

# A Pied Theological Cosmology: Alejandro García-Rivera's Gift to Science

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*The work of the late Alejandro García-Rivera has been overlooked as a contribution to theological engagement with science. A significant obstacle to appreciating it as such is the view that his theological cosmology marks a problematic shift from Latinx theological aesthetics to an uncritical engagement with the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. This article engages his oeuvre in response to that critique. Using Hans Urs von Balthasar's concept of "theo-drama," it argues that García-Rivera not only fits Teilhard into the broader mosaic of his work successfully, but that García-Rivera's final work illumines his whole oeuvre as a "gift to science." It shows how García-Rivera adapts his account of the beauty in the "little stories" of the pueblo to little places in the natural world, in order to help us see their beauty as an objective reality calling us to participate in their care. Thus, the article portrays García-Rivera's body of work as a way to engage the scientifically-minded through a sensibility for natural beauty, born of mestizaje, popular piety, and the cross.*

**Keywords:** Hans Urs von Balthasar, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Latinx theology, pragmatism, science and religion, theological aesthetics, theological cosmology, ecotheology

**P**IERRE Teilhard de Chardin famously, and cryptically, characterized his magnum opus, *The Human Phenomenon*, as a "scientific study," and insisted that it be read as such.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I argue that the oeuvre of Latino scientist-theologian Alejandro García-Rivera (1951–2010) also makes a contribution to science, distinct from Teilhard's. It has not been recognized as such, in large part because of García-Rivera's use of Teilhard. Because Teilhard's work transgresses a commonsense notion of science with

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, trans. Sarah Appleton-Weber (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 1.

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its inclusion of “spiritual energy” in its purview, among other things, a generation of scholars has characterized it as a “foray into the theology of nature” or a theological cosmology instead.<sup>2</sup> García-Rivera’s final monograph, *The Garden of God*, certainly fits that characterization.<sup>3</sup> He subtitles it *A Theological Cosmology*, and it offers an account of the cosmos as a whole, which, like Teilhard’s, ultimately rests on God’s relation to the cosmos—hence, a theological cosmology. It would not be a contribution to science if we held to a commonsense notion of *science* as that body of theories, concepts, and suppositions about the natural world that rests solely on empirical observation and experiment. It contains no sets of data, no equations, no new theory comparable to relativity or Darwinian evolution.

Nevertheless, I insist here that García-Rivera’s whole body of work, and not just *The Garden of God*, can be rightly considered a gift to science if we allow scholarship in the field of science and religion to trouble that commonsense notion of science. There is a creative ferment in the field right now that has taken its lead from Peter Harrison, a historian of science. In *The Territories of Science and Religion*, he argues that science and religion do not pick out natural kinds—that they are not well-defined, transcendental categories, but rather historically constructed, artificial unities, comparable to historical polities, with ever-shifting boundaries.<sup>4</sup> In response to Harrison’s work, scholars are reconsidering those boundaries.<sup>5</sup> Paul Tyson, for instance, proposes widening

<sup>2</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, 22–32; John F. Haught, *The Cosmic Vision of Teilhard de Chardin* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), 212. Haught calls Teilhard’s work a “theology of nature” and traces this reading back to Ian Barbour. García-Rivera refers to Teilhard’s work as a “theological cosmology.”

<sup>3</sup> Alex García-Rivera, *The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology, Theology and the Sciences* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> This reconsideration has thus far followed two distinct directions, one represented by the After Science and Religion Project, which was a Templeton-funded research project based at the University of Queensland in Australia (2018–2021), and the other by a mostly British group of researchers, who are pursuing a granular approach to issues in science and religion, which they call “science-engaged theology.” The After Science and Religion Project, by contrast, has opted for a more radical reset of the field, inspired by Radical Orthodoxy. For an overview of the state of the field by a scholar who has contributed to both efforts, see Andrew Davison, “More History, More Theology, More Philosophy, More Science: The State of Theological Engagement with Science,” in *New Directions in Theology and Science*, ed. Peter Harrison and Paul Tyson, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2022), 19–35, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003240334-1>. Harrison’s work has called into question the very field of science and religion, as the title of the University of Queensland project suggests. For the sake of this article, however, I follow Josh Reeves’s suggestion that we can

our understanding of science, after the example of the “natural philosophy” of old, so that the study of nature would be founded on an explicit “theology of science.”<sup>6</sup> Robert Russell and Andrew Davison make similar, though more limited proposals, in suggesting that theology can contribute in various ways to science.<sup>7</sup>

These thinkers follow the growing understanding in history and philosophy of science that *science* includes more than just observations, hypotheses, and theories, but also nonpropositional and even nonverbal aspects such as values, which comprise the sensibility or disposition necessary for the practice of science.<sup>8</sup> This understanding reflects the collapse of various attempts to draw a principled line of demarcation separating “the context of justification” from “the context of discovery” in philosophical definitions of science.<sup>9</sup> A previous generation of philosophers had attempted to leave everything “nonscientific” to the context of discovery—values, attitudes, fundamental beliefs, and so on—and to identify science with the context of justification—observation, experiment, induction, abduction, and deduction. The predominant claim

continue to use the terms “science” and “religion” responsibly and still onboard the anti-essentialist thesis of *Territories*, if we treat *science* as a loosely defined range of practices, which bear among themselves a Wittgensteinian family resemblance (and the same for religion). “Science and religion,” then, would broadly name the field dedicated to various kinds of interdisciplinary projects, ranging from sociologically designed studies of the impact of scientific discoveries on religious belief to theological projects like García-Rivera’s. I take “theology and science” to name a subfield in science and religion that comprises projects with at least implicit theological premises. For further discussion of these issues, see Josh A. Reeves, “A Defense of Science and Religion: Reflections on Peter Harrison’s ‘After Science and Religion’ Project,” *Zygon*, December 21, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12861>.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Tyson, *A Christian Theology of Science: Reimagining a Theological Vision of Natural Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Robert J. Russell, “Theological Influences in Scientific Research Programs: Natural Theology ‘in Reverse,’” *Theology and Science* 15, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 378–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2017.1369751>; Andrew Davison, “Machine Learning and Theological Traditions of Analogy,” *Modern Theology* 37, no. 2 (April 2021): 254–74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12682>.

<sup>8</sup> Russell, “Theological Influences in Scientific Research Programs,” 380–82.

