

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR AND BERNARD LONERGAN ON REMEMBERING TRADITION: A PROBLEM OF TIME

Introduction

Tradition is a type of remembering. Though remembering by no means comprehends Christianity in its entirety, nor Tradition, remembering is fundamental to both. Christians are charged with proclaiming the death and resurrection of the Lord until he comes again. It is a profession of a past as well as a present – indeed a future. The last thing a Christian wants to do is forget. So *memory* is the first analogy that surfaces for understanding the problem and potential of Tradition. Memory is the first step on the way to what I argue today: remembering is symphonic, that is, a fundamentally aesthetic act, and symphonic remembering allows us to understand Tradition in a way that makes it possible, consistent, and anti-nostalgic.¹

To make my case – which takes a heuristic form rather than that of a detailed argument – I seek several resources within and without theology. I refer to elements of contemporary psychology, music theory, and the work of Maurice Blondel. Central to my main argument is the union of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Bernard Lonergan, especially when asking questions about memory and Christ. I will gesture toward the other elements, but focus my energies on Blondel, von Balthasar and Lonergan. As a sort of prefix for this audience in particular, please know that my paper does not consider which

¹ In her 2012 dissertation, Jennifer Newsome Martin describes Hans Urs von Balthasar's thought as "non-nostalgic." See "Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Press of Speculative Russian Religious Philosophy" (dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2012), 4, 20. This line of thought has been further developed in the upcoming published version as "anti-nostalgic." See *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Critical Appropriation of Russian Religious Thought*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015).

theologian is “better” or even how the two compare at all. Both of them are helping me to ask and to respond to a question.

I. A Way Into the Problem

It is by no means possible to review every philosophical problem with respect to Tradition, so I will focus on one of the most important: how to understand history and truth together if indeed they can be. This dilemma is relatively new to theology, but old enough to have been addressed with a serious solution one hundred years ago. So it is that Maurice Blondel, whose philosophical writings spanned the turn into the 20th century, is able introduce us to this specific problem, lead us beyond it, and bring us to aesthetic or symphonic remembering.

When Blondel was writing his essay “History and Dogma” in 1902, there was an intense debate in the Catholic Church over the historical-critical method of interpreting the Bible.² “History and Dogma” is a work on the nature of history written in the midst of a serious confrontation with it, and it is concerned with the role of history and with its boundaries in the study of Scripture.³ Blondel’s argument is framed according to two “sides” of a specific, biblical problem. The question is this: how is the Bible true when it is also historical? One side of the conflict stresses truth apart from history (“extrinsicism”);⁴ the other stresses history apart from truth (“historicism”).⁵ Both ends of the debate are insufficient to the problem they address, and Blondel asks whether there

² Maurice Blondel, “History and Dogma,” *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, trans. Alexander Dru and Illyd Trethowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 219-290.

³ See “Prefatory Note to History and Dogma” in *Letter & History and Dogma*, 211-217.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 226-231.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 231-264.

may be any reconciliation or resolution to a crisis that seems to sunder the very possibility of faith.⁶

Because human action is metaphysical as well as historical for Blondel, history plays a real but relative role in understanding it. The inverse is also true, though not in an identical way: metaphysics plays a real but relative role in understanding history. Within his variegated understanding of the real – and not otherwise – Blondel posits Tradition as the mediation between history and dogma. This allows Blondel to preserve the relative independence of both truth and history, and to relate them to one another.⁷ It also means that Tradition is neither "nowhere" nor "somewhere" specific. Tradition is really only known through what it mediates: history and truth. In other words, Blondel imagines Tradition as a *lived* reality, and as it lives with a transcendent as well as earthly life. Here Blondel is making a distinction between existential tradition and scientific history, as Lonergan does in *Method*.⁸

Blondel describes Tradition as something other than “paper memory” (what could or will be written),⁹ and as something other than “the transmission of a spoken word or of a custom.”¹⁰ Here Blondel side-steps arguments over *what* instruments hand on Tradition and even *what* Tradition hands on: there is an argument of an entirely different nature here. “Tradition’s powers of conservation,” writes Blondel, “are equaled by its powers of conquest: that it discovers and formulates truths on which the past lived.”¹¹ Indeed, Tradition constantly looks forward to the future God intends. So we might say that

⁶ Ibid., 225.

