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— Michelle A. Gonzalez  
University of Miami  
Author of *Shopping: Christian Explorations of  
Daily Living*



# Secular Music and Sacred Theology

*Edited by Tom Beaudoin*



A Michael Glazier Book

**LITURGICAL PRESS**  
Collegeville, Minnesota

[www.litpress.org](http://www.litpress.org)

A Michael Glazier Book published by Liturgical Press

Cover design by Jodi Hendrickson. Cover images: Thinkstock.

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Secular music and sacred theology / edited by Tom Beaudoin.

p. cm.

“A Michael Glazier book.”

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8146-8024-7 — ISBN 978-0-8146-8025-4 (ebook)

1. Music—Religious aspects. I. Beaudoin, Tom, 1969– editor of compilation.

ML3921.S43 2013

782.4—dc23

2012045237

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# Acknowledgments

“Bring water out of the rock; let justice roll.”

(Num 20:8, Amos 5:24)

I hope that this book will prove a welcome introduction to theological explorations of popular music and that it will prompt the sorts of agreements, disagreements, and questions that help readers further their own journeys in theologizing about contemporary culture.

This book grew out of the community of scholars connected to the Rock and Theology blog that has been generously supported for several years by Liturgical Press. I am grateful for the energetic, collegial, and patient editorial support of Peter Dwyer and Hans Christoffersen at Liturgical Press. Thank you, too, to the many writers and readers at Rock and Theology, whose contributions encouraged the thinking taking place in these pages. Fordham University graciously provided a research leave in the 2011 spring semester that substantially aided the generation of this book. And I am in debt to the fine copyediting skills of Lauren L. Murphy at Liturgical Press.

To my bandmates in The Raina and in The Particulars, praise for the continued pleasures of the rock and roll life—and blame for my continued hearing loss.

I offer and owe the deepest gratitude to my family: to my spouse Martina and our daughter Mimi, who inspire this work by making our family life an irreverent mix of music and theology.

Tom Beaudoin  
New York City, August 2012



## *Introduction*

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# **Theology of Popular Music as a Theological Exercise**

*Tom Beaudoin*

### **Sculpting the Self through Music and Theology**

Most people spend a lot of time enjoying music but very little time asking why we care about it so much. In the United States, many people easily and passionately state that they like this or that song, band, or genre, but there are few occasions for asking how these choices connect with what we think our lives are all about. This is perhaps easiest to see among young people. More than one teacher has observed that students today “live inside music. Their musical lives may well be their spiritual lives.” They (and their elders) find something “vital, vigorous, intense” in music. But they (and we) lack ways of integrating that pleasure into our larger lives, of thinking about how music relates to the bigger picture of our lives.<sup>1</sup>

The authors in this book, in writing theology, care about “big picture” questions. Theological research focuses on what religious traditions have to do and say concerning the beings, books, and beliefs that people call holy or sacred. Certainly there are fields of inquiry, philosophy or psychology, for example, in which music as part of life’s “big picture” can be explored. Theologians and religion scholars are not the only ones who pursue what people call divine. Theologians do, however, make this pursuit central to our work. As a result, everything the authors have to

<sup>1</sup> Mark Edmundson, “Can Music Save Your Life?” *The Chronicle Review*, June 8, 2012, B6–9.

say in this book about “popular music” or “secular music”—in short, the music that a lot of people in everyday life find themselves enjoying a lot of the time—is going to be connected to God or to things that are related to God, like “religious” or “spiritual” ideas, texts, or practices. For the authors in this book, making sense of popular music means making a case about how music is more or less related to spiritual things.

The explorations in this book are part of a larger movement among scholars who think that something sacred is at stake in appreciating music in everyday life. The literature on this topic has mushroomed in the last fifteen years, well beyond any one person’s ability to track it all.<sup>2</sup> These scholars try to make sense of what happens to religious experience in a world heavily influenced by popular media culture, a world in which songs, movies, musicians, actors, and celebrities influence our individual and collective imaginations about how we might live. Theologian Kelton Cobb, for example, argues that theology cannot remain unchanged when “whole generations in the West have had their basic conceptions of the world formed by popular culture.” Out of this newly influential experiential palette, people “invest life with meaning and find a justification for their lives”<sup>3</sup>—or as I mentioned above, people are aided in coming to a sense of the “big picture.”

Music has a unique place in the sea of popular culture. It has achieved a position of cultural dominance compared to other forms of cultural expression. With the assistance of several decades of technological breakthroughs, and because of a deep affinity between contemporary social change and popular musical expression, music has come ever more intimately into nearly every aspect of everyday experience, adding to music’s traditional place in religious and social rituals. Music is every-

<sup>2</sup> Very helpful starting places into the wider literature include Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005); Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005); Anthony B. Pinn and Benjamín Valentín, eds., *Creating Ourselves: African Americans and Hispanic Americans on Popular Culture and Religious Expression* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Christian Scharen, *Broken Hallelujahs: Why Popular Music Matters to Those Seeking God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2011); Jeffrey F. Keuss, *Your Neighbor’s Hymnal: What Popular Music Teaches Us about Faith, Hope, and Love* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011). David Nantais, *Rock-a My Soul: An Invitation to Rock Your Religion* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011) is an accessible meditation on the relationship between rock and roll and the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola.

<sup>3</sup> Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 7.

where.<sup>4</sup> Music, it is now thought, may even have been of particular significance in human evolution, facilitating sexual selection, social cohesion, and even basic cognition. It is no wonder that music has been called a “human obsession.”<sup>5</sup>

What I am really talking about here is the way that music has a powerful way of putting together human identity for individuals and groups. Music is a kind of glue that helps different aspects of identity stick together and endure. Many dimensions of experience are tutored and shaped by popular music cultures: who we are racially and ethnically, what we take ourselves to be in terms of gender and sexuality, where we belong generationally, spiritually, and more. One way of talking about this powerful role of music is to use the notion of “subjectification,” which means “subject-making,” where the “subject” is the human being. In other words, when we talk in philosophy and theology about subjectification, we are pointing to the ways in which who—and whose—we take ourselves to be are deeply influenced by, and substantially implanted in, the ways that we are persuaded to count certain things as being “real” and mattering more than other things. This persuasion happens through the “hidden curriculum” of our families, schools, religious institutions, and larger social environment, including our media, and especially including the music that influences and/or comes from “the people”—“popular music.”<sup>6</sup>

Some of this subjectification works through what we choose given the options before us, but a lot of it happens through what is taken as normal, appropriate, worthy, decent, or desirable in the cultures in which we are shaped. Culture makes constant subtle interventions in what we take to count as ourselves and our communities. This influence is not neutral; it is saturated with the history of forces beyond what we can comprehend, forces that are part of the history of our culture, powerful dynamics that carry legacies of being silenced as well as inclinations to speak, all tangled with overt and subtle acts of violence. These forces have resulted

<sup>4</sup> T.C.W. Blanning, *The Triumph of Music: The Rise of Composers, Musicians, and Their Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* (New York: Dutton, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> I borrow the term “subjectification” from the philosophy of Michel Foucault. For an introduction to this term and its significance for theology, see Tom Beaudoin, “Engaging Foucault with Rahner: Sketching an Asymptotic Relationship,” *Philosophy and Theology* 20, no. 1–2 (2008): 307–29.

in our profoundly unequal, stratified society, with uneven access to social goods—and in which music is created, distributed, and taken in. Popular music is far from simple entertainment. Music is a force that can be a way of being trained to succumb to the history of exploitation and/or of being able to invent new forms of freedom. These popular music practices can run the gamut from listening to music at a live show alone or with others, or while traveling or daydreaming, to creating, performing, and distributing one's own music, to watching music videos and performances on a screen, to analyzing music in everyday conversation or academic discourse, and more. These are just some ways that music becomes a part of our way of dealing with and creating an effective sense of self and other.

