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Chapter 7

Unwritten Theology. Notes Towards a Natural Theology of Music

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Prelude

This chapter engages with Tillich's theology of culture and George Steiner's powerfully suggestive characterisation of music as 'unwritten theology' to suggest ways in which the possibility of a natural theology of music might be theorised.¹

Steiner's claim exposes a central dilemma for work that seeks to explore the ways in which music relates to transcendence. On the one hand, for those such as Jeremy Begbie, 'music can serve to enrich and advance theology' in its ongoing quest, in his words, 'to extend our wisdom about God, God's relation to us, and to the world at large'.² Music, in this case, serves as an aid to reflection, further equipping the theologian in her inescapably writerly enterprise. On the other hand, as Frank Burch Brown suggests: what if the theologian of art allows that art not only assist theology but further 'reshape, somehow, the image and sound, the look and feel, of the substance of faith'?³ For such an approach, music itself becomes theology and hence the theologian's task is radically transformed. No longer able to make use of music to enrich her writing, the theologian is thus displaced and the linguistic hegemony of *theology* is challenged in favour of a 'theology without writing'.

¹ George Steiner, *Real Presences. Is There Anything in What We Say?* (Chicago, 1989), p. 218.

² Jeremy S. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 3.

³ Frank Burch Brown, 'Aesthetics and the Arts in Relation to Natural Theology', in Russell Re Manning (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 535.

This chapter explores the possibilities for theorising a ‘theology after writing’ capable of ‘reshaping, somehow’ not simply the form but also the substance of faith by drawing on resources from Paul Tillich’s cultural-theological analyses of what he characterises as art with ‘religious style, but non-religious content’, as well as Jean-Luc Marion’s notion of iconic distance (particularly as developed by James Herbert). Taking seriously the challenge of thinking of music as ‘un-writing theology’, the chapter suggests that a framework of a natural theology of music might provide the necessary openness to discovery that Steiner’s description requires.

Towards A Natural Theology of Culture

In his 1989 work *Real Presences*, subtitled *Is there anything in what we say?*, George Steiner recognises the centrality of the question of the meaning of music to his general argument against the cultural *misère* of what he calls ‘the secondary city’. Such a situation is characterised by Steiner as a culture without criticism; dominated by ‘the secondary and the parasitic’ and ignorant of hermeneutics as ‘the enactment of answerable understanding, of active apprehension’.⁴ In awe to the idolatry of the informational, such a culture elevates what Steiner bitingly characterises as the ‘academic-journalistic’ talk about the aesthetic that mistakes pragmatic and anonymous ‘philology’ for ‘the life of the creative imagination’.⁵ By contrast, the burden of Steiner’s work is to argue for, or perhaps better to show forth, the possibility of another, ‘primary’ city, in which hermeneutics is restored to its status as, in effect, a continuation or repetition of the art that it interprets. Such interpretation, then, is no longer limited to the passive cataloguing of cultural productions characteristic of so much ‘art history’ but rather aims to pass judgements of aesthetic quality. At the same time, Steiner rails against a

⁴ Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 7.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

(perhaps distorted, or at least exaggerated) view of deconstruction as a similar avoidance of any normative stance towards artworks. For Steiner, both the catalogue compiler and the deconstructionist abdicate the critic's responsibility – an ethical and spiritual responsibility – to the artwork's truth, its meaning. This, Steiner acknowledges, entails a wager; a wager on meaning, which is itself a wager on the passage from meaning to meaningfulness. Yet such a wager is, for Steiner, a necessary one and unavoidably a theological one:

...the wager on the meaning of meaning, on the potential of insight, when we come face to face with the text and work of art or music, which is to say when we encounter the *other* in its condition of freedom, is a wager on transcendence.⁶

In rejecting the Feuerbachian-Nietzschean diagnosis of the God who 'clings to our culture' as 'a phantom of grammar, a fossil embedded in the childhood of rational speech', Steiner unambiguously declares his thesis:

...that any coherent understanding of what language is and how language performs, that any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling, is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God's presence. I will put forward the argument that the experience of aesthetic meaning in particular, that of literature, of the arts, of musical form, infers the necessary possibility of this 'real presence'.⁷

⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

Strikingly, Steiner's argument, whilst it stands against the empiricising tendencies said to characterise modern scientific forms of natural theology is nonetheless itself clearly a sort of natural theology.⁸ It is, as it were, a 'cultural-natural theology' that, in Graham Ward's words, 'locates the theological postulate...in the ordinariness of human communication and the nature of man himself'.⁹ Ward locates Steiner's argument with reference to David Tracey and Paul Ricoeur, but surely a better parallel can be drawn to Paul Tillich's project of a theonomous theology of culture (or cultural theology), in which the meaning of culture is identified with its religious dimension of depth.¹⁰ Just as for Steiner, so for Tillich, the cultural and the theological effectively coincide. Drawing an explicit contrast between nature and culture Tillich, in an unpublished 1926 essay, defines culture in terms of the unconditional demand of meaning:

Culture is not simply the process of life, but obligation, an unconditional obligation. For behind it is the meaning-bearing idea of truth and society. Its realisation is culture, as the cultured forms and not as the unmediated life-process. It is not nature, but a demand placed upon nature.¹¹

Hence, for Tillich, the cultural theologian, as much as Steiner's critic, must recognise her own participation within culture and the responsibility that this places on her as

⁸ Russell Re Manning (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* (Oxford, 2013).

⁹ Graham Ward, 'Review Article. George Steiner's *Real Presences*', *Journal of Literature and Theology*, 4/2 (1990): p. 237.

¹⁰ Russell Re Manning, 'Tillich's Theology of Art', in Russell Re Manning (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 157-161.

¹¹ Paul Tillich, 'Das Wesen der Bildung und das Bildungsideal [1926]' in Erdmann Sturm (ed.), *Ergänzungs- und Nachlassbände zu den Gesammelten Werken von Paul Tillich*, vol. 11, *Religion, Kultur, Gesellschaft. Unveröffentlichte Texte aus der deutschen Zeit (1908-1933). Zweiter Teil* (Berlin, 1999), p. 30. My translation.

‘participat[ing] in the positing of the objects [she] seeks to know’.¹² Such a natural theology of culture is, for Tillich, not only ‘re-creative’ but also ‘co-creative, or productive’.¹³

Interestingly, both seem to give the central role of theological discernment not to the artists themselves but rather to the theorist – the critic or the theologian of culture. In a sense, this is unsurprising: both are after all primarily ‘secondary’, in that they are the interpreters and not the producers of culture. And yet, of course, both aim to blur the lines between producer and interpreter, Steiner with his ideal of the primary city and Tillich with his ideal of the kairoic theonomy. Here, then, the non-aesthetic discourse of a natural theology of culture seeks to mimic the culture that it seeks to re-present. Hence the importance for both Steiner and Tillich of the ethical and spiritual disposition of the cultural theorist – not, of course, according to the bourgeois mores and creedal pieties of established or positive ethics or religion, but in response to what Steiner calls ‘the presence of a realness, of a ‘substantiation’ (the theological reach of this word is obvious) within language and form’ or to what Tillich designates as ‘the experience of the unconditioned’ as ‘an actuality of meaning that convulses everything and builds everything anew’.¹⁴

Here I suggest it may be helpful to bring a third (and perhaps surprising) voice into this attempt to theorise a natural theology of culture: Jean-Luc Marion. In his phenomenology of givenness, of the Heideggerian ‘*es gibt*’, Marion, in contradistinction to Derrida, defends a philosophy of revelation that seeks to recognise the saturation of the present by the infinite.¹⁵ For Marion, theological presence is iconic when the finite cultural form resists the temptation

¹² Paul Tillich, *The System of the Sciences. According to Objects and Methods*, trans. Paul Wiebe (East Brunswick, NJ, 1981), p. 146.

¹³ Ibid., p. 146.