<sup>9</sup> Larry Laudan, “The Demise of the Demarcation Problem,” in *Physics, Philosophy, and Psychoanalysis: Essays in Honor of Adolf Grünbaum*, ed. R. S. Cohen and L. Laudan (Boston, MA: D. Reidel, 1983), 111–28. Laudan’s essay is a classic statement of the central issues. For an up-to-date consideration of the role in values in science, see Bennett Holman and Torsten Wilholt, “The New Demarcation Problem,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 91 (February 2022): 211–20, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2021.11.011>.

now is that science is “value-laden,” which reflects both the difficulty of the so-called “demarcation problem,” as well as the realization that values do play a complex role in scientific reasoning.

When I say that García-Rivera’s theology is a gift to science, I mean science as value-laden—as comprising more than just the context of justification. I do not mean to suggest that scientific reason includes or ought to include explicit theological premises, nor do I mean to confuse the theology of nature, natural theology, or theological cosmology with science. A theology of nature seeks the meaning of nature with explicit reference to God or with explicit theological premises, and I maintain the usual understanding that good science should not rely on theological propositions. But I do want to stretch the meaning of *science* to include its human dimension, not only in keeping with contemporary history and philosophy of science, but also with what I believe to have been Teilhard’s and García-Rivera’s convictions.

In this regard, Russell’s work offers a helpful heuristic. He points out that theological ideas can and indeed have played a role in helping scientists choose between competing theories that make equivalent predictions about phenomena.<sup>10</sup> In his generalized model of creative mutual interaction (CMI) between science and theology, he also argues that theology can contribute to scientists’ philosophical assumptions, as well as to the scientific imagination. “Theological theories,” he says, “can act as sources of inspiration in the scientific ‘context of discovery.’”<sup>11</sup> García-Rivera’s gift to science is of this kind. His oeuvre does not propose a new scientific theory, nor an explicit theology of science, of the kind proposed by Tyson, but it does make a contribution to the scientific imagination. It offers a sensibility for the beauty of the cosmos, which García-Rivera found absolutely necessary for the practice of good science.

A keen sense of the urgent necessity for such a sensibility deeply informs his work. Before his career as a systematic theologian, which began at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago and ended at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, García-Rivera worked as a physicist for Boeing, until he had a vision of the apocalypse prompted by his work on a cruise missile. Science, he realized, could achieve great beauty, but it could also bring about hell on earth.<sup>12</sup> That vision of hell frames not only *The Garden of God*, his

<sup>10</sup> Russell, “Theological Influences in Scientific Research Programs,” 382–85.

<sup>11</sup> Robert J. Russell, *Time in Eternity: Pannenberg, Physics, and Eschatology in Creative Mutual Interaction* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 74–75. He also uses the term “imagination” in the figure that depicts CMI (73).

<sup>12</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, viii.

final work before an untimely death from cancer; it also prompted his whole career in Latinx theology.<sup>13</sup>

But the importance science held throughout García-Rivera's theological career has been little appreciated. Early on in that career, García-Rivera wrote, "What possible contribution can Hispanic theology bring to the dialogue between theology and the natural sciences? Were it not for the fact that I may be the only Hispanic physicist-theologian, the question might not even be asked."<sup>14</sup> That question remains largely unasked in readings of García-Rivera's work, which tend to emphasize his revisionary application of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological aesthetics to the beauty of *mestizaje* and Latinx popular piety.<sup>15</sup> To the extent that his reflections on science have been recognized, that recognition has been largely limited to *The Garden of God*.<sup>16</sup> Some of his more favorable critics view *The Garden of God* as the possible centerpiece of his oeuvre,<sup>17</sup> but others regard it as a mere pastiche of Teilhard, and a

<sup>13</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, vii; Alex García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 1–2.

<sup>14</sup> Alex García-Rivera, "A Contribution to the Dialogue Between Theology and the Natural Sciences," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 2, no. 1 (August 1994): 51–59, at 51.

<sup>15</sup> Gregory J. Zuschlag, "The Turn to the 'Beautiful' in U.S. Hispanic/Latino Theology: Theological Aesthetics of Roberto Goizueta and Alejandro García-Rivera," *Offerings: A Journal of Practical Theology and Spirituality* 7 (2008): 3–23; Cecilia González-Andrieu and Ana María Pineda, "Alejandro García-Rivera (1951–2010): Un Recordatorio," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79, no. 2 (June 1, 2011): 280–86, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfr015>; Peter J. Casarella, "Beauty and the Little Stories of Holiness: What Alejandro García-Rivera Taught Me," *Diálogo: A Bilingual Journal Published by the Center for Latino Research at DePaul University* 16, no. 2 (2013): 53–58, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dlg.2013.0001>; Michelle A. Gonzalez, "Alejandro García-Rivera: A Legacy in Theological Aesthetics," *Diálogo* 16, no. 2 (2013): 33–36, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dlg.2013.0017>; Christopher Tirres, "Theological Aesthetics and the Many Pragmatisms of Alejandro García-Rivera," *Diálogo* 16, no. 2 (January 1, 2013): 59–64, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dlg.2013.0008>.

<sup>16</sup> Dominic Colonna, "The 'Prophetic-Ethical' Dimension of Sacred Art and Alejandro García-Rivera's Pursuit of the Garden of God," *Cithara*, 51, no. 1 (2011): 51–60; Dominic Colonna, "The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology," *Cithara*, 51, no. 1 (2011): 62–65; Roberto S. Goizueta, "The Theologian as Wounded Innocent," *Diálogo* 16, no. 2 (2013): 37–42, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dlg.2013.0024>; Robert J. Schreiter, "Spaces Engaged and Transfigured: Alejandro García-Rivera's Journey from Little Stories to Cosmic Reconciliation," *Diálogo* 16, no. 2 (2013): 43–47, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dlg.2013.0031>.

<sup>17</sup> Goizueta, "The Theologian as Wounded Innocent," 37; Schreiter, "Spaces Engaged and Transfigured," 45. I owe a particular debt to these two scholars, as well as to Casarella, for their holistic reading of García-Rivera.

betrayal of his earlier work besides.<sup>18</sup> In it, García-Rivera supposedly trades his earlier sensitivity to suffering and to the particular for a Teilhardian universe story that elides difference and minimizes suffering. Setting aside the merits of this critique of Teilhard and his followers, it remains the case that some of García-Rivera's readers have found Teilhard to be an uneasy fit with the rest of García-Rivera's work.<sup>19</sup>

In this article, I argue that this critical view of *The Garden of God* is mistaken and that the whole of García-Rivera's oeuvre, in fact, makes a unique contribution to science: a dramatic sensibility for the fragile beauty of creation that is at once empirical and theological. He appeals to this sensibility, rather than to a cosmic story, to facilitate an insight that belongs to both heart and mind: that Beauty calls humankind to tend, rather than to master, the earth. (Note that I capitalize *Beauty* when my usage reflects García-Rivera's particular understanding of Beauty as divine.)<sup>20</sup> It is his emphasis on little places, rather than on the cosmic sweep of time, that links *The Garden of God* to his previous work and recommends his oeuvre as a contribution to the basic fund of values that motivate scientists' pursuit of natural knowledge.