Even though the word “subjectification” is not often used in popular music research, music as a force for subjectification—inducing configurations of individuals and communities that accede to or resist the damages our history gives us—has been an important theme of research. The power of the blues for the expression and crafting of African American lives has been well-argued,<sup>7</sup> and rock and roll by African American artists has served to create communities of conversation and activism regarding racial justice and interracial solidarity.<sup>8</sup> Popular music teaches ethical codes by the pleasure it gives, providing listeners a story about how to hold life together and what people can hope for.<sup>9</sup> Women artists and fans have found in popular music a school for self-assertion and gender creativity.<sup>10</sup> Exploring and negotiating models of political participation outside of Latin America through the reworking of Mexican culture have been facilitated by Latino rock “in diaspora.”<sup>11</sup> And rock and roll has been a way for young Muslims to craft a pluralistically-informed identity

<sup>7</sup> A classic work is James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury, 1972). This motif also occurs throughout Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Simon Frith is a singular student of popular music. A good place to start is *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Gillian Gaar, *She's a Rebel: The History of Women in Rock & Roll*, 2nd ed. (New York: Seal Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Roberto Avant-Mier, *Rock the Nation: Latin/o Identities and the Latin Rock Diaspora* (New York: Continuum, 2010).

within Islam.<sup>12</sup> These examples show that music is frequently a force for pulling together or tugging apart the threads of identity, weaving the ambiguous threads of the society in which popular music comes to be known.

In taking account of the role of subjectification through music, we have not moved very far from theological concerns. Indeed, the more curious we are about what music means for the core of human life, the more that theology can and should be invested, because theological traditions have commonly understood God as both the architect and the goal of life. Theology is the concern for the “place” of divinity in subjectification, for the sake of making human life, and the life of the world, more worthy of its mysterious and sacred “essence.” This is one fundamental reason that theologians and religionists argue about what music means. We want to know where that special relation to “something more” is (or is asserted to be) “taking place.”

### **Three Definitions of Popular Music and Their Theological Significance**

Thus far, I have been making “popular music” seem more simple a thing than it actually is. But I did allude above to the range of things people do with music, and getting specific about that range is important for theological work on music. Pop music scholar Simon Frith, working from a long career interpreting the role of music in contemporary society, has argued that popular culture can be understood in three basic ways. Because popular music is not only a part of popular culture more generally, but helped to “found” pop culture, these three definitions are of particular importance for understanding how music works in contemporary culture.<sup>13</sup>

Borrowing from the language of democracy, Frith argues that popular culture can be understood as cultural “products” made “for the people,” “of the people,” and “by the people.” First, as something made “for the people,” we can think of music as an industrially-produced commodity aimed at a particular social group. This definition directs our attention to the ways that music becomes popular through the way it is planned

<sup>12</sup> Mark Levine, *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Simon Frith, “Popular Culture,” in *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, ed. Michael Payne and Jessica Rae Barbera (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 553–55.

and branded for the consumption of a specific social demographic. There is an important insight here: all music is created and made available to certain publics with a more or less sophisticated (perhaps manipulative) attempt to be placed into people's lives. Of course, I also want to know what this definition means for theology. It means that theology can look for the meaning of music by what its makers "design" into it. Theology then asks how God and God-related spiritual texts, ideas, and practices relate to a series of governing intentions: what the artist means to convey, what the record company is trying to sell, how the larger social ideology benefits from its propagation. This definition focuses on music's meaning in the intentions, influences, and intervention of powerful forces behind it.

The second definition Frith presents is that pop culture is the culture "of the people." Here, pop music becomes popular because it so well characterizes a social group's values, behaviors, or identity. The music seems to "fit" or "depict" what people are like, and that is what makes it "popular." For example, there is music that seems to speak particularly to teenage life, to racial-ethnic realities, to religious affiliation, to local or regional tastes, to gender dynamics, or to specific levels of formal education or status or social privilege. Insofar as a musical artist, lyric, song, album, video, concert, or the like symbolizes a quality of a social group, popular music is the music or culture "of the people." Popular music is frequently experienced by fans as "my music" or "our music" precisely for these reasons. For theological research, this means that we may look to the sensibilities of the social group that are "embedded" in the music when we want to understand how to relate spiritual things to popular music. Our interest becomes how the music is symbolizing "where people are," acting like a seismograph for contemporary life.

The third definition Frith offers is popular culture as culture "by the people." This is close to what is sometimes called "folk culture," because here we focus on a specific social group's practices. What people do creatively musically, on their own terms, is "popular music." Though this definition tends to prioritize inventive local artistry, it can conceivably include the creative things people do with the commodities they receive. So popular music as culture "by the people" can include street raps, busking, and home recordings (and how those circulate in use in local communities), but can also include appreciation for what people really do with commercially produced music, such as how they treat lyrics, what they do with musical celebrity, how they construct their own playlists, how they share music, and how they put music into the par-

ticularities of their lives for myriad purposes that always have to be studied in context. Theology that wants to work with popular music understood in this way looks to how groups, through music, put their lives together, through both consent and dissent about how to get things done. Theologians look to relate their spiritual materials to the creative and tensive places of music from the “ground up.” Music’s involvement in negotiations of power and everyday reiterations of identity become of great interest theologically.

Were we to take an ordinary example of pop music, like a song from a mainstream pop, rock, or hip hop album, and ask how it is “popular music” according to these definitions, and how we make theological sense of it, it would look something like this: We might begin by asking who wrote this song, what do we know about their life, and what were they trying to communicate? Who paid for this music to be recorded and marketed, and what are their motivations to have it sell, and to whom? What are the deep social dynamics of the society in which this music is made and sold, and how are those social dynamics being legitimated or interrupted in the sound, the words, the images of this music? We would also want to know what this song tells us about the people who like it, and about the culture in which it came to be—how and why it speaks to these people in this moment. And we should be curious about how this song fits into larger patterns of life on the ground for its fans: when they listen to it, how important the lyrics are and what they mean to people, how the song informs their thoughts, dreams, conversations, perceptions, self-perceptions, and how it opens or closes people to other music, feelings, relationships, politics. That is admittedly a lot to find out, and few scholars can tackle all of that. We are necessarily selective.