⁷ Blondel, “History and Dogma,” 264-265.

⁸ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 182.

⁹ Blondel, “History and Dogma,” 266.

¹⁰ Ibid., 267.

¹¹ Ibid., 267

Tradition fundamentally spans not only time, but also time as it is oriented to and animated by eternity.

For Blondel, Tradition is something much more like the Body of the Church as it persists through history in “the unity of a consciousness which is divinely assisted.”¹² This makes Tradition at once historical, communal, and – most importantly – the work of the Spirit as well as human beings. “Something in the Church escapes scientific examination,” says Blondel, “and it is the Church which, without rejecting or neglecting the contributions of exegesis and of history, nevertheless controls them, because in the very tradition which constitutes her, she possesses another means of knowing her author, of participating in his life, of linking facts to dogma, and of justifying both the capital and the interest of her teaching.”¹³

The understanding of Tradition that Blondel offers, while familiar to us through its hidden influence on others,¹⁴ indeed on Vatican II,¹⁵ is critical in its achievements. Here is a grasp of Tradition that manages to be stubbornly historical without reducing itself to historical acts, that acknowledges communal awareness without hypostatizing the Church, that preserves the full dignity of revelation without divesting it of the Incarnation. Tradition is the active mediation of history and truth. This is what we need Blondel’s help to see, something he uniquely contributes, something we do not see at present.

II. Tradition As (Communal) Memory

¹² Blondel, “History and Dogma,” 268.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 268-269

¹⁴ See “Introduction” in *Letter & History and Dogma*, 13.

¹⁵ Again indirectly in his influence on French theologians. See “Introduction,” 82.

Brief transition through psychology.¹⁶

III. Memory as Symphonic

Memory is a way of appropriating the present through the past, and it is important that we never lose sight of either. The past and the present are each patterned according to the other in remembering, though there is a certain primacy is offered to the past. This dual patterning of past and present is the shape of memory's particular form of mediation. What I want to do now is describe that mediation in some detail, particularly because the past does not come to us as whole cloth and because the past is actively arranged and rearranged as we remember it. This provides us with an analogy for the communal remembering of Tradition. I'll focus on this analogy for the time I have left, while acknowledging that I haven't treated every possible outcome.

Because memory involves the active arrangement of more than one element of the past and present together, phenomenologically multiplying the senses of time that we participate in *as* we remember, a helpful way to grasp memory is through the aesthetic.¹⁷ That is to say, it is helpful to understand memory under the aspect of beauty. Remembering is especially suited to the aesthetic. I will take a couple of minutes to explain why, which will move us into symphonic remembering.

¹⁶ I commented on this at CTSA 2015, and will be working it into an article.

¹⁷ Here I mean to draw upon philosophers like Jean-Louis Chrétien, Paul Ricoeur, and (to a lesser degree) Martin Heidegger. See Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, trans. Andrew Brown (London: Routledge, 2013); Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Part 3*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008).

For von Balthasar, the aesthetic is partially described in classical-medieval terms: beauty has integrity, proportion, and *claritas* (brightness).¹⁸ Especially important to this understanding is how beauty assembles parts into a whole; beauty relates proportions to one another in such a way that this whole has integrity, and beauty arrests our attention when it “shines forth” from an object. Von Balthasar’s word for beauty’s integral interrelating – for the “whole,” the unity, that we see – is *form* (*Gestalt*). He uses the word in both a Thomistic and modern sense. What we need to understand of his modern appropriation is that beauty elicits our response with a certain emotional-psychological intensity. Von Balthasar says our response to beauty is ecstatic, drawing forth everything in us. So, for von Balthasar, *Gestalt* is both intelligibly grasped and – for lack of a better word - emotionally grasped. I mean something like Jonathan Heaps’s work in what he calls “body-feeling.”¹⁹