I begin with a summary treatment of Teilhard, which foregrounds the tension between Teilhard and García-Rivera, as well as one critical point of contact. The scope of Teilhard's cosmic story far exceeds García-Rivera's more typical focus on "little stories."<sup>21</sup> But both thinkers share in a kind of Pauline project: to preach the Gospel before the modern "Areopagus" (cf. Acts 17:16-34). I use *The Garden of God* as a hermeneutic to highlight the extent to which García-Rivera pursues this apologetic aim throughout much of his oeuvre.<sup>22</sup> I then focus on *The Garden of God* itself to show how it carries forward

<sup>18</sup> Daniel P. Castillo, "Agony in the Garden?: Evaluating the Cosmology of Alejandro García-Rivera in View of the 'Little Story' and the 'Principle of Foregrounding,'" *Diálogo* 16, no. 2 (2013): 65-68, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dlg.2013.0015>.

<sup>19</sup> See also Colonna, "The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology," 64. Colonna takes issue with García-Rivera's combination of Teilhard and von Balthasar.

<sup>20</sup> García-Rivera capitalizes *beauty* somewhat unevenly, but he does so more often than not. The capitalization reflects his assertion of the divine nature of Beauty, as he explains in "On A New List of Aesthetic Categories," in *Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar*, ed. James Fodor and Oleg V. Bychkov (New York: Routledge, 2016), 169-83 at 170, eBook. He likewise capitalizes *goodness* and *truth*, and the "communities" that correspond to the three transcendentals, for similar reasons. Where these terms and others ("mystery," e.g.) are capitalized in the text of this article, the usage reflects García-Rivera's.

<sup>21</sup> Casarella, "Beauty and the Little Stories of Holiness," 55.

<sup>22</sup> Though I largely disagree with Castillo's reading of *The Garden of God*, I nevertheless owe him a debt as well for suggesting that García-Rivera's vision of hell "might be understood as the unifying ground from which his diverse theological endeavors emerged"; Castillo, "Agony in the Garden?," 65.

the achievements of García-Rivera's earlier theological aesthetics, including his treatment of suffering and of difference. I conclude with an assessment of García-Rivera's oeuvre as a whole in comparison to Teilhard's work. Both thinkers appeal to the dramatic beauty of the cosmos, but the scale of the appeal differs. Teilhard appeals to the future fulfillment of all creation in Christ as the source of the hope that must fund scientific research, in his view. García-Rivera, on the other hand, appeals to God's choice of the lowly as the source of the compassionate tenderness he views as vital to the practice of good science.

### Teilhard's "Cosmic Vision"<sup>23</sup>

In a global society that possesses ever-increasing power to shape not only human evolution but the future life of the planet itself, how can the human race find the hope necessary to seek the good of all, especially when the prospect of the eventual victory of entropy, the heat-death of the universe, looms as the final death knell of all hope? Such is the central problem Teilhard poses in *The Human Phenomenon*, the primary source García-Rivera draws on in his chapter on Teilhard in *The Garden of God*.<sup>24</sup> "The universe has always been moving, and it continues to move at this very moment," Teilhard observes in a pivotal passage, before turning to the key question:

But will it go on moving *tomorrow*?

Tomorrow? It is only here, at this turning point where the future substitutes itself for the present that the observations of science must cede to the anticipations of faith—here legitimately is where our dilemma can and must begin. Who can truly guarantee us a tomorrow? And without the assurance that tomorrow exists, how can we possibly go on living at all, we in whom the terrible gift of foresight has awoken, perhaps for the first time in the universe?

Sickness of the dead end—anguish of feeling shut in.<sup>25</sup>

Science, for Teilhard, has opened up radical new vistas to human sight, including the possibility of intervening in the process of evolution itself, but it has also revealed an apparent "dead end":

<sup>23</sup> While the interpretation I offer of *The Human Phenomenon* here is my own, I am indebted to two of John Haught's most recent publications on Teilhard, *The Cosmic Vision of Teilhard de Chardin*, and *God after Einstein: What's Really Going on in the Universe?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), as well as to the anonymous reviewer who recommended them.

<sup>24</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, 20–21.

<sup>25</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, 160; emphasis in the original.

A rocket that rises following the arrow of time and bursts open to be extinguished—an eddy rising in the midst of a current that descends. This is what our image of the world would be.

According to science.<sup>26</sup>

So it would be—unless, as Teilhard suggests, we take a wider view.

If we embrace a “wider empiricism,” as John Haught puts it, and include the phenomenon of spirit or consciousness in our purview, then we can discern, according to Teilhard, a descriptive law of evolution that has held in the cosmos up until this point.<sup>27</sup> Ever greater degrees of consciousness emerge hand in hand with ever greater degrees of unification.<sup>28</sup> Appealing to reflective symmetry, Teilhard suggests that the future of the cosmos will look much the same,<sup>29</sup> such that our cosmic destiny will not be the entropic decay of all matter, but rather, an Omega Point of hyper-unification and hyper-consciousness, which he considers a veritable requirement for human hope and action in the world.<sup>30</sup> Here he turns to “the anticipations of faith” to ground this hope, for he posits Christ as the motive force behind the Omega Point, drawing all things to himself through the attractive power of his love.<sup>31</sup>

Controversial at the time, Teilhard’s vision remains controversial still today, for various reasons. Teilhard considered both political and scientific means of pursuing the Omega Point, such as fascism and eugenics, which John Slattery has recently highlighted in a number of critical publications.<sup>32</sup> Haught responds to Slattery’s critique in the final chapter of *The Cosmic Vision of Teilhard de Chardin* by situating Teilhard’s comments on fascism and eugenics in the broader context of his work, including his insistence that true unity requires difference.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, Slattery’s critique highlights a more general concern that critics have had about Teilhard, that his work minimizes suffering.

<sup>26</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, 20.

<sup>27</sup> Haught, *The Cosmic Vision of Teilhard de Chardin*, 215.

<sup>28</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, 172.

<sup>29</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, 183–94.

<sup>31</sup> Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, 209–15.