Then we would ask (although we are and should be asking all along) more explicitly theological questions. How does religious tradition address itself to these messages, values, and ideological practices? But for good contemporary theological research, especially with a public topic like popular music, we do not merely assert. We have to have good reasons and justly persuasive rhetoric for theological work. By “good reasons,” I mean reasons that stand up to scrutiny as good argument among those committed to it inside and outside of theology. By “justly persuasive rhetoric,” I mean to recognize that we are persuaded not only by “good reasons” but by persuasive, poetic, even beautiful writing and other forms of theological presentation, and that this persuasive rhetoric ought to ultimately serve justice toward ourselves and all others in our (local and global) society. “Good reasons” can never be separated cleanly

from “justly persuasive rhetoric.” But good theological researchers keep this sort of thing in mind when they try to talk about culture, or about any theological work for that matter. And so we have to ask ourselves if there are good reasons and justly persuasive rhetoric for having this engagement between theology and music happen? Why do we think our theological traditions might have something significant to say here, and how do we convey that with care, style, and beauty? No less important is the moment in theological work where we ask why this theological engagement with music matters for us and for those affected by this conversation. Do we see that we or others might become different, gain knowledge, insight, wisdom, or virtue, might simply grow or change, as a result? And will this engagement, which is both ever new and ever rooted in our past, make us reconsider both this music and our theological tradition?

The point is that despite theology’s historical tendencies to see itself as the protector of the divine property known as “revelation,” it is simply the case that neither music nor theology can stay the same in this kind of engagement. We will either reaffirm what we thought and felt about religion and music, or we will not. And we may only later come up with reasons for that reiteration or reconsideration. This is something like the dynamic, explicit or implicit, that most scholars of theology and popular culture undertake, even if we do not undertake every step consciously every time we do our work.<sup>14</sup> To study theology and popular music is to find ways of bringing together musical culture and theological culture and to find how why and how it matters that that happens, and to use that knowledge to make even wiser discernments in the future. These discernments are not ultimately for producing specialized knowledge alone, but for learning how to live with a spiritual sense, more fully and responsibly, in our particular social habitat. Theological research must conform to the best standards of research and, at the same time, realize theology is also for living wisely and well.

<sup>14</sup> Among many strong recent works on the changing relationship between theology and culture that the explicit turn to cultural analysis entails, see Sheila Greeve Davaney, “Theology and the Turn to Cultural Analysis,” in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, ed. Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3–16.

## Constraints on Theologizing about Music

There are so many ways of putting music and theology in relationship with each other that the possibilities can seem daunting, but it also means that there is a great deal of room for specific engagements and pushing out new frontiers. You might get the impression that one way is as good as another, that because there are so many ways to make theological sense of popular music, that one choice is as “good” as another and that in the end, it does not really matter how one enters the conversation or carries it forward.

However, theology is, and should be, “constrained” by two forces that are beyond its control: history and culture. When we do theology, we have to think carefully about our historical situation and try to name the contingency of our past and the prospects that appear to us as possible avenues forward. We also have to think well about our cultural placement, because the basic stuff of theology—practices, ideas, texts—are always testaments to a particular past cultural situation that are used in new present cultural situations. So we have to speak in a “public” way when we do theology, taking responsibility for the way that history and culture have put us where we are with respect to our understanding of God and religion. We have to realize that every theological exploration is a way of dealing with the history we have inherited, and is a way of addressing the multiple cultures actually present as our “publics.”

Working creatively with these “constraints” can turn them into new possibilities, new realms of freedom for theologians. Many different areas of theology are coming to terms with these constraints and possibilities. For example, theologian Don Browning argues that a theological encounter with marriage has to be carried out under particular exigencies today. A theology of marriage needs to be a kind of “public philosophy,” one that should not be argued by resting on privileged (and increasingly hoary) theological ideas like “orders of creation, covenant, and sacrament.” At the same time, theology is part of Western histories of marriage, and so we must “understand our society’s indebtedness to what these concepts did to form Western marriage.”<sup>15</sup> Something similar is true of theologizing about rock and roll or all popular music: No single theological system is going to be able to make persuasive sense of

<sup>15</sup> Don S. Browning, “Can Marriage Be Defined?,” *Equality and the Family: A Fundamental, Practical Theology of Children, Mothers and Fathers in Contemporary Societies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 207–19.

popular music today, but due to rock and roll's roots in gospel music, the churches, and different kinds of Christian experience, theology is also part of the history of rock and roll. This makes theological work on rock and roll a complicated venture, one beset by limits and possibilities on all sides. It is hard to integrate these constraints into theological work, but theologians are under particular obligations to think about the constraints on our work, because theology is always a constrained discourse while at the same time being a discourse committed to freedom through the relating of "sacred" (cultural) material to "other" (cultural) material. In this work of relating, we constantly run up against the need to think through the ultimate "force" beyond theology's control that also limits and frees theology: God, or whatever sacred power theology can imagine. Integrating an awareness of these constraints and open-ended-nesses of history and culture can be a way of beginning to acknowledge the more profound, perhaps limitless, limit that divine revelation poses for theological work.

### **The Shape of This Book**

While there are now a fair number of edited books with multiple authors that engage religion and popular culture, a focus on popular music is less common. Although some serious theological inquiries into popular music have appeared in recent years, there are no edited collections that I know of that focus on theology and popular music.<sup>16</sup> This book aims to contribute to the conversation by not only showing different ways in which different authors take different theological approaches to different forms of rock and roll (broadly construed), but also by taking cultural studies of music seriously as a partner for theological engagement. You will notice chapters that take account of "non-theological" vantage points on music, from religious studies literature, cultural studies of music, histories and biographies, interviews with musicians, accounts of live performance, fan perspectives, and more. This new approach emerges from a generation of scholars who live in both academic/religious/theological and pop music contexts, retaining their passion for all domains while disagreeing on how those realms do and should relate to each other. Many of the authors in this book are musicians, all

<sup>16</sup> One theologically rich collection that focuses on hip hop is Anthony B. Pinn, ed., *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

are fans, and each believes that the conjoint study of theology and popular music is important and mutually enriching.

The chapters are divided into three sections, characterizing three distinct (but overlapping) ways that theological work proceeds in relation to popular music. The headings direct our attention to how scholars find theologically meaningful material in the world of popular music.

In the first section, "Theology through Artistry," the authors situate the theological significance of music in relationship to the creative process of artistic invention. David Dault juxtaposes the music of Lou Reed with the theology of Karl Barth and the art of Yves Klein, so as to show how all three artists create works that try to name what exceeds naming. The ancient theological question of whether God can be comprehended in human terms is turned by Dault, in his chapter "To the Void: Karl Barth, Yves Klein, and Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music*," into a triptych of rock and roll, theology, and visual art, all trying to let that which is profoundly "other" appear through their respective mediums. In the process, we are sensitized to the analogies among these forms of artistry, and while theology is not assimilated to music and art, Dault locates it on an evocative map of family resemblances across genres for experiencing what cannot be grasped. Maeve Heaney, in "Musical Space: Living 'In-Between' the Christian and the Artistic Callings," also finds juxtapositions to be a productive site for theological exploration. For her, the life and work of the artist houses a key tension in music culture that is theologically significant: the calling to be a Christian and the calling to be a musician. Heaney works with statements from musicians about their art and their faith, weaves in her own experience as a Christian musician, and finds in contemporary theology resources for making sense of these distinct and yet complementary callings. The deeper one goes, juxtapositions become comparisons, and comparisons become exchanges, or occasions for pursuing places of spiritual convergence and divergence. Through it all, the tensions among callings will be the place for theological work. Thus we have two different takes on why and how one can make musical artistry the center of theologically interested exploration.