What takes place in the apprehension of beauty involves both the earlier levels in Lonergan’s cognitional-intentional theory and the later ones: this is an experience and a judgment, and for von Balthasar this kind of interplay resembles (but is not yet) love.²⁰ It is similar to when Lonergan describes the unity of proportionate being as potential, formal, and actual.²¹ The unity of being is all three manners at once, distinguishable but not separable. Our response to beauty highlights how human knowing is a unity in much

¹⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics vol. I: Seeing the Form*, [= *GL I*], 2nd ed., trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 19-20.

¹⁹ Jonathan Heaps, “Insight is a Body-Feeling: Experiencing Our Understanding,” presentation, West Coast Methods Institute, April 2015.

²⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: A Theological Logical Theory vol. I: The Truth of the World* [= *TL I*], trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 77-78.

²¹ Bernard Lonergan, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan vol. 3: Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick Crowe and Robert Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 533.

the same way; that is, more than one operation, distinguishable yet whole.²² Beauty elicits the response of the very dynamism of knowing; it is a sort of assembling of self in response to the beautiful. This is why it is important to remember that Lonergan's "levels" of cognitive-intentionality are beautiful. It is not a mere re-affirmation of the true. Under the sign of beauty, we grasp the proportionate relations among the levels, and are pressed to acknowledge the levels work simultaneously – simultaneous in the sense of always already related and drawn toward one another. In other words, I think beauty gestures toward an aspect of Lonergan's thought that has not yet surfaced in fullness in scholarship, and Father Doran's work has already begun this effort.²³

This has not been a tangent. It is important to note that, for von Balthasar, "sight" is not meant literally, as if the truth were "out there now." Robert Doran has already done the work of transliterating von Balthasar's understanding of "sight" into Lonergan's terms. For von Balthasar, seeing the form carries with it all of the senses I have described above, including the cognitive. If beauty is as he says, then remembering is aesthetic because it, too, is the drawing-together of many parts into an apprehended unity. Whether we are discussing the memory of the individual or the memory of Tradition, we are also discussing an aesthetic "act."

²² Balthasar, *GL I*, 26-27.

²³ Robert M. Doran, *The Trinity in History: A Theology of the Divine Missions, Volume I: Missions and Processions* (Lonergan Studies), Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012. "...wherever there has been or is or will be human attentiveness, intelligence, rationality, and moral responsibility pursuing the transcendental objectives of the intelligible, the true and the real, with these pursuits encased, as it were, in a tidal movement that contains aesthetic and dramatic intentions of the transcendental objective of the beautiful, there has been the offer of the gift of God's love, that is, the gift of the Holy Spirit, as the inchoate supernatural fulfillment of a natural desire for union with God, and as a pledge of the beatific knowing and loving that is our supernatural destiny. The gift of the Holy Spirit is thus universal." (77).

I call the act of remembering *symphonic* because that is von Balthasar's term for genuine pluralism,²⁴ and in memory we have an analogous pluralism of time, theme, and event. Remembering is also symphonic because music is particularly apt for understanding several aspects of memory. In music, we have a present-tense that both recollects the past and even drives toward the future: the notes are only heard now, and yet heard in succession together, and both the meter and musical phrases draw us into anticipating what arrives next. Memory is always a remembering in the present, and yet not with mere nostalgia. Or we might say that nostalgia is an incomplete version of remembering. We recall the past in order to understand the present, even the re-minding of the present, and it is through the patterns of recollected experience that we make decisions in the present for the future.

In the case of Tradition – and, ultimately, human knowing – remembering's unity does not come from itself. To be more precise, human knowing presupposes a perfect knower, God, in order to be itself, as Lonergan shows us. Tradition's mediation of history and truth is more radically without a unity without God. The form of Christ is the form of Tradition, and not otherwise. We are to “see” Christ, and he is the fullest measure of Tradition's authenticity. This is what makes my work here a *theological* aesthetic.