<sup>32</sup> John P. Slattery, “Dangerous Tendencies of Cosmic Theology: The Untold Legacy of Teilhard de Chardin,” *Philosophy and Theology* 29, no. 1 (2017): 69–82, <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtheol201611971>; John P. Slattery, “Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s Legacy of Eugenics and Racism Can’t Be Ignored,” *Religion Dispatches*, May 21, 2018, <https://religiondispatches.org>. Slattery has also published responses to critiques of his argument in *Religion Dispatches and Commonweal*.

<sup>33</sup> Haught, *The Cosmic Vision of Teilhard de Chardin*, 218–23.



Another group of contemporary critics in fact offers a postmodern critique of Teilhard's vision as constituting a closed metanarrative that explains suffering away and subsumes the little and the different into one master story or epic.<sup>34</sup> The critique of García-Rivera's use of Teilhard issues from this interpretation of Teilhard's work. Daniel Castillo reads *The Garden of God* as a "cosmological metanarrative of progress," fashioned from Teilhard's future-oriented theory of the universe's evolutionary progress toward Christ.<sup>35</sup> In his estimation, it fits ill with the importance García-Rivera places on the "little stories" of the poor in his earlier work.

Haught also mounts an argument, across both *The Cosmic Vision* and *God after Einstein*, against the postmodern critique. Rather than crafting a metanarrative, Haught argues, Teilhard simply foresaw the consequences that relativistic physics and Darwinian evolution hold for human hope, which Haught identifies as the kernel of religion.<sup>36</sup> Einstein, according to Haught, revealed that temporality belongs to the fabric of the universe itself, while Darwin discovered contingency in the origin of species.<sup>37</sup> Together, these scientific discoveries spell the conditions of freedom, for Haught, rather than closure.<sup>38</sup> They allow Teilhard and his followers, Haught included, to characterize the cosmos as a drama with an open future—precisely the condition of possibility necessary for the hope that Teilhard sought to offer readers of *The Human Phenomenon*.

That this dispute still remains unresolved today helps explain the mixed reception of García-Rivera's final monograph. I cannot resolve the interpretation of Teilhard in this article, but a resolution is not germane to my argument. The question is not whether Teilhard falls victim to the postmodern critique. It is whether García-Rivera's adaptation of Teilhard does.

In fact, there are two questions here. First, what is the relationship of *The Garden of God* to the rest of García-Rivera's work? Second, to what genre does *The Garden of God* in fact belong? Is it an epic that falls victim to the postmodern critique or something else entirely? In some ways, Teilhard makes a difficult conversation partner for García-Rivera. Gerard Manley Hopkins is a key inspiration for García-Rivera; the poet's vision is central to García-Rivera's

<sup>34</sup> Celia Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution: Wonder and Wisdom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 48–53; James Matthew Ashley, "Reading the Universe Story Theologically: The Contribution of a Biblical Narrative Imagination," *Theological Studies* 71, no. 4 (December 2010): 870–902; Lisa H. Sideris, *Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 3–9.

<sup>35</sup> Castillo, "Agony in the Garden?," 67.

<sup>36</sup> Haught, *The Cosmic Vision of Teilhard de Chardin*, 185; Haught, *God after Einstein*, 9.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Haught, *God after Einstein*, 34–48, 211n23.

<sup>38</sup> Haught, *The Cosmic Vision of Teilhard de Chardin*, 124–27.

masterwork, *The Community of the Beautiful*.<sup>39</sup> But Haught himself highlights the stark contrast between Hopkins's worldview and Teilhard's.<sup>40</sup> Hopkins focused on the past and the present; Teilhard focused on the future. Moreover, although Teilhard may not tell an epic, the scale of his vision is clearly epical. García-Rivera, on the other hand, is characteristically focused on the local, at least in his work leading up to *The Garden of God*. The solution to this tension, according to Castillo, is to read *The Garden of God* together with García-Rivera's earlier work as a "corrective."<sup>41</sup>

In response to the first question, I follow Castillo's suggestion to read García-Rivera's oeuvre holistically, but instead of treating his earlier works as a corrective, I use *The Garden of God* as a hermeneutic key to his oeuvre to foreground his long-standing interest in dialogue between science and religion. As for the second question, I argue that García-Rivera achieves something unique in *The Garden of God*. His final work tells no grand narratives, but only the little stories of a specific place: a fragile, "entangled bank," teeming with living forms of time.<sup>42</sup>

### **Beyond *The Garden of God*: Theological Aesthetics as Apologetics**

In one respect, García-Rivera's work does resemble Teilhard's: it serves as a kind of Christian apologetics for "a world come of age."<sup>43</sup> In *The Garden of God*, García-Rivera emphasizes the need for the church to develop "a convincing cosmology" for a world profoundly shaped by modern science, both materially and spiritually speaking.<sup>44</sup> But this apologetic concern is by no

<sup>39</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 7–38.

<sup>40</sup> Haught, *The Cosmic Vision of Teilhard de Chardin*, 17–33.

<sup>41</sup> Castillo, "Agony in the Garden?," 67.

<sup>42</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 91–93; the reference is to a famous line from *On the Origin of Species*, by Charles Darwin, quoted by García-Rivera at page 91.

<sup>43</sup> An argument for this characterization of Teilhard's work lies beyond the scope of this article, but it reflects the view of some of Teilhard's most thorough and sympathetic interpreters, such as Henri de Lubac and Bruno de Solages. The overall conclusion to Solages's massive study of Teilhard's thought is that Teilhard is no less than "le plus grand apologiste du Christianisme depuis Pascal." Teilhard de Chardin, *Témoignage et étude sur le développement de la pensée* (Toulouse: Edouard Privat, 1967), 390. De Lubac offers this characterization: "Alone, Père Teilhard looked ahead, to proclaim Christ to generations born into the age of science." Henri de Lubac, *The Religion of Teilhard de Chardin* (New York: Collins, 1967), 15. For a succinct and less hagiographical defense of this interpretation of Teilhard's work, see Donald P. Gray, "The Phenomenon of Teilhard," *Theological Studies* 36, no. 1 (March 1975): 19–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056397503600102>, esp. 20–27.

<sup>44</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 52.

means original to *The Garden of God*. As I argue now, this concern spans the whole of his oeuvre. (Note that my intent here is simply to foreground this concern in García-Rivera's earlier works and not to explicate their arguments. I turn to the latter task under the heading "Theological Cosmology as Theo-Drama.")