The second section of the book, "Theology in Community," investigates ways that music helps create communities of heightened moral consciousness. Michael Iafrate's chapter "More Than Music: Notes on 'Staying Punk' in the Church and in Theology," finds punk rock, and especially the ethics of punk culture, to be a robust place for theological appreciation and criticism. This is so especially because the personal and social commitments of punk and theology frequently coincide, and a

theologically aware punk ethic can even help ground everyday adult life and the practice of academic theology. The ways that musical experience changes people in theologically substantial ways also interests Mary McDonough. Her chapter, "On the Road to the Promised Land: How the NAACP, the Black Church, and Rock Music Helped the Civil Rights Movement," puts interracial early rock concerts in the historical context of the civil rights movement, and argues that rock and roll shows are much more than entertainment. They have been crucibles for the American moral imagination about race. Theological analysis of popular music's role in fomenting morally conscious community should take deep account of the politics of the culture in which the music takes place, as well as the contending imaginations of the communities that resist the destructive dimensions of those politics. Misogynistic cultural mores, and the failures of theologies to integrate subjective experiences of suffering into their concepts of God, are at the heart of the chapter by Gina Messina-Dysert. In "Is God Absent on 'Grey Street'? Theodicy, Domestic Violence, and the Dave Matthews Band," she argues that in the experiences and questions of victims-survivors of domestic violence, theology finds itself in need of an alliance with the power of music to enable a more suitable presence to the depth of theological questions in suffering. For this work, she turns to the music of the Dave Matthews Band, arguing that from this band comes a music that can, in telling the truth about suffering and the theological crisis it induces, deepen solidarity on behalf of justice for women. Each of these chapters finds theology's work to be in appreciating, criticizing, and drawing out the implications of music's role in making more ethically responsible communities.

In the final section, "Theology through Song," the authors take songs as the core of theological insight and access other contextual material (such as interviews, concerts, biographies) that help to elucidate the theological significance of songs. Christian Scharen finds the presence of "the festive" in contemporary song in a way that speaks directly to a revived sacramental theology that can draw from popular music. His chapter, "Secular Music and Sacramental Theology," focuses on performances by Arcade Fire, Lady Gaga, and Esperanza Spalding. Scharen finds music creating the occasion for theology to join philosopher Charles Taylor in recovering the notion of festivity in the service of a more rigorous show of embodiment that can inform theological work on the worldly experience of the divine. Myles Werntz, in "Erase This from the Blackboard: Pearl Jam, John Howard Yoder, and the Overcoming of Trauma," sees an entire album posing a theological question that the-

ology should take seriously and can help to answer. Working from a close reading of Pearl Jam's *Ten*, Werntz identifies its pressing theological themes to include trauma and apocalypse, and ultimately hope. Werntz turns to theologian John Howard Yoder to respond, thereby arguing that Pearl Jam's songs are of theological significance, and that Yoder's theology addresses an important theological matter at stake in a widely influential rock record. Daniel White Hodge presents songs as theological innovations in their own right, challenging mainstream theology to revise its assumptions about race, secularity, and salvation. His chapter, "Baptized in Dirty Water: Locating the Gospel of Tupac Amaru Shakur in the Post-Soul Context," argues that Shakur was a theologian from and for his milieu, bringing the life lessons, language, and loves from the streets to discourse about God, Jesus, and religion, and creating a new possibility for theology in the process. Close readings of Shakur's songs show a searching theological sensibility at work that can help theology take itself further into its own deepest commitments and contemporary social relevance. For Jeff Keuss, the songs of Tom Waits and Nick Cave are sources of theological insight, bringing theology poetically into the complex space of the experience and assertion of God's presence and absence already foreseen by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. In his chapter, "Tom Waits, Nick Cave, and Martin Heidegger: On Singing of the God Who Will Not Be Named," Keuss shows how careful attention to songs can surface deeply theological conundrums. The way that songs navigate theologically can have an integrity of their own and can also be enriched by finding analogues in academic discourse, such as philosophy of religion. Songs turn out to be a way that philosophy of religion happens melodically, and elite philosophy of religion is a way that a popular song's intellectual content can get registered and deepened. For this section of the book, the work of the theologian is in learning how to read and hear songs productively, all the while searching for the existing theological discourse from the tradition to affirm, reject, or complicate.

### **Theological Engagement with Culture: Capitulation, Interpretation, or Liberation?**

These chapters, taken as a whole, teach us about method in theological engagements with popular culture. Academic theology engages culture when theologians read cognate disciplines for material they consider relevant for theological analysis. Through such inclusion of "non-theological" material, the items to count as theologically relevant get

rhetorically placed. This display of specific cultural material, disaggregated from its larger context, is a theological maneuver, regardless of whether that material gets an explicitly named theological appreciation, criticism, or mere comment. Theology says through the forms of its narratives, “the holy story can be told in this way,” and one thing to notice about theologians’ engagements with culture is that this very form becomes as much the content of our theological arguments as any other identifiable “contents.”

Now that this dynamic of theological production—the necessary interaction between “theological” and “non-theological” material—is getting noticed more and more in contemporary theology, different reactions have followed. Some argue that such a dynamic is a sad capitulation on the part of theology, because it is an essentially anti-theological submission to non-theological outsiders. Why, they ask, should “cultural” material “spoil” theology and violate its special revelatory privilege?<sup>17</sup> Other theologians see this dynamic as a hermeneutical necessity. Interpretation, they argue, is essential to living faith. We must always interpretively connect a religious tradition to a particular social-cultural situation.<sup>18</sup> Still other theologians argue that this dynamic is valid insofar as it represents a liberative intervention. This is because theology must figure out how to stand critically for freedom in cultural contexts of suffering.<sup>19</sup> These three theological characterizations of the deep placement of theological work amidst cultural investigation can be summarized as: capitulation, interpretation, liberation.

I am writing generally, of course, about theological trajectories today, but each of these generalizations contains some truth. If theology uncritically repeats cultural forms, it is capitulation. Just so, no theology can avoid interpreting cultural situations and interpreting itself along the way. No theology sees itself or its culture “purely,” and the skill of prudential judgment is one of the most prized of theological skills. And if that judgment does not issue in the service of justice, we can accuse our hermeneutics of decadence. All three characterizations thus make essential claims. But they carry their own violence as well. All three characterizations of the theology-culture dynamic (capitulation, interpretation, liberation) tend toward a violent special pleading. By this, I mean that they impose theological restrictions on reality by force of a vindication

<sup>17</sup> This is typically the response of “radical orthodox” or neo-orthodox theologies.

<sup>18</sup> Correlational or liberal theologies typically make this response.

<sup>19</sup> This response is common to theologies of liberation.

of a certain selective enforcement of ideas and practices that make one Christian. This is what Daniel Boyarin calls “christianicity”—Christianity as a kind of display of identity in a certain time and place, as an experience of being trained to recognize one’s essential Christian-ness as resident in beliefs and practices in an over-against relationship with Christianity’s “others.”<sup>20</sup> The “capitulation” defense is an ancient kind of theological imposition: a failure to learn from what gives others (in contemporary culture) their wholeness, peace, integrity, sense. The “interpretation” response treats religion as a privileged dialogue partner for unlocking cultural meaning, presuming religion’s privilege and coherence. The “liberation” strategy prescribes that the freedom to be fostered by theology will necessarily be assimilable to Christianity, instead of potentially transcending Christianity, or standing indifferent to it.

