates out of nothing, a dimension of the physical world created, assumed, and affirmed in Christ, to be fully redeemed in the new creation. If Zuckerkandl and others are right, music provides not only an intellectual model but a concrete embodiment of the integrity of created time, and one of potentially immense theological significance.

*Mutatis mutandis*, the same holds for space. Again, much well-intentioned theological writing has suggested that music offers us most when it generates an experience which releases us from all things spatial. Countering this, much recent

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<sup>49</sup> Victor Zuckerkandl, *Sound and Symbol: Music and the External World* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956).

<sup>50</sup> Zuckerkandl, *Sound and Symbol*, 151–246.

<sup>51</sup> Classically, in *Space, Time and Incarnation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

writing has argued, compellingly in my view, that far more important and far more central to the way music is actually practiced and imagined is the way it can enable a deeper bodily *indwelling* of our material-spatial world.<sup>52</sup> And again, with this we should not miss what can be learned theologically from the *kind of spatiality* that music opens up for us. Consider the contrast between visual and aural perception. Objects in our visual field typically occupy bounded places: they cannot overlap without losing their distinctiveness. We cannot see red and yellow in the space at the same time, *as* red and yellow. By contrast the tone I hear when I press a key on a piano fills the whole of my heard space, my aural field. It does not occupy a bounded location. It is everywhere in my aural space. If I play another note of a different pitch along with the first, that second tone fills the entirety of the same (heard) space. Yet I hear it as irreducibly distinct from the first. In our aural environment, notes can interpenetrate, sound through one another. They can be in the same space at the same time, yet perceived as irreducibly distinct. The sounds do not so much fill a space; they *are* the space we hear, they exemplify, enact their own space.

Again, so much of what Torrance has proposed with respect to theology and space—and again, especially with regard to Christology—begins to be far more readily conceivable. So many of the conceptual blockages that have relied on receptacle models of space begin to dissipate when we allow aural awareness to have its sway, for this is a form of perception not ruled by structures of mutually exclusive, bounded places. We need only think of the two natures of Christ, the *communication idiomatum*, the struggles of articulating a convincing kenotic Christology; or more widely, the sterile oscillations between synergism and monergism, and the numerous attempts to “balance” divine and human agency in a way that does justice to the biblical witness. Supremely, the intra-trinitarian relations and the very conception of “divine spatiality” begin to take on a fresh intelligibility once we refuse to over-rely on one sense mode to do all our conceptual work for us. In our aural space, after all, we do not hear a three-note chord as three mutually exclusive entities, nor as one fused tone, but as a resonant

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<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Julian Johnson, “Music Language Dwelling,” in *Theology, Music, and Modernity: Struggles for Freedom*, eds. Jeremy Begbie, Daniel K. L. Chua, and Markus Rathey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 295–316.

field. The notes sound through one another, interpenetrate. This is not a logically prior space into which three different objects are inserted; it is a space *constituted by* the resonant, differentiated life of the three. The three tones I hear do not each *have* a space; they *are* that space in action.<sup>53</sup>

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This essay only points to some of the ways in which Torrance's theology provides a rich counterpoint to contemporary discussions in the arts. There can be little doubt that, if he is read with care, and time is taken to penetrate to the currents that at the deepest level propel his thought, Torrance will prove to be one of the most stimulating and contemporary theologians to have appeared in the last hundred years. Those who go on to explore the arts in his company, including themes we have not considered here, will likely be immeasurably enriched.

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<sup>53</sup> On this, see Jeremy Begbie, "'A Semblance More Lucid?'" An Exploration of Trinitarian Space," in *Essays on the Trinity*, ed. Lincoln Harvey (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 20–35.