I begin with the hermeneutic key to this reading, identified by Castillo, namely, García-Rivera's vision of the apocalypse.<sup>45</sup> I then show how each of his first three monographs responds to this vision, whether explicitly or implicitly. In *St. Martín de Porres: The "Little Stories" and the Semiotics of Culture* (1995), García-Rivera faults apocalyptic science for its reductive erasure of difference; in *The Community of the Beautiful* (1999), he strives to articulate a convincing account of the objective Beauty of creation as the ground of his appeal to the scientist; and in *A Wounded Innocence* (2003), he gestures at what we need in order to perceive this Beauty—namely, the embrace of our own vulnerability, rather than our mastery of it. Together, these works offer a constructive critique of our scientific age, which proposes our participation in divine Beauty as our salvation—hence, an apologetics.

### ***The Hermeneutic Key***

According to García-Rivera himself, his concern for the plausibility of the Christian worldview began with the vision of hell that prompted his career in theology, which is essential to understanding his attitude toward science. The vision came upon the nightmarish realization that he had been assigned to work on a cruise missile. He recalls the experience at the beginning of *The Garden of God*:

The sudden realization led me to a powerful experience unlike any I have ever had before and, after all these years, to writing this book.

I fell into a kind of waking dream, a mystical-like experience. The black tarmac outside the trailer began to envelop all of Boeing field and I could see, smell, and hear the flame, smoke and roar of a terrible conflagration. I knew as a physicist the destructiveness and toxicity of nuclear forces. I had gone into science for my love of the beauty of nature. Now I was seeing, feeling the dark side. After being overwhelmed by this vision of hell, the consequences of continuing to work on this project began to sink in. I would be helping bring hell to earth. . . . What sort of science is this that can bring hell to earth?<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> See note 22 regarding Castillo, "Agony in the Garden?."

<sup>46</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, vii–viii.

His revulsion propelled him right out of the trailer, out of his career, back into church, and eventually into ministry for a small, Lutheran congregation in Allentown, Pennsylvania: the community of St. Martín de Porres. Here was the community that his earlier work had threatened to obliterate.<sup>47</sup> García-Rivera characterizes *The Garden of God* as his response to this conversion experience.<sup>48</sup> But highlighting his vision of hell also reveals his first monograph, named in honor of his Allentown congregation, as a response as well.

### ***Protest against the Narrowness of Reason***

At first glance, that response comes close to a repudiation. In *St. Martín de Porres*, he articulates a theological anthropology of difference that makes for a striking rejection of an aspect of modern physics. Cutting-edge physics today, perhaps to a fault, pursues the beautiful as a function of symmetry and even supersymmetry.<sup>49</sup> García-Rivera went into physics in pursuit of this beauty, as he explains in the previous extract and also in the introduction to *The Community of the Beautiful*.<sup>50</sup> But in *St. Martín de Porres*, he takes a stand for *asymmetry*, making asymmetric difference the hallmark of human nature: “The human being,” he says, “is the asymmetric other who defies easy identification or categorizing.”<sup>51</sup> And this asymmetry bears the trace of God’s handiwork, “who created the world in marvelous diversity, a garden of fecund asymmetries.”<sup>52</sup> Set against García-Rivera’s vision of hell on earth, this theological anthropology characterizes the scientific pursuit of symmetry as an antihuman and even satanic affair.<sup>53</sup>

But García-Rivera does not in fact repudiate science, even in *St. Martín de Porres*. “The protest,” he says, “was not against the category [of reason] itself

<sup>47</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 1, 3.

<sup>48</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, ix.

<sup>49</sup> See Sabine Hossenfelder, *Lost in Math: How Beauty Leads Physics Astray* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).

<sup>50</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Alex García-Rivera, *St. Martín de Porres: The “Little Stories” and the Semiotics of Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 99.

<sup>52</sup> García-Rivera, *St. Martín de Porres*, 100.

<sup>53</sup> Admittedly, García-Rivera does not mention his Boeing vision in *St. Martín de Porres*, but he makes this critique of science explicit elsewhere. A science too enamored of symmetries loses all sensibility for the unique particular, including “the human creature who both senses and theorizes.” This “anthropological lacuna” is the condition of possibility for antihuman science. Alex García-Rivera, “Light from Light: An Aesthetic Approach to the Science-and-Religion Dialogue,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 28, no. 3–4 (June 2001): 275.

but the narrowness of it.”<sup>54</sup> At the end of *St. Martín de Porres*, and more fully in his subsequent work, he turns from protest to the construction of what he calls an “empirical aesthetics,” which manifests a Pauline concern for the credibility of the Gospel in a scientific age.

### ***Constructing an Empirical Aesthetics***

García-Rivera uses the term “empirical aesthetics” and defines it in a joint article that takes scientists’ experience of beauty in their work quite seriously.<sup>55</sup> He and his coauthors argue that “beauty is not only a subjective response in the eye of the beholder but also an objective property of natural systems.”<sup>56</sup> Here García-Rivera states more clearly than anywhere else a key aspect of his theological aesthetics: its *objectivity*. An objective aesthetics does two things for García-Rivera: as objective, it satisfies scientific reason; and as an aesthetics, it provides him with a way to address not just the mind but also the heart of his interlocutors. As García-Rivera’s theology-and-science writings make clear, these interlocutors include not just his fellow theologians but his fellow scientists as well.<sup>57</sup>

This audience helps explain the great lengths to which García-Rivera goes to make the objectivity of his theological aesthetics plausible and compelling in *The Community of the Beautiful*. The task he sets himself is to defend the objectivity of *pied* Beauty as opposed to that of symmetric beauty: the Beauty of “all things counter, original, spare, strange,” as a line in Hopkins’s poem “Pied Beauty” goes.<sup>58</sup> He finds in Hans Urs von Balthasar a prototype for a theological aesthetics that partially answers the demands of objectivity and asymmetry, or difference. Von Balthasar’s account of “seeing the form” responds to both these demands in his insistence on the otherness of the form. But García-Rivera

<sup>54</sup> García-Rivera, *St. Martín de Porres*, 102.

<sup>55</sup> Alex García-Rivera, Mark Graves, and Carl Neumann, “Beauty in the Living World,” *Zygon* 44, no. 2 (June 2009): 243. See Brian Owens, “Beauty and Wonder of Science Boosts Researchers’ Well-Being,” *Nature*, March 17, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-00762-8>, which reports the results of a sociological study on scientists’ experience of beauty in their work.

<sup>56</sup> García-Rivera, Graves, and Neumann, “Beauty in the Living World,” 244.

<sup>57</sup> In addition to the works already cited, see also Alejandro García-Rivera, “Endless Forms Most Beautiful,” *Theology and Science* 5, no. 2 (2007): 125–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700701387552>.