Are there any other ways of understanding this theology-culture dynamic? I propose that we can understand theological work on culture as a pragmatic rehearsal. A notion of pragmatic rehearsal does not aim to put to rest all these conundrums, but places itself within and across the lines of rhetorical force already at work in the other approaches. By pragmatic rehearsal, I am suggesting a theory of the performance of academic theological knowledge: that theological work is a kind of dynamic, performed knowing, and to enact it is to operate intellectually and materially, with situational tools, on a cultural nexus of significance, and from an awareness contingently denominated “theological,” for the sake—and with the effect—of a conscious and unconscious intervention in practice.

Theological work is “pragmatic” in the sense of conscious deliberation about what needs to be done in this historical-cultural moment with these specific ways of construing the moment and of specifying what can be done; it is also “pragmatic” as personal-cultural unconscious “deliberation,” built out of the personal psychology and cultural genealogy of the theologian and her history, about what this moment is and what can and must be done.

It is a “rehearsal” in the sense that it repeats and reconstructs personal and cultural history. “Rehearsal” is a paradoxical term; it means to do something you have already proven you can do, and it means to do

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 17.

something that you have not yet fully proven you can do. It means to go through an ensemble of moves that you have already learned as part of a set piece, but it also means to go through that ensemble of moves in order to prepare for a special display, an extraordinary performance. Theological work is a rehearsal in both senses. Theology is a way of dealing with oneself, others, and culture. That dealing is provisional. It is also direct and indirect. This is why practice-based theologies are playing and should play an increasingly important role in contemporary theological research. In these approaches, theologians can come closer to recognizing the practice-character of all theology. All theology studies and enacts practices. Another way of saying this is that all theology involves itself with orchestrations of identity with respect to a claiming power. But this should not lull us into thinking that just because a theology has to do with practical or cultural matters that it is proceeding with full awareness and criticality as a practice-intensive theology. Many practical, pastoral, and praxis theologies can operate just as other theologies, with a reluctance to foreground the problem of the moves and cultural-spiritual interventions it is making, often enough in the name of a renewed, liberating, faithful, or transformed practice.

On this interpretation, theology of popular culture, as a model for and exemplification of theological work "as such," is practice-based, practice-intensive, and practice-effective. On this reading, theologians are engaged in pragmatic rehearsals, enacting the ways of analysis they have inherited, operating on a scene of significance, and confirming and/or challenging an arrangement in view of (a) claiming power(s). This reading potentially holds the diversity of approaches outlined above and in this book, while suggesting their importance for the definition of academic theological labor in the twenty-first century, particularly in "secular" Western contexts. Such reflections also indicate that theological engagements with popular culture harbor something far from being theologically ephemeral and culturally transient; they are ways of approaching difficult problems with which the larger theological community struggles. Or stated differently, such reflections show that the larger theological community's analyses are no less theologically ephemeral and culturally transient than what "theology and popular culture" research discovers.

**PART ONE**

**Theology through Artistry**





## *Chapter 1*

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# **To the Void: Karl Barth, Yves Klein, and Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music***

*David Dault*

"Some experiences are best left unexplained."

Bob Mould<sup>1</sup>

I remember visiting a museum in Atlanta to see a traveling exhibit, and part of the collection was this huge painting that took up most of one wall. It was a seascape, a stormscape full of roaring, crashing, angry waves. The foam caps on the swells were above my head, and the troughs of these monstrous walls of water met to form a murderous valley at my feet. This was one of the largest paintings I have ever seen, and it was all screaming water.

There in the middle, totally at the mercy of this frozen power, careening toward the depths of wreckage, to death, was a tiny boat.

I don't now recall the name of the artist or the name of the painting. What left an impression, however, was the enormity of this image and the hopelessness and grandeur it conveyed. Staring into that raging sea, I felt small. I felt insignificant. I felt that I was in the presence of power much beyond my comprehension, let alone my control.

That, of course, was the point.

The Romantics—not only the painters, but the poets, too—were preoccupied with this feeling. Their work helped provide us with a technical vocabulary for exploring the heights and depths of human meaning and the mortal questions of awe: Was this the incomprehensible majesty of

<sup>1</sup> "Beaster (1993): A Note from Bob Mould." <http://www.granarymusic.com/archive/last-dog-and-pony-show/discography/sugar/beaster.html>.

the natural world? Was this the overwhelming wrath of an inscrutable God? Yes, and more. In the grandeur of the Romantic gesture, the assured calculations of the Enlightenment—with its world fully described by rationality—find both their fruition and their challenge. Logical descriptions of the divine attributes are retained in Romanticism, but are now coupled with an acute loss of God’s domesticity, the beauty of the classical understanding now paired with the terror and absoluteness of the sublime. As Wordsworth put it:

Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light  
 Were all like workings of one mind, the features  
 Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,  
 Characters of the great Apocalypse,  
 The types and symbols of Eternity,  
 Of first and last, and midst, and without end.<sup>2</sup>

These Romantic “characters of Apocalypse”—among them the Sublime, the Void, and the Abyss—invoke the “gulf separating expectation from reality,”<sup>3</sup> that “inner place, which is not a place,” to borrow Augustine’s phrase, that separates the apprehension we possess in imaginative memory from our ability to positively name that apprehension.<sup>4</sup>

It is this problem of naming that infects the twentieth century (especially so, with the Shoah’s dark specter interrupting all delimitations of apprehension, and, following Adorno, even the possibility of poetry itself). Moreover, as with all centuries, when speaking of God, we risk both over-familiarity and domestication or run aground upon the limits of language and terror of the divine. For several of the church fathers, the way forward was apophasis, the path of negative theology, by which we speak only with assurance of what God is not. God cannot be contained and, therefore, God cannot be contained in language.

The response of the Romantic however is not an apophatic response; neither is it a positive one. Rather, in a *tertium quid* to the positivism of scientific modernism and the *via negativa* of the ancients, Romanticism

<sup>2</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude; or, Growth of a Poet’s Mind* (4.635–40), quoted in M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), 107.

<sup>3</sup> Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 451.

<sup>4</sup> St. Augustine, *Confessions* 10.9, in Philip Schaff, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church; Volume I: The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustine, with a Sketch of his Life and Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 146.

bequeaths us a vocabulary of gestures. In contrast to both positivism and apophaticism, the gestural vocabulary of Romanticism points to the Abyss, noting it without naming, locating it without logic. Like the fictive crew of the boat tossed by huge swells, Romanticism apprehends from within the overwhelming immensity of the Sublime. This is not a conventional form of logical naming. Instead, falling down the crest of the wave into the unknown below, one may there sing "Of Truth, of Grandeur, Beauty, Love and Hope / and melancholy Fear subdued by Faith,"<sup>5</sup> not because one knows these things, but because in that moment the one so singing is consumed by them.

