as for aggression, we have to continue to respect its 'numinous power' (p. 649). But, Taylor seems to say (and here I put his points into my own words), there is the possibility of transfiguring the energy or aggression into an energy, equally intense and electric, of 'limitless self-giving' (p. 654). The attraction of violence is in major part the excess or abandon that can be experienced by going berserk in battle. Something of that abandon, in a more joyful way, can be experienced in letting go of oneself in a radical gift of love to God and neighbor (p. 668).

I don't know if Taylor's account of the transfiguration of sexuality and aggression fully works – certainly Nietzsche would not think his focus on the aristocratic warrior ethic could be subsumed and redeemed in this way. Can sexual desire and aggression be quite so completely transfigured for humane ends? Even so, I applaud Taylor for taking human sexuality and aggression so seriously. Indeed I would go so far as to say that one of the main challenges for contemporary theologians is to incorporate sexual desire and violence and aggression into their theologies. John Milbank, David Bentley Hart, and Sebastian Moore have been at the forefront of recovering an erotic desire for God, but the confrontation with violence and aggression needs more attention. Rowan Williams is the paradigm example of someone whose theology is not afraid of letting the violence and aggression in our souls breathe, although it would take more time to explain exactly how. It is a basic insight of psychoanalysis, respected by Taylor, that our sexuality and aggression cannot be denied, lest they return in even more destructive ways. Humanity in its flesh and bones has to be reckoned with, and not simply by calling our powerful sexuality and aggression sinful. Taylor is at his strongest when he hints, tantalizingly, that our sexuality and aggression are what they are so that they can participate in the divine pedagogy of humanity, in a framework proposed by Irenaeus (p. 668), and be transformed into energy for communion and love. But it is incredibly gratifying to see a Christian philosopher value Nietzsche and Freud so highly.

JEFFREY MCCURRY

A THEOLOGY OF CRITICISM: BALTHASAR, POSTMODERNISM, AND THE CATHOLIC IMAGINATION, by Michael P. Murphy (*Oxford University Press*, Oxford 2008). Pp. xiv + 210, £45.00 hbk

More than any other major Catholic theologian of the twentieth century, Hans Urs von Balthasar re-set theology into the ambit of the humanities in ways unlikely to be emulated. He managed to achieve the almost impossible, of writing an aesthetic theology based on an awesome stock of learning whose range encompassed a faculty of arts. Balthasar provided a theological umbrella under which those with affiliations in the humanities might shelter, comforts which had been hitherto unavailable. An outcome of this generosity of vision is that the shifting basis of the human condition, and what kills its spirit in contemporary culture, can be more imaginatively calibrated. In this scholarly and carefully crafted work, Murphy grasps these opportunities and explores how a Catholic imagination offers prospects of reverse from the cul-de-sacs of postmodernism.

Primarily concerned with narrative and language (Derrida looms much), Murphy seeks to find a basis for coherence, a harmony that would resolve the unprofitable dualism that increasingly governs contemporary critical thought. Thus, construction as a response to nihilism forms his ambition for the study in which 'the analogical imagination can staunch the wounds of deconstructionism' (p. 72) and this entails conversion (pp. 73–74). As he observed rightly earlier in the study, 'all roads, whether begrudgingly or not, lead back to questions of theology' (p. 20). His primary concern is with the reconciliation of opposites and their

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redemption in a theological aesthetics. Thus, the study involves a re-casting of many facets of contemporary thought into the realms of theological expectations whose contours are illustrated in highly specific examples: Flannery O'Connor's short story, 'Revelation', Lars von Trier's film, *Breaking the Waves* (1996), and David Lodge's novel, *Therapy.* Murphy's range of source material is fittingly wide for the task this study undertakes. For a work whose main text is 159 pages long, 30 pages of notes, in some cases with multiple paragraphs, might seem excessive, yet they indicate the enormous care undertaken by the author to express matters comprehensively.

In its appeal to what is transcendent, the study aspires to produce a more coherent theological reading of the imagination than it claims has been hitherto available. But these ambitions entail a slightly imperial dismissal of two sociological works on culture, dismissed as 'ephemeral', of the kitsch and theologically fatigued (pp. 49–50). These might pass on insight but fail on theological rigour. Oddly, later he comes to realise that Balthasar did have concerns with practical issues of the social sciences, with 'subject formation, interpersonal relationships, and the ethics of love' (p. 131). These issues also emerged for him earlier in relation to identity and roles (p. 116). Indeed, it might be said that Balthasar, as in *Theo-Drama* was the only major theologian who could write sociology fluently and with understanding. Yet, one has to take Murphy's study on its own terms. Two of his three case studies succeed and these are his vehicles for much dense and sometimes discursive reflection.