<sup>58</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Pied Beauty,” line 7, cited in García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 7. García-Rivera does not cite a specific edition. See “Pied Beauty,” in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 15, for a version that differs slightly (in spacing) from the one that García-Rivera quotes.

finds it necessary to supplement von Balthasar with a lengthy tour through the early American pragmatist tradition. Why?

Metaphorically speaking, we might say that von Balthasar's theology does not "preach" before the Areopagus. It addresses the believer, not the skeptic, providing no bridge to belief for the non-initiated. Von Balthasar speaks the language of mystagogy, rather than that of evangelization. In García-Rivera's own words:

Von Balthasar introduces a radical objectivity that takes theological aesthetics far away from a merely subjective or psychological analysis.

But how can such a radical objectivity be analyzed? It is this question that, I believe, exposes the greatest weakness of von Balthasar's theological aesthetics. The move towards objectivity has as one of its greatest motives the reconciliation between faith and reason. . . . Von Balthasar takes us to the threshold between Reason and Faith [*sic*]. There stands the radical objectivity of the form, at once accessible to Reason and Faith. But is ecstasy reasonable? Is rapture? More important, are there deceptive ecstasies? If so, how can one tell between a deceptive or false ecstasy and a true one? Or does von Balthasar believe all ecstasy is true and good?<sup>59</sup>

In other words, how do we convince the skeptic that "seeing the form" is not a hallucination? In response to this overarching question, García-Rivera develops a pragmatist theological aesthetics because he finds that the basic pragmatist concept, the sign, affords him a logical analysis of "seeing the form," which he uses to make the objectivity of Beauty more intelligible to the nontheologian. "Von Balthasar's approach takes us to theology rather quickly," says García-Rivera.<sup>60</sup> As Gregory Zuschlag points out, García-Rivera opts instead for a "horizontal" approach to the Mystery, which begins with the creature-creature relation, rather than the creature-Creator relation—a theological aesthetics "from below," so to speak.<sup>61</sup> While this approach stands in some tension with von Balthasar's insistence on the utter uniqueness of the form,<sup>62</sup> it allows him to not only perceive divine Beauty in the forms of popular piety, as Zuschlag observes, but also in the creatures of the natural world. In light of García-Rivera's writings in theology and science, his pragmatist response to von Balthasar bears out an apologetic reading of *The*

<sup>59</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 90.

<sup>60</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 102.

<sup>61</sup> Zuschlag, "The Turn to the 'Beautiful' in U.S. Hispanic/Latino Theology," 16.

<sup>62</sup> See the helpful discussion of this point in Casarella, "Beauty and the Little Stories of Holiness," 54–55.

*Community of the Beautiful*, inasmuch as it anticipates García-Rivera's concern in *The Garden of God* to articulate a cosmology convincing to scientist and theologian alike.

### ***The Scientific Heart***

This concern is admittedly distant from García-Rivera's third monograph, *A Wounded Innocence*, in which he develops a theology of art. It is not mentioned, for instance, by Castillo, even as a potential corrective to *The Garden of God*. Nevertheless, adopting *The Garden of God* as a hermeneutic suggests a possible reading of *A Wounded Innocence* as also belonging to García-Rivera's broader dialogue with science. If *The Community of the Beautiful* argues for the objectivity of his empirical aesthetics, García-Rivera's third monograph articulates its subjective condition of possibility: that is, a wounded innocence.

García-Rivera recognizes the need for such a principle: "Beauty's objectivity must engage our subjectivity and move us as well," he says. "For this reason, an empirical aesthetics must take into account both the objectivity and subjectivity of beauty."<sup>63</sup> But that account is not forthcoming in either "Beauty in the Living World" or in *The Community of the Beautiful*, where García-Rivera's emphasis lies on the objectivity of Beauty.<sup>64</sup> In these works he is especially concerned to counter a strictly subjectivist version of the claim that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder."<sup>65</sup> But he speaks to the need to retain an account of the subjective contribution to the experience of the beautiful in yet another reflection on faith and reason. He explains: "Reason needs pathos to discover its true object—the underlying order of the universe—because such order is a product of a divine pathos, a divine love that created all creatures."<sup>66</sup> That is, reason needs to empathize with its object, or it will fail to understand it, inasmuch as that object, in the Christian worldview, is ultimately the creature of Love. The pathos of love is precisely the subject of *A Wounded Innocence*, and so it too fits into the mosaic of García-Rivera's reflections on faith and reason.

In *A Wounded Innocence*, García-Rivera identifies the subjective condition of possibility for the experience of objective Beauty: in a word, vulnerability. Our human vulnerability, once embraced, allows us to feel with

<sup>63</sup> García-Rivera, Graves, and Neumann, "Beauty in the Living World," 250.

<sup>64</sup> García-Rivera does take up the subject briefly in chapter 3 of *The Community of the Beautiful*.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, García-Rivera, Graves, and Neumann, "Beauty in the Living World," 260.

<sup>66</sup> García-Rivera, "On A New List of Aesthetic Categories," 182.

Beauty—which, he concludes in *The Community of the Beautiful*, is ultimately that which moves the heart. Thus García-Rivera completes his theological aesthetics. And thus far, we have seen that the apologetic concern of *The Garden of God* is by no means alien to his aesthetics. There is, however, an undeniable ambiguity toward science in his earlier work, which still raises the possibility of discontinuity between it and *The Garden of God*. The question is whether *The Garden of God* belongs to the same genre as García-Rivera's earlier work or whether it marks a “problematic shift,” as Castillo argues.<sup>67</sup> To that question, I now turn.

### Theological Cosmology as Theo-Drama

Thus far I have turned on its head Castillo's suggestion to read García-Rivera's earlier work as a corrective to *The Garden of God*: instead, I read it as a part of an apologetic project that culminates in *The Garden of God*. García-Rivera's earlier work anticipates *The Garden of God* by articulating an empirical aesthetics, which aims at making *pied* Beauty both plausible and moving to the scientific heart. The question now, however, is whether that effort collapses with its capstone, *The Garden of God*, into a kind of cosmic metanarrative that minimizes suffering and erases difference. Celia Deane-Drummond contrasts such a narrative, which she calls “epic,” with “theo-drama,” a category she draws from von Balthasar. Unlike epic, she says, “drama is about human actions and particular events in particular contexts, and theodrama [*sic*] is that which is connected to God's purpose.”<sup>68</sup> Through its particularity, theo-drama resists the inevitability of epic, its universalizing tendency, and its disinterested standpoint.<sup>69</sup> I argue now that, together with García-Rivera's previous work, *The Garden of God* belongs, not to the genre of epic, but to theo-drama instead, which allows for the “little stories” that are central to García-Rivera's vision.