When one is caught in the crest of the overwhelming wave, it is hard to discern the provenance. Standing far away, one might be able to name the source, but we never meet the Sublime at such a distance. From the middle of the storm, all we know is that there is some power that holds us, be that the power of God or of the devil. We are beholden to this power, and as such, are in no position to properly speak or name the power. If we had any means to properly measure the nature of the wave of the Sublime, the wave of the Abyss, to which we are presently and constantly in thrall, we would have to be somewhere other than the boat in which we presently find ourselves. "The human plight consists fundamentally of enslavement to supra-human powers; and God's redemptive act is his deed of liberation," as J. Louis Martyn put it.<sup>6</sup> What this implies, however, is that God's liberating action might itself be every bit as overwhelming, ineffable, and terrifying as that from which we are liberated. Arthur A. Cohen's description of the attempts of contemporary theology to grapple with the horror of the Shoah is symmetrical to this inbreaking of God unto human salvation: "clearly thinking the *enormous event* is one thing, comprehending and expressing its meaning quite another."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as Cohen continues, "The thinker has no choice but to stand precariously within his own limitation when he tries to speak . . . about the nature of God."<sup>8</sup>

Is there hope, then, for a gesture that does not consist in "trying to speak?"

<sup>5</sup> Wordsworth, "Prospectus to *The Recluse*," quoted in Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 466 passim.

<sup>6</sup> J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible Series, vol. 33A (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 97.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur A. Cohen, *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Cohen, *Tremendum*, 84.

In what follows I will consider the works of Karl Barth, Yves Klein, and Lou Reed. They are each unrelated, and also unrelated to (at least in the direct sense of being descended from) the earlier Romantic gestures I have mentioned above. Barth offers the incomprehensibility of grace; Klein gives us color without form; Reed creates a rock and roll without structure: what they share in common, however, is their attempt to communicate in this *tertium quid*, without the strictures of positivity or apophysis. I classify such gestures, from Romanticism forward, as serious attempts to address the problem of naming the unspeakable. I will argue that each is a discrete and familial attempt to inhabit subjectivity in the face of the Sublime, the Abyss, the Void.

## Barth

In Barth's *The Epistle to the Romans* he makes the enigmatic statement that "only when grace is recognized to be incomprehensible is it grace."<sup>9</sup> In Barth's reading of Paul, the event of Jesus Christ and his resurrection is both historical and meta-historical; it is an event that exists within the world and beyond the world (and, therefore, beyond the world's language). As Barth explains:

The Resurrection is the revelation: the disclosing of Jesus as the Christ, the appearing of God, and the apprehending of God in Jesus. The Resurrection is the emergence of the necessity of giving glory to God: the reckoning with what is unknown and unobservable in Jesus, the recognition of Him as Paradox, Victor and Primal History. In the Resurrection the new world of the Holy Spirit touches the old world of the flesh, but touches it as a tangent touches a circle, that is, without touching it. And, precisely because it does not touch it, it touches it as a frontier—as the new world.<sup>10</sup>

In this claim, Barth sets out a precise limitation. Our ability to apprehend "the power of God" is suspended between the positive and the apophatic. For Barth, there is no home in the "real world" of common sense and certainty for the Christian community. Inhabiting solely its location in Christ, the Christian community experiences a "krisis" of the power

<sup>9</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskins (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 31.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

to name, and indeed of all earthly power.<sup>11</sup> (Barth retains the Greek word "krisis," without translation, in his text, thereby maintaining its layers of meaning, which include the concepts of separation, trial, and judgment.) "The assumption that Jesus is the Christ," Barth asserts, "is, in the strictest sense of the word, an assumption, void of any content that can be comprehended by us."<sup>12</sup>

Under "normal" circumstances, of course, recognition and comprehension operate in tandem, however Barth insists that the circumstances within any Christian community must always be far from normal: "The activity of the community is related to the Gospel only in so far as it is no more than a crater formed by the explosion of a shell and seeks to be no more than a void in which the Gospel reveals itself."<sup>13</sup>

Within the void of the crater, there is nothing to be "named," properly. The "presence" of the void is not a formal presence, and therefore does not offer itself positively. However, precisely to the degree the cratering can be comprehended as void, it can be "named" as such. The "absence" within the void is not an apophatic absence; it does not confound our language. Instead, what Barth seems to be suggesting here is the *tertium quid*, between positive naming and the refusal to name. For Barth, the crater in question is not (as commentators often fail to emphasize) simply the crater of a bombshell; rather, it is the crater ripped in our cosmos by the tangential intersection of the Holy Spirit with our reality. The absence that marks this crater is not merely a void in an earthly sense. Rather it is the Void: a "frontier," an alien "new world" unto its own, indecipherable in its presence, yet undeniably present in the event of Christ's Resurrection.

This Gospel, Barth claims, "sets a question-mark against all truths."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Barth asserts that there is no truth of the Gospel within us that we might claim as our own. "Therefore the power of God can be detected neither in the world of nature, nor in the souls of men," Barth insists.<sup>15</sup> To follow Christ, therefore, consists in recognizing the total lack of Gospel within us, recognizing this lack (and therefore the Gospel-shaped hole itself) as the Void, the infinite and terrifying frontier of otherness. As with the figure of Grünewald's John the Baptist, so esteemed by Barth,

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 36.

our only hope is in pointing, a gesture toward the Void, and in allowing the contours of that Void, as with the contours of a crater, to suggest for us the shape of grace not that we possess, but that possesses us. Here we recognize only the terrifying incomprehensibility of the Sublime, the Abyss, the Void, the lack of truth within us. In these circumstances, then, where recognition and comprehension are so radically decoupled, Barth is certainly demonstrating for us the limitations of language, in particular, to express the divine truth and grace of the Gospel.

## Klein

Klaus Ottman sums up succinctly the effect Yves Klein's work has had on the world of art. Indeed, as Ottman puts it, "to talk about Yves Klein one must talk about the wound caused by the effects of his art and ideas inflicted upon the French artistic tradition."<sup>16</sup> (Barth, it should be noted, also uses this language of wounding, as when he announces that the name of Jesus "marks the point where the unknown world *cuts* the known world."<sup>17</sup>) Kerry Brougher and Phillipe Vergne, the curators of a major Klein retrospective held at the Walker Art Center and Hirshorn Museum in 2010–11, tell us that

Klein's goal was no less than radically to reinvent what art could be in the postwar world. Through a diverse practice, which included painting, sculpture, performance, photography, music, architecture, and writing as well as plans for works in theater, dance, and cinema, the artist shifted the focus of art from the material object to the 'immaterial sensibility'; he levitated art above the weariness induced by the Second World War, resurrecting its avant-garde tendencies, injecting a new sense of spirituality, and opening doors for much to follow in the 1960s and beyond, including Pop, conceptual art, Minimalism, monochromatic painting, perceptual experimentation, and performance. Thus, Klein is important to consider not only for his own art and times, but also as a crucial figure in the evolution of contemporary art in general. The self-proclaimed 'painter of space,' Klein artistically and literally leapt into the void and there discovered the full potential of his vision. As Albert Camus so memorably

<sup>16</sup> Klaus Ottman, "Introduction," in Yves Klein, *Overcoming the Problematics of Art: The Writings of Yves Klein*, Klaus Ottman, trans. (Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, 2007), ix.