¹⁴ Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 4 and Victor Nuovo, *Visionary Science. A Translation of Tillich's "On the Idea of a Theology of Culture" with Interpretive Essay* (Detroit, 1987), pp. 24-5.

¹⁵ Jean-Luc Marion, ‘The Final Appeal of the Subject’ in John D. Caputo (ed.), *The Religious* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 131-144.

to present itself as sufficient to its representation and instead enacts in its presenting its distance from that which it represents. Referring to Christ's iconicity, Marion writes that 'God withdraws in the distance, unthinkable, unconditioned, and therefore infinitely closer'.¹⁶ In contrast to the idol – the attempt to collapse the distance between God and the object – Marion writes of the icon's quality that 'it reveals and conceals that upon which it rests: the separation in it between the divine and its face. Visibility of the invisible, a visibility where the invisible gives itself to be seen as such, the icon reinforces the one through the other....The icon [offers] a sort of negative theophany: the figure remains authentically insurpassable (norm, self-reference) only in that it opens in its depth upon an invisibility whose distance it does not abolish but reveals'.¹⁷

Whilst Marion famously restricts such iconic exposure to the *achieropoietic* icon of Christ (a revelation repeated in the Eucharist), James Herbert has recently applied Marion's notion of iconic distance to suggest what he calls a 'theology of art' that explores various cultural manifestations by venturing into 'the strange expanse between God and humanity [once] rid of the metaphysical miasma of presupposed Being and non-Being'.¹⁸ In other words, Herbert aims to derive from Marion's concept of iconic distance a tool to enable him to explore the presence of theological concerns in works of art that have no explicitly religious content and to make sense of the surprising ways in which art with explicit religious content can subvert that content. The key is interpretation: 'the divine emerges more often as the subject of sight and sound than as their object'.¹⁹ Here once more we find a form of a natural theology of culture. Marion's concept of iconic distance, as much as Steiner's notion of real presence and

¹⁶ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and the Distance. Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York, 2001), p. 215.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

¹⁸ James Herbert, *Our Distance from God. Studies of the Divine and the Mundane in Western Art and Music* (Berkley, CA, 2008), p. 7.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

Tillich's of ultimate concern enable the discernment in culture of what we might call 'non-religious' or 'non-heteronomous' natural revelation and with that the attempt to respond appropriately in the form of a cultural theology.

One final consideration is required before turning explicitly to music and the potential for a natural theology of music. The framework that I am developing here of a cultural theology not only invites the theologian to engage with the wager of transcendence in cultural productions (and thus frees theology from a confinement to the religious), it also requires that same theologian *as theologian of culture* be a participatory cultural critic, to be a member of Steiner's primary city. As such, any theology of music must be so much more than simply a commentary upon the repetitions or analogues in musical form of privileged primarily linguistic theology. A theology of art as a *theology* remains words about God, in the same way that Steiner's art criticism remains a written or spoken response to a work of art and does not take the form of art itself. And yet, as co-creative with the art to which it responds, it must equally work against itself to show forth the theological meaning of the artwork in its very autonomous particularity. In short, for the theologian of culture, what is at stake in her theological engagement with culture is as much the nature of theology itself as the religious meaning of culture; cultural theology is not just theology applied to culture, but theology transformed by culture. Potentially even a cultural theology might be a theology without *logos*, a theology unwritten by the real presence of the transcendence that gives iconic culture its ultimate concern.

Music as Unwritten Theology

In the second section of this chapter, I want to sketch out the contours of a natural theology of music in light of the above theoretical considerations and George Steiner's explicit and suggestive comments about the centrality of music to his argument and its potential to 'un-write' creedal/religious theology.