To establish the point, I compare the theological aesthetics in *The Garden of God* to that of his earlier work, particularly as developed in *The Community of the Beautiful* and *A Wounded Innocence*. Castillo claims that García-Rivera puts his theological aesthetics into a Teilhardian framework in *The Garden of God*. I argue the contrary, that García-Rivera reframes Teilhard in his own terms, without explaining away suffering or erasing difference.

<sup>67</sup> Castillo, “Agony in the Garden?,” 65.

<sup>68</sup> Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution*, 49.

<sup>69</sup> That is, “some standpoint from which we can merely be observers of a sequence of events,” says Deane-Drummond (*Christ and Evolution*, 51).



### ***García-Rivera's Theological Aesthetics: Objective Evidence***<sup>70</sup>

In *The Community of the Beautiful*, García-Rivera sets out to define an objective standard of Beauty that does justice to difference.<sup>71</sup> Following von Balthasar, García-Rivera recognizes Christ as the objective form of Beauty, which makes his a *theological* aesthetics.<sup>72</sup> Centering the aesthetics on Christ does justice to difference because Christ makes the paradigmatic aesthetic experience, “seeing the form,” an encounter with the other.<sup>73</sup> In this context, “‘seeing’ is, paradoxically, an *act of receptivity* to that which is other,” as García-Rivera explains.<sup>74</sup> To really see Christ, and not reduce him to one’s prior categories of understanding, requires a Marian act of faith—a *fiat* that lets the form be, even to the extent of allowing it to form one’s capacity for sight.

García-Rivera supplements this Balthasarian account, however, with the pragmatic philosophy of Charles S. Peirce and Josiah Royce, in order to render his theological aesthetics more accessible to the “Greek” mind, as I have argued previously.<sup>75</sup> Peircian pragmatism gives García-Rivera an account of the objective reality of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, which allows him to analyze creature-creature relations in terms of the three transcendentals.<sup>76</sup> According to García-Rivera’s reading of Peirce, Truth actually subsists in the so-called “Community of the True,” which itself is a necessary consequent of the very structure of Peirce’s logic.<sup>77</sup> For Peirce, the fundamental logical relationship is not dyadic but triadic: it includes not just the signifier and the signified but also the *interpretant*.<sup>78</sup> Even the most basic logical expression,

<sup>70</sup> Although García-Rivera does not delineate his project as von Balthasar does in *Seeing the Form*, I find von Balthasar’s categories of “objective evidence” and “subjective evidence” useful in analyzing García-Rivera’s oeuvre. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2009), pts. 2, 3.

<sup>71</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, chap. 2.

<sup>72</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 86–90.

<sup>73</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 89.

<sup>74</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 89.

<sup>75</sup> Compare Casarella, “Beauty and the Little Stories of Holiness,” 54–55.

<sup>76</sup> See Tirres, “Theological Aesthetics and the Many Pragmatisms of Alejandro García-Rivera,” esp. 60–61.

<sup>77</sup> García-Rivera, *Community of the Beautiful*, 112; see also García-Rivera, “On A New List of Aesthetic Categories,” 177–78. The following paragraphs in this section summarize chapters 4–6 of *Community of the Beautiful* and should be considered wholly derivative.

<sup>78</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 33. For a general introduction to Peirce, see Robert Burch, “Charles Sanders Peirce,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2022 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/peirce/>. For more on

$P=Q$ , for example, includes *three* logical signs: “P,” “Q,” and the interpretant, “=,” which interprets the relationship between signifier and signified.

The interpretant invests Peircian logic with two critical features for García-Rivera. First of all, it renders the relationship between signifier and signified non-arbitrary, so that the triad becomes the bearer of Truth. Secondly, it engenders a logical community: with its interpretant, the first logical triad as a whole becomes a new signifier (the whole statement “ $P=Q$ ” in the previous example), to which a new signified and a new interpretant correspond; and so on and so forth. Thus, the Community of the True is formed: a logical community in which Truth as a real transcendental objectively subsists.

The interpretant *par excellence* is the human person who interprets Truth to another.<sup>79</sup> Interpretation therefore enjoys an intrinsically moral character, which Peirce’s disciple Josiah Royce recognized, for the interpretant can choose either honesty or deception in the act of interpretation.<sup>80</sup> Peirce’s pragmatic account of Truth, then, needed a moral complement, which Royce set out to develop.

The challenge was that Royce found the moral valuation of negatives (for example, honesty and dishonesty), without contextualization, to be completely arbitrary.<sup>81</sup> To use a spatial metaphor: given two points in space, it is purely a matter of convention which is left and which is right. Add a third point as a reference, however, and the matter becomes objective: in a Peircian set, in other words, honesty acquires positive value.<sup>82</sup> The triadic structure of Peircian sets thus provides Royce the means to articulate an objective, pragmatic moral philosophy, in which the Good instantiates itself in the Community of the Good, just as Truth instantiates itself in the Community of the True.

García-Rivera recognizes in Royce’s moral philosophy a proto-aesthetics, which he uses to give an account of the Community of the Beautiful. He points out that the spatial metaphor used to explain Royce’s ethics can be taken literally. Thus, García-Rivera discovers *form* in the triadic structure of the Peircian set, by which the Community of the Beautiful can objectively distinguish between “left” and “right,” “up” and “down,” a “higher” and a “lower.”

Peirce’s semiotic understanding of logic, see Francesco Bellucci, *Pierce’s Speculative Grammar: Logic as Semiotics* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>79</sup> Compare García-Rivera, “On A New List of Aesthetic Categories,” 178.

<sup>80</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 122–23.

<sup>81</sup> Josiah Royce, “Negation,” in *Royce’s Logical Essays: Collected Logical Essays of Josiah Royce*, ed. Daniel S. Robinson (Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown, 1951), 190–93; cited in García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 152.

<sup>82</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 147–48.

With this semiotic interpretation of form, García-Rivera can already claim to have the basis for a concept of Beauty that does justice to “dappled things” by not reducing their originality to reflective symmetry. The aesthetic experience of form in his account depends on foregrounding *asymmetries*, rather than perceiving “unity-in-variety” by reducing difference to the same. But García-Rivera does not simply equate asymmetry with Beauty.