<sup>17</sup> Barth, *Romans*, 29, my emphasis.

wrote in the visitor book to Klein's 1958 'Void' exhibition at Iris Clert's gallery, '*Avec la vide, les pleins pouvoir*' [With the void, full powers], encapsulating succinctly both the artist's agenda and his legacy.<sup>18</sup>

As you can see, Klein was a master provocateur across the range of the visual arts. Pablo Picasso had a "blue period" (a body of work, produced between 1900 and 1904, which was preoccupied with meditations on twilight shades and blue-green hues), for example, and many artists have followed Picasso's lead into the monochromatic world. Few, however, have taken it to the radical lengths Klein did, for whom blue became a trademark (and trademarked) shade. Beginning in 1956 and continuing until his untimely death from a heart attack in the summer of 1962, Klein made the decision to paint exclusively in one shade of deep ultramarine blue. Critics have noted the "religiously transcendent language with which Klein spoke of the color"<sup>19</sup>—even going so far as to trademark his own personal shade, International Klein Blue (IKB), described as an "ordinary ultramarine with polymer binder to preserve its intensity."<sup>20</sup> Klein's audacity led him to exhibitions that featured repetitious canvases, all covered in the same nonrepresentational hue, and at least once to an exhibition in a major gallery consisting of a completely empty room. This exhibition, entitled "The Void" by Klein, as mentioned above, was at the Galerie Iris Clert in Paris.

Klein has been most often compared to another artist-provocateur of the early twentieth century, Marcel Duchamp. Though the comparison is apt, the mention of Duchamp does little to categorize Klein's work or motivations. Such gestures as repetitive, monochromatic canvases and the proffering of empty space as a content could be classified as "abstract art," of course, but Klein adamantly resisted this label, insisting that he was "not an abstract painter but, on the contrary, a figurative artist, and a realist."<sup>21</sup>

Klein pursued this "realism" by profoundly unorthodox means, which he elaborated upon in the several short philosophical manifestoes he

<sup>18</sup> Kerry Brougher and Philippe Vergne, "Acknowledgments," in Kerry Brougher, et al., *Yves Klein: With the Void, Full Powers* (Washington and Minneapolis: Hirshorn Museum and Walker Art Center, 2011), 13.

<sup>19</sup> Leo J. O'Donovan, "Blue Streak: Review of 'Yves Klein: With the Void, Full Powers,'" *Commonweal* (September 2010): 28.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

wrote concerning his work. In “My Position in the Battle between Line and Color,” for example, Klein unequivocally rejects the conventions of line and form in painting, dismissing them as a “prison window” of psychological limitation. “Lines concretize our mortality,” Klein writes. “Color, on the other hand, is the natural and human measure; it bathes in a cosmic sensibility. The sensibility of a painter is not encumbered by mysterious nooks and crannies. Contrary to what the line tends to lead us to believe . . . color is sensibility become matter—matter in its first, primal state.”<sup>22</sup> Klein’s monochromes were not abstract; rather, they were absolutely factual representations of reality. Klein was often asked, “what does this [painting] represent?” He responded, in the beginning, “This simply represents blue,” and eventually ceased responding altogether.<sup>23</sup>

Klein insisted throughout his career that such literal representations were neither jokes nor clichéd provocations. When he proffered a canvas painted entirely in blue (or, at other times, entirely in an orange hue, which he also referred to as “blue”), he was deadly serious. “When there are two colors in a painting,” he writes, “a struggle is engaged; the viewer may extract a refined pleasure from the permanent spectacle of this struggle between two colors in the psychological or emotional realm . . . but it is one that is no less morbid from a pure philosophical and human vantage point.”<sup>24</sup> This principled refusal to enter into the conflict of colors, to provide observers with the base pleasure of the struggle of strong against the weak, elevates Klein’s project above the aesthetic realm. His monochromes at their core are moral statements.<sup>25</sup>

Klein’s intention in all of these gestures—his monochromes, his later “flame paintings” (created with fire, as you would expect), and even with the empty gallery of “the Void”—is simply to present, and represent, reality itself. Through his gestures Klein awakens our senses to the space around us as a valued world; that is, a world of ordinary things made precious through extraordinary and invisible relationships: “The painter

<sup>22</sup> Klein, *Problematics of Art*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, much of Klein’s “The Monochrome Adventure” strikes this sort of idealistic and moral tone, as summed up by the following quotation: “The role of the painter in the society of the future will be to live ‘externally,’ to live *in* a collectivity in which he will refine, through his presence, the best, the purest, and the most delicate states of sensibility and its atmosphere so that these, quite simply, may be healthful, gay and good!” *Ibid.*, 149.

is the one who knows how to specify that real value, that sensibility that is born out of the belief and the knowledge that there is poetry if matter consists of concentrated energy, as science has concluded in its latest analysis."<sup>26</sup> Klein's faith in these invisible relationships is not a faith in positivist expression. Klein explicitly rejects the conventional tools of line, shape, form, and structure. For Klein, true art is alchemy, not photography. "The canvas beholds, in an instant, the 'indefinable,' which stands between a truly and poetically free person and itself."<sup>27</sup>

This insistence, that the Void actually functions as a representation, helps to elucidate this notion of the avant-garde gesture in light of Barth's epistemic challenge. Throughout each, ever increasingly serious, action, Klein managed to maintain and indeed heighten his reputation as a central and vital artist. In other words, far from excluding him from the artistic milieu, these gestures, though incomprehensible in terms of classification, were nonetheless recognized in their incomprehensibility. In short, these gestures were communicative and effective, for if they were not, Klein would not have long remained accepted as a serious artist. Far from being rejected, however, *Paris Match* once referred to Klein as "the greatest painter in the world."<sup>28</sup>

## Reed

In the thirty-five years since its initial release, it is unclear how best to understand Lou Reed's uncanny *Metal Machine Music*. The work consists of four LP album sides of meticulously recorded, stereo-separated, multiple-guitar feedback. The result is a screaming wall of undulating, shimmering noise. The tonal register is reminiscent of standing in the middle of a busy factory floor without earplugs. Long, siren-like drones swirl, punctuated by machine gun-like bursts of treble. The mixture grows insistent, whistling and humming, and then ebbs to a growling calm. It is a room full of radios all tuned to static, the volume pegged at eleven. It is the whine of the telephone at the end of the movie *Fail Safe*. In its uncompromising sonic landscape, *Metal Machine Music* is all of this and much, much more.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 146–47.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>28</sup> O'Donovan, "Blue Streak," 28.