Steiner writes that:

The question of whether anything meaningful can be *said* (or written) about the nature and sense of music lies at the heart of this essay....More than any other act of intelligibility and executive form, music entails differentiations between that which can be understood, this is to say, paraphrased, and that which can be thought and lived in categories which are, rigorously considered, transcendent to such understanding....The truths, the necessities of ordered feeling in the musical experience are not irrationally; but they are irreducible to reason or pragmatic reckoning.²⁰

This much may be familiar and mainstream to much philosophy of music (especially that influenced by the Romantic tradition), but in what follows next Steiner gives this affirmation of the irreducibility of music to spoken or written language a new twist that propels him beyond the Romantic elevation of the autonomy of pure or absolute music and towards a natural theology of music. He continues:

This irreducibility is the spring of my argument. It may well be that man is man, and that man 'borders on' limitations of a peculiar and open 'otherness', because he can produce and be possessed by music.²¹

²⁰ Steiner, *Real Presences*, pp. 18-19.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Steiner returns to this suggestion as he concludes his essay. He quotes Leibniz that ‘music is a secret arithmetic of the soul unknowing of the fact that it is counting’ and explains:

This is why music has been at the centre of my argument throughout. What every human being whom music moves, to whom it is a life-giving agency, can say of it is platitudinous. Music means. It is brimful with meanings which will not translate into logical structures or verbal expression.²²

But this is no mere emotivism of the power of music to move the heart, it is the archetypal instance of culture as theology:

Music makes utterly substantive what I have sought to suggest of the real presence in meaning where that presence cannot be analytically shown or paraphrased....Music has celebrated the mystery of intuitions of transcendence from the songs of Orpheus, counter-creative to death, to the *Missa Solemnis*, from Schubert’s late piano sonatas to Schoenberg’s *Moses and Aron* and Messiaen’s *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*. Countless times, this celebration has had manifest relations to religion. But the core-relation far exceeds any specific religious motive or occasion. In ways so obvious as to make any statement a tired cliché, yet of an undefinable and tremendous nature, music puts our being as men and women in touch with that which transcends the sayable, which outstrips the analysable....The meanings of the meaning of music transcend. It has long been, it continues to be, the unwritten theology of those who lack or reject any formal creed.²³

²² Ibid., p. 217.

²³ Ibid., p. 218.

Far from illustrating or serving religion, as a positivist theological analysis of the religious meaning of music might contend, here music comes before religion; it is the unwritten theology that first articulates the real presence of the transcendence to humanity. Steiner, in effect, reverses the usual relation between religion and music, in which music more or less inadequately expresses religious truths as a vehicle for a primarily religious meaning. Instead, for Steiner, it is religion that expresses the theological truth of music. As he puts it, 'for many human beings, religion has been the music which they believe in'.²⁴ Here, then, is a clear example of Frank Burch Brown's suggestion that art can not only assist religion in re-expressing what it already knows, but further can 'reshape, somehow, the image and sound, the look and feel, of the substance of faith'.²⁵

Just as for Tillich, in his famous affirmation that 'it is not an exaggeration to ascribe more of the quality of sacredness to a still-life by Cézanne or a tree by van Gogh than to a picture of Jesus by Uhde', so for Steiner the religious meaning of culture stands apart from a primary relation to explicitly religious content.²⁶ In the case of music this is radically so, given the difficulties inherent in defining the idea of the content of music, religious or otherwise. It is perhaps strange that Tillich wrote so very little about music in his theology of culture, given the obvious overlap of Steiner's argument to Tillich's analysis of the significance for the theology of culture of the depth dimension or import (*Gehalt*) of culture that comes to expression in specific forms and contents, sometimes explicitly religious, sometimes not. For Tillich, the greater the predominance of import over content, the clearer the theological meaning of a cultural production. Arguably it is with music, the cultural form least

²⁴ Ibid., p. 218.

²⁵ Brown, 'Aesthetics', p. 535.

²⁶ Paul Tillich, *What is Religion?* ed. James Luther Adams (New York, 1969), pp. 88-89.

circumscribed by content, that such a cultural-theological expressiveness can be most clearly manifest. Perhaps, however, Tillich's theology of culture remains too wedded to the primacy of the determinate, even as he rails against the religious positivism characteristic of his age. After all, Tillich's theology is, in essence, symbolic; and symbols whilst they breakthrough to that in which they participate, nonetheless remain tied to some form of content, even when that content evacuates itself in favour of import.²⁷ Perhaps, then, Tillich cannot quite fully 'un-write' his theology, even as he re-writes it as a theology of culture, such that he cannot produce a co-creative natural theology of music?