Flannery O'Connor never lets a theologian down. This wise, brilliant woman was uncanny in her theological acumen for one so young. Murphy's use of her short story, 'Revelation', to illustrate the epiphany of imagination is well done, where the imperfections of a hierarchy drawn on earth are subsumed into the Pseudo-Dionysius and his characterisation of procession and return. This redemption of hierarchy entails a vision which Murphy persuasively enlarges. His theme, of the relationship between medieval theology and contemporary postmodernism, is well brought into focus in chapter 3, which is telling and impressive.

Less so is chapter 4 that involves a laboured use of Trier's central character, Bess, who achieves sanctity by being pummelled. She is used to illustrate Christological properties of loss and gain. Her death, after a life of sacrifice based on a sexual mission of availability to all, is scarcely convincing as an example of what *Theo-drama* might be about. The invocation of bells as indicative of Catholicism, oscillating between use as a metaphor (pp. 104–5) and an actuality (p. 125) is pushed in directions of a dualism, one expressive of an analogical imagination. Their symbolism is insufficient to bear the weight of the conclusions Murphy seeks to sustain, of healing and redemption, where the weak emerge as the strongest. Indeed, ironically in the weakest chapter in the book, the most distinctive properties of the Catholic imagination emerge in contrast to Protestantism. The bells draw attention to a liturgical context that is never properly explored, where word and deed fuse in rite to fuel a Catholic imagination. Somehow, their use in the context of Trier is artificial and unpersuasive. Far more fitting and fruitful examples could have been invoked by Murphy of the use of the bell in film signifying redemption – Tarkovsky comes to mind. Oddly, this use of the film draws attention to the over-emphasis on the word as against the visual to formulate a Catholic imagination. Admittedly, Murphy could retort that this would involve writing another book.

Dealing, in chapter 5, with *Therapy* Murphy is on securer ground, and brings forward the notion of conversion employed earlier into the existential choices facing its questing hero, Tubby. Set in relation to Balthasar and Kierkegaard, Murphy gives a useful reading of the pilgrim journey to Compostela, one beset with impure motives where the questing is fruitless but where the self of the hero

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finds an accommodation to himself sufficient to journey onwards. This chapter represents a fruitful re-casting of seeking in contemporary culture, where matters of conversion and redemption and emptiness and incompleteness are brought into focus in ways that point to the imagination for their resolution. In this chapter, Murphy seems to find his voice for his own pilgrim journey into imagination and redemption, and it is here that the sense of narrative of the study most clearly emerges, and where it counts, in the final chapter.

Although clearly and well written, there is a microscopic property to the book, particularly in the examples used, yet overall in the text, sentences of real brilliance break out and steely insights emerge. The learning is there, but rather episodically distributed in the study. At occasional points of languor, one waits hopefully for relief. Understanding of the contemporary relevance of Balthasar is well sketched (chapter 2) and what is sought is credible, of an imagination that would surmount the contradictions emerging in postmodern philosophy to realise a coincidence of opposites. But 'seeing the form' of God, in ways that relate to the imagination (p. 156), signifies the need for some accommodation to the visual, however well the text feeds the mind's eye as to what to imagine. This is the missing dimension of the book that makes its text at times seem arid.

It is just not enough to conclude that the Catholic imagination is 'incarnational, sacramental and trinitarian' (pp. 157–8). What Murphy ends on brings into focus a nagging worry of the study, as to how *Catholic* the imagination is that he wishes to present for coherent theological inspection. Invoking Balthasar and three Catholic writers and directors hardly suffices to produce what needs to be distinctively stipulated, perhaps in a sectarian way Murphy is reluctant to envisage. Also, a more telling conclusion is required, one that more fully draws together the thesis of the book. Somehow, the study just stops at the end. Good in parts, bibliographically rich, and broad in sweep and ambition, it provides a useful reference point for a reading of facets of the Catholic imagination, a topic seemingly flourishing in the US but decidedly dormant in the UK. Much is to be learnt from our American cousins and this study is indicative of what is worthy of emulation.

KIERAN FLANAGAN

ZIZEK AND THEOLOGY by Adam Kotsko (*T&T Clark*, London 2008) Pp. vii + 174 pp., £14.99

Theology has opened up to what is often dubbed 'continental' philosophy. Whether or not the harvest of this philosophy always rewards the labour of its reading is a moot point, but there is no sign that the labours cease. There is always new flora to be examined and, perhaps, introduced to theological soil. Slavoj Zizek is the latest transplant. In this thorough and accessible book Adam Kotsko sets himself the task of carrying out an initial examination.

Zizek's intellectual and political roots are a curious hybrid of a reading of Hegel, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Althusserian structuralist Marxism, and an obsession with popular culture. He defines himself as a Marxist and an atheist. However those confident self-designations fly in the face of his philosophy, which is concerned to undermine the ready and ideological acceptance of the world so that emancipatory potential might be released. This Althusserian project of ideology-critique is linked to Lacan in that it is identified as an assault on the 'big Other', the master signifier that at once represses possibility, creates the space for fantasy, and establishes that against which emancipation must be achieved (by this argument God can be identified as one such big Other). The method is Hegelian; Zizek makes a statement about the big Other, contradicts it, and then

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