Dismissed by some as a joke intended to get Reed out of a contract with his record company,<sup>29</sup> others have heralded the work as the inspiration and anticipation of punk rock and avant-noise groups like Sonic Youth, Hüsker Dü and Germany's Einsturzende Neubauten. David Fricke, writing the liner notes for the 2000 reissue of the album, explains that moreover

*Metal Machine Music* now enjoys a second life as Art. It is considered a pivotal work of ambient music and was recently used as the soundtrack for a museum installation in Germany. But *Metal Machine Music* was made with rock & roll tools, built from the base elements of electric teenage revolution: rage, joy, sabotage, righteousness. *Metal Machine Music* was not a new kind of rock; it was every kind of rock, boiled down to its molten essence.<sup>30</sup>

In this assertion that *Metal Machine Music* represents the "molten essence" of rock we hear an echo of Klein's assertion that his blue monochromatic paintings "simply represent blue." Like Klein's work, Reed's album is troubling to those who seek clear boundaries of style and genre; where Klein's detractors may have demanded he add a line or a dot of contrast to his monochromes to render them "acceptable," one also hears in the early critical reception of *Metal Machine Music* the condemnation of Reed for his refusal to offer any semblance of structure. "In its droning, shapeless indifference, *Metal Machine Music* is hopelessly old-fashioned," James Wolcott wrote in his 1975 *Rolling Stone* review of the work, giving the album no stars. "Lou Reed is disdainfully unveiling the black hole in his personal universe, but the question is, who's supposed to flinch?"<sup>31</sup>

I flinched, for one. I have made several forays into listening to the entire four side wall of sound that careens from the first second of the recording to the last, lingering, locked-groove instant of the thing. The process is always uncomfortable and very jarring—at least at first. I would not say it is possible to enjoy the piece, but I can say without reservation that I appreciate it. The sound is not simply white noise or

<sup>29</sup> Amanda Petrusich, "Interview with Lou Reed," Pitchfork Media Online, <http://pitchfork.com/features/interviews/6690-lou-reed>.

<sup>30</sup> David Fricke, "Most of You Won't Like This, and I Don't Blame You at All," liner notes to reissue of Lou Reed, *Metal Machine Music: An Electronic Musical Composition*, \*The Amine β Ring, compact disc, Buddha Records/BMG 74465 99752 2.

<sup>31</sup> James Wolcott, "Review of Lou Reed, *Metal Machine Music*" (original review appeared August 14, 1975), *Rolling Stone* online, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/metal-machine-music-19750814>.

feedback. It offers an overwhelming amount of information for the ears to take in, particularly when listening through headphones. With such over-stimulation, the mind begins to hear layers and patterns within the sound. Fricke agrees, "If you go back through the rest of *Metal Machine Music*, you start to hear a certain oblique cohesion, patterns and effects that surge in and out of the chaos: shrill pipe-organ-like chords; treble-y shivers of demented surf guitar."<sup>32</sup> I can attest to this phenomenon. There are, however, no pipe organs in the recording, and neither are there surf guitars. Instead, what the listener experiences through continued exposure to the sounds is an alchemy similar to the one Klein described. In the fray of the noise, Reed's world of sound becomes invisibly valued. As a gesture of "music," Reed's *Metal Machine Music* is, like Klein's canvasses, an event that is "indefinable," but nevertheless communicative.

Fricke writes that "to truly love *Metal Machine Music*, you have to learn to laugh with it." At times Reed may laugh, too, as he has in later interviews, but there is a gravitas to the work upon which Reed has always insisted. His own self-assessment, from the original liner notes of the album, strongly resonates with Klein's attestations about the moral nature of art: "passion—REALISM—realism was the key . . . this [record] is what I meant by 'real' rock, about 'real' things," Reed proclaims.

Even if you are clear in your expectations when you begin listening, however, *Metal Machine Music* is likely to thwart them and take you somewhere else entirely. Because it is a decisively non-"rock and roll" record from a quintessential "rock and roll" musician, the work remains an enigma. When critics approach it, they often must do so at the most basic, architectural level, giving description instead of interpretation: "The harsh feedback sounds are, of course, tones; some of them have a drone-like character, others swarm chaotically," writes Torbin Sanglid. "There is no structure, but there is a *texture* with the drones as temporary points of orientation between traditional opposites—the expressionistic scream and the meditative mantra."<sup>33</sup>

Despite the difficulties we may have in deciphering the message, Reed himself is adamant that the work is meant to be a gesture of communication, even in its incomprehensibility. "If *Metal Machine* is anything, it's energy and physicality, and you should be able to physically feel it,"

<sup>32</sup> Fricke, liner notes to *Metal Machine Music*.

<sup>33</sup> Torben Sangild, "Noise: Three Musical Gestures; Expressionist, Introvert and Minimal Noise," *JMM—The Journal of Music and Meaning* 2 (2004), printout, accessed at <http://www.musicandmeaning.net/issues/showArticle.php?artID=2.4>.

Reed explains, adding, “the myth is sort of better than the truth. The myth is that I made it to get out of a recording contract. OK, but the truth is I wouldn’t do that, because I wouldn’t want you to buy a record that I didn’t really like. . . . The truth is that I really, really, really loved it.”<sup>34</sup>

It’s clear that other listeners have loved it, too, despite its difficulty. Steve Albini and Lester Bangs have both written appreciative commentaries of the piece, with Bangs going so far (with tongue in cheek, one imagines) as to insist that it was “the greatest album ever made.” “If you ever thought feedback was the best thing that ever happened to the guitar,” Bangs writes, “well, Lou just got rid of the guitars.”<sup>35</sup>

When I think of that painting I saw in the museum—the tiny boat, the enormous wave engulfing them, pulling them down down into the Sublime, the Abyss, the Void—I have no doubt whatsoever that *Metal Machine Music* would be the soundtrack for that terrifying moment.

## To the Void

Starting with the Romantic poets, we have briefly attempted here to understand the “characters of the great Apocalypse,” the specters of the awe-filled silence that hold us in thrall as we confront the Void. Barth names the silence as the “frontier” where the event of Christ robs us of solidity, as a bombshell opens a crater and where “By faith we are what we are not.”<sup>36</sup> Klein insists upon the simplicity and moral shape of this emptiness, the Void that presents and represents the world in its truth, offering the world its value. Similarly, in the molten essence of *Metal Machine Music*, Reed also seeks to present and represent truth, to offer us “real” rock about “real” things. Reed makes the gesture as a wholly gratuitous act, calling the album “the only recorded work I know of seriously done as well as possible as a gift.”<sup>37</sup>

The avant-garde gesture, the *tertium quid*, is the gift of truth, of “real” things. But it is a gift only given on the deck of the ship, in the heart of the storm, as the waves are crashing. It marks a communicative action

<sup>34</sup> Lou Reed, “Interview with Lou Reed,” Amanda Petrusich, Pitchfork Media Online, <http://pitchfork.com/features/interviews/6690-lou-reed>.

<sup>35</sup> Lester Bangs, “The Greatest Album Ever Made,” *Creem* (March 1976), reprinted with permission by Matt Carmichael at <http://www.rocknroll.net/loureed/articles/mmmbangs.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Barth, *Romans*, 149.

<sup>37</sup> Reed, liner notes to *Metal Machine Music*.

taken in desperation of being understood, in the face of the radical limitations of language. To return to Wordsworth's poem, with which we began this reflection, the gesture functions "as if it had a voice," despite (or indeed because of) the impossibility of giving words to the "real" things with which it is consumed—the Abyss, the Sublime, the Void.

As such, the avant-garde gesture offers a third possibility, suspended beyond the apophatic gesture of the negative theologian and the positivity of the scientist. Though it may be misunderstood as an empty refusal to communicate, the avant-garde gesture is instead simply empty communication. Like Grünewald's John the Baptist, the gesture names all that words cannot. It points to the Void, and, in pointing, invokes a nameless name for the Beauty of that terrifying frontier. Echoing Reed, it is the pure molten essence of "energy and physicality," confronting the recipient in the vastness of the wave and the vacuousness of the crater, in the blue that is simply blue itself, beyond language but not beyond communication.