So it is that a theological aesthetic is meant to do legitimate theological work, and to offer insights to theology that are not as readily available elsewhere. This kind of work requires careful analogical thinking, which is why so much of theological aesthetics seems reducible to comparisons between art and religion. I will not be doing that here. In the spirit of von Balthasar and Lonergan, I want to explore what music can show us about

²⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Truth is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987).

our complex relationship to time, to memory, and indeed to tradition. I'll play a few songs, and after each one, I will offer some speculation. It is important to note, for a brief moment, that I have to move from music to theology. This is analogical thinking.

Theology is not *in* music, but is perceivable through it. I offer this claim in contradistinction to some current scholarship. To see the beauty of a tree is indeed to know something of God, but my act of describing that sight in theology cannot be found in the tree. Theology bears a necessary primacy of the Word.

Now then. We begin with the second movement of Beethoven's seventh symphony. To remind us all, Beethoven was an 18th century composer, and represents a period of transition from Classical to Romantic music. We will listen to the beginning, and with this song I ask you to listen for how the song repeats, and how it changes.

[Beethoven]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uOxOgm5jQ4>

When we listen to music, we are able to hear more than one note at once. We are able to organize the sounds; or rather, the sounds are already organized, patterned, timed. The more I learn about how to listen to music, the more that I can hear. In Beethoven's seventh, we can hear consistent repetition fairly simply. The same instruments play the same melody, and at first what varies is simply intensity. Then Beethoven adds more strings, but they all run through the same melody. They speak the melody over one another. The significant change occurs when Beethoven adds different instruments (mostly wind): these new instruments take over the repeated phrase, leaving the strings to play with different notes in the same key. So we now have two musical phrases that speak to one another.

What if remembering Christ were something like this? Tradition recalls a clear, repeated theme. In history, the intensity of the theme varies, and so do the significant actors. In fact, we hear multiple elements of Christ at the same time, and these change. (Simply play the song again: more than one note hitting the ear at once.) Still the theme plays: and it is singular only as a proportionate integrity. Tradition, then, bears consistency that is multiple as well as singular; we might say catholic and one. The Church is always doing the remembering, but who does the active remembering may shift. Saint Lawrence, a deacon, loves the poor of Rome; with St. Francis, someone who isn't a priest is seen with that same radical love.

A word on the multiplicity of notes: in human memory and the memory of tradition, we reach backward into more than one moment as we remember. I look back at a moment in childhood knowing who I am now, and who I became later before now. In other words, memory isn't *simple*. Since Tradition's primary object is Christ, we have a

slightly different phenomenon – there is a way the death and resurrection are always recalled – but it is also possible to see that the mystery can be appropriated in more than one way at the same time.

In music, phrases can be borrowed and placed into different songs. The results are different interpretations of an identical set of notes. Here we have Sufjan Stevens’s “Concerning the UFO Sighting Near Highland, Illinois,” followed by Jaymes Young’s “Habits of My Heart.”

Explain their separate musical careers/styles.

[Sufjan]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zR2TqWDqO_w

[Young]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDJOP16yNdY>

The addition of lyrics makes meaning more complex, and its advantage is that it more closely resembles the shape of human remembering: events, details, and also words, ideas. This is especially true of Tradition.

The piano theme is originally from Sufjan. The notes repeat consistently throughout the song, and the lyrics concern a UFO sighting that becomes a metaphor for incarnate meaning, perhaps specifically Christ. Sufjan remains somewhat ambiguous. (As always.)

With Jaymes Young, we have the identical set of notes on a digitized piano, but it is accompanied by a very different song. While the instruments remain organized around the central theme, the topic has shifted dramatically. This may be an explanation of the misuse of Tradition, but it could also be a legitimate part of Tradition: if we take Young as an Augustinian, he can be readily appropriated into Sufjan Stevens’s Incarnational theme.