In conclusion, I refer once again to Marion's notion of iconic distance as a way, perhaps, of shaking the foundations of Tillich's symbolism to enable a cultural theological response to Steiner's invitation to theorise music as unwritten theology. In this I aim to understand Steiner's characterisation of music as unwritten theology not as a description of some kind of pre-theological character to music that needs to be 'fleshed out' as it were with the verbal and written resources of *logos*, but as 'a logic of sense other than that of reason' that is 'the truest name we have for the logic at work in the springs of being that generate vital forms'.²⁸ Music as unwritten theology is not simply a theology-in-waiting, but it is a theology *without* writing. But, of course, a theology without writing is a paradox in which the tension between the unwritten and the *logos* threatens to collapse into the pole of inarticulate silent emoting on the one hand and over-particular analysis on the other. Steiner recognises this when he writes:

²⁷ Russell Re Manning, *Theology at the End of Culture* (Leuven, 2005).

²⁸ Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 218.

Music is at once cerebral in the highest degree – I repeat that the energies and form-relations in the playing of a quartet, in the interactions of voice and instrument are among the most complex events known to man – and it is at the same time somatic, carnal and a searching out of resonances in our bodies at deeper levels of will or consciousness. These are banalities.²⁹

Herbert's use of iconic distance can be helpful here. For Marion, in Herbert's words, 'the icon, rather than representing an essence, represents a relation'.³⁰ The icon's insistence on distance in effect suspends it between the visible and the invisible, the figured and the unfigurable. This, then, is an image of the unwritten theology of music – between import and content, between emotive silence and rational logic – whose meaning is precisely to mean. According to such a natural theology of music, music does not reveal particular religious content; but neither does it show forth nothing – it does not simply speak itself. Rather music as unwritten theology is the possibility of non-heteronomous revelation of the real presence of transcendence, protected against idolatrous distortion by its incorporation of iconic distance. It is, to invoke another of Tillich's notions, the *Grundoffenbarung*, or the foundational revelation, by which the birth of religion itself is enabled. Tillich writes:

The moment of the breakthrough of *Grundoffenbarung* is altogether indifferent with regard to its content. Man has no knowledge, no content to show. The divine is the ground and the abyss of meaning, the beginning and the end of every possible content....This is the hour of the birth of religion in every man.³¹

²⁹ Ibid., p. 217.

³⁰ Herbert, *Distance*, p. 7.

³¹ Paul Tillich, 'Rechtfertigung und Zweifel [1924]' in Renate Albrecht (ed.), *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 8, *Offenbarung und Glaube. Schriften zur Theologie II* (Stuttgart, 1970), p. 92. My translation.

For Tillich, *Grundoffenbarung* ‘reveals the presence of God prior to any knowledge of God’; it is perhaps, the closest Tillich gets to an unwritten theology, even if for Tillich it is more closely associated not with music, but with the existential howl of *Angst*.³² Steiner’s, perhaps, is a more melodious *Grundoffenbarung* and it is with his words of a co-creative critical theology of music that I conclude:

Music and the metaphysical, in the root sense of that term, music and religious feeling, have been virtually inseparable. It is in and through music that we are more immediately in the presence of the logically, of the verbally inexpressible but wholly palpable energy in being that communicates to our senses and to our reflection of what little we can grasp of the naked wonder of life. I take music to be the naming of the naming of life.³³

³² Werner Schüßler, ‘Where Does Religion Come From? Paul Tillich’s Concept of *Grundoffenbarung*’ in Michel Despland, Jean-Claude Petit and Jean Richard (eds.), *Religion et Culture* (Laval, 1987), p. 161.

³³ Steiner, *Real Presences*, pp. 216-17.

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