My final example focuses on the musical subversion of a Tradition, so that we might see how subversion works in music, and whether it might describe elements of the Tradition in history. I will be playing you a song from the artist FKA twigs, a British R&B artist of Jamaican and Spanish descent. The song touches on a common R&B trope: “Being in a relationship with me would be better” (to put it in the most boring way possible). FKA twigs deliberately subverts this theme, renders it with unsettling double meanings. Much of her work – in dancing, in video, in visual imagery – is ambiguous, distorted. She tends to expose the falsity of the relationship to others achieved in fame: she is a manipulated image. FKA twigs never smiles, defying typical expectations for pop stars. I find it significant that she works to subvert her genre as a black woman, and I will play you a song from her. Fair warning that it is quite explicit. It is called “Two Weeks.”

[FKA twigs]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yDP9MKVhZc>

This song is deliberately atypical, conscientiously unsettling. Before I describe how FKA twigs achieves her subversion. The BBC has a show called “Like A Version,” in which a band or artist plays a cover of another song. The band covering FKA twigs’s “Two Weeks” is called #1 Dads. They are all white with one woman, playing on one drum and one keyboard, and accompanied by a guest artist, a man (also white) who sings the lyrics.

[Like A Version]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mXi8ehnp0Y>

What is significant about this cover is not simply that it is well-done, but the ways in which the band is forced to pare down the song to its basic parts. This exposes the roots of the song for us, and we can hear a more typical R&B sound “underneath” the song, as it were. Doing so also has a way of normalizing FKA twigs’s song, and the normalization is ambivalent in kind. We can see that FKA twigs’s subversion works because it is based thoroughly in its tradition. Her critique exposes the dark undercurrents of power prevalent in popular songs. Normalizing this critique, appropriating it, shows how a critique can be assimilated into a Tradition, as something that exposes something authentic about that Tradition. Yet this threatens to obscure or deny the critique itself, silencing its contribution again. So Tradition stands in tension with its authentic critiques.

Conclusion

This evening, I have worked to describe Tradition as a problem and to articulate some elements of a response. My essay has been a work *toward* a richer understanding of Tradition in theology and the Church, and is a part of a much larger need and interest. Reaching backward to Maurice Blondel has helped us to understand Tradition as mediation rather than as an unchanging essence. From Blondel’s beginning, we saw that Tradition resembles memory, indeed aesthetic remembering. Both Hans Urs von Balthasar and Bernard Lonergan opened the door to understanding “aesthetic remembering” as symphonic or musical, that is, through the analogy of music. Applying a theological aesthetic of memory to the problem of Tradition – in other words, thinking through careful analogies – allowed us to see ways that we might affirm Tradition as not only consistent and an avenue for development, but also as an active re-appropriation of

the “memory” Christ in the present. Tradition is anti-nostalgic (to the present and to the past) or else it is not authentically itself. It is even possible to say that Tradition may be subverted without overcoming or falsifying it, as the subversion reveals and reinforces musical themes in Tradition – not simply because they have been questioned, but rather because these themes have been appropriated *in* the question. There is much left to explore in a thesis like this, especially matters of Christology and pneumatology, but it is a beginning. I am grateful to have thought through this beginning with you, and I look forward to our discussion together.

Insight

386 – “It may be noted, however, that what frequently enough is meant by the analogy of being is precisely what we mean by saying that the notion of being underpins, penetrates, and goes beyond other contents.”

533 – The unity of the universe of proportionate being is threefold: potential, formal, and actual. Its actual unity is an immanent intelligible order.... Its formal unity is constituted by its successive levels of conjugate forms... Its potential unity is grounded in conjugate prime potency...

dynamic unity” (of subj., theol) – 138-144

development: undifferentiation → “process of differentiation and specialization towards a goal in which the differentiated specialties function as an integrated unity” (138)

In the first place, Lonergan gives us a helpful clarification between kinds of authenticity within and about traditions: individual human beings have or lack “minor authenticity” with respect to their own traditions, and traditions themselves have “major authenticity” to be judged by history and divine providence.²⁵

Tradition as a noun – memory as noun, as a verb;

Consciousness as patterned

²⁵ Method, 80.