At this point, he reintroduces von Balthasar and the Christ-form to lend his aesthetics its *theological* objectivity. Beauty does not instantiate itself in just any perception of asymmetry, but specifically in the ethico-aesthetic act of “lifting up the lowly.” *Seeing the form*, pragmatically speaking, means foregrounding those whom the Creator foregrounds: seeing requires the Community of the Beautiful to lift up the lowly.<sup>83</sup> As Roberto Goizueta puts it, “This is where beauty and justice meet, in the transformation of receptivity into gratitude and finally, into a participation in the Donor’s own self-emptying love in the world.”<sup>84</sup> Here again we have Mary’s *fiat* as the paradigm of the aesthetic act: Beauty instantiates itself in the Community of the Beautiful through every act that gratefully and gracefully cooperates in lifting up the lowly—through every act of praise.<sup>85</sup>

### ***García-Rivera’s Theological Aesthetics: Subjective Evidence***

This last point touches on the subjective evidence for García-Rivera’s theological aesthetics, which distinguishes it from an ethics. Beauty is that which inspires praise. In García-Rivera’s own terms, Beauty is that which “moves the human heart.”<sup>86</sup> It is this interior movement that constitutes the subjective evidence of Beauty and, most importantly, García-Rivera’s response to the problem of suffering.

While *The Community of the Beautiful* already addresses the problem of suffering in part, through the ethico-aesthetic standard of foregrounding, it does not take on the full force of the problem. In particular, it leaves the passivity of suffering to one side. In *A Wounded Innocence*, García-Rivera responds directly to this problem.

It is critical to understand his response, as Roberto Goizueta points out, because it carries over directly into *The Garden of God*.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>83</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 187–96.

<sup>84</sup> Goizueta, “The Theologian as Wounded Innocent,” 41.

<sup>85</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 185.

<sup>86</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 9.

<sup>87</sup> In Goizueta’s estimation, “It is precisely [a wounded innocence]—so strange sounding at first glance—that makes possible and generates a theological cosmology.” Goizueta, “The Theologian as Wounded Innocent,” 37.

Unfortunately, García-Rivera is also perhaps at his most obscure in *A Wounded Innocence*, as he himself acknowledges at one point.<sup>88</sup> He is clear, at least, about his subject: *A Wounded Innocence* is about “the human capacity to experience [the mystery of Beauty].”<sup>89</sup> To put it in Balthasarian terms, *A Wounded Innocence* communicates the subjective evidence of Beauty.

In a certain sense, García-Rivera cannot but be obscure here because the subjective capacity for Beauty, *as* subjective, cannot be objectified or seen. It can only be seen *with*. *A Wounded Innocence* thus becomes an attempt to communicate an experience to the reader: the experience of seeing with a wounded innocence. It is a performative, rather than an explanatory, text. García-Rivera puts it in Royce’s terms: he means for this text to facilitate a “religious insight” for the reader—that is, the existential apprehension of ultimate meaning.<sup>90</sup> The text is more akin to the works of art within its pages than a theory of suffering or a theodicy.

That being said, “wounded innocence” has an objective sign, which García-Rivera identifies as human vulnerability. Our passibility is both the essence of the problem of suffering and also the very condition of possibility for our capacity to experience Beauty—to be moved. But our vulnerability, as such, is not yet the subjective evidence of Beauty. It is not the movement itself.

That movement comes to light through the paschal mystery, by which we can recognize our vulnerability as a “happy fault.”<sup>91</sup> García-Rivera develops this insight through a moving meditation on Caravaggio’s masterpiece, *The Incredulity of St. Thomas*, which depicts the risen, wounded Christ gently guiding the hand of Thomas to probe Christ’s wounded side.<sup>92</sup> But García-Rivera focuses on Thomas’s other hand, which “appears to clutch his [own] side.”<sup>93</sup> García-Rivera sees the surprise clearly registered on the face of St. Thomas as “surprise at the realization that he, too, is also pierced.”<sup>94</sup> In this intimate moment, Thomas learns that a hardened cynicism is not the only possible response to evil. By the gift of the paschal mystery, he can come to see his own woundedness as an intrinsic element in his perception of Christ’s wounded

<sup>88</sup> Alex García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 119.

<sup>89</sup> García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence*, x.

<sup>90</sup> García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence*, 32–34. “Religious insight” was Royce’s answer to William James and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. For García-Rivera’s source, see Josiah Royce, *The Sources of Religious Insight* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1912), 5–9.

<sup>91</sup> García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence*, 24.

<sup>92</sup> García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence*, chap. 7.

<sup>93</sup> García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence*, 120.

<sup>94</sup> García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence*, 120.

form as moving. His vulnerability allows him to be a living interpretant of Christ's Beauty.

Thus, the subjective evidence of Beauty consists in the arduous realization of a wounded innocence, which reflects Christ's. This realization is nothing less than the actual perception of our own being as gift, our wounds notwithstanding—or, as Goizueta suggests, nothing less than our participation in Christ's kenosis.<sup>95</sup> To perceive something as a gift requires the capacity to receive it as other, which already entails a kenotic movement, a self-emptying that refuses to claim the other as mine. Fully accepting the gift, particularly in the case of those "inner gifts," such as talents, means giving it away again, which completes the kenotic movement.<sup>96</sup> For García-Rivera, our vulnerability teaches us that our very being is other. We, too, are pierced. In the light of the paschal mystery, we can also say: we, too, are gift. And when we are moved by the piercing of Christ to give of ourselves, we participate in Christ's kenotic response to evil, not theoretically, but dramatically.

Though he only uses the term elsewhere, *A Wounded Innocence* marks García-Rivera's oeuvre up to that point as "theo-drama," rather than "epic." Drawing likewise on von Balthasar, he uses the term in the same sense as Deane-Drummond.<sup>97</sup> Unlike epic, theo-drama paradoxically finds the universal in the particular according to the logic of participatory reason. "There are two levels of order which reason can grasp in the universe," says García-Rivera. "First, there is the kind of order that relates one thing to another in a mechanical or impassive way and, second, there is a deeper order that relates one thing to another in a participatory or sympathetic way."<sup>98</sup> Epic reason impassively relates human history to the history of the cosmos, but theo-dramatic reason relies on sympathetic resonance to connect human-scale stories to what García-Rivera calls the "Big Story."<sup>99</sup>

Theo-drama invites our participation in the bigger story. García-Rivera highlights this latter aspect of theo-drama in *St. Martín de Porres*. "[Little stories]," he says, "are not told to replace the 'Big Story' but, instead, to make such a story possible"—that is, possible for the particular individual.<sup>100</sup> He characterizes our "little stories" as "faith seeking understanding."<sup>101</sup> Elsewhere he writes:

<sup>95</sup> Goizueta, "The Theologian as Wounded Innocent," 40–41.

<sup>96</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 78–80.

<sup>97</sup> García-Rivera, "On A New List of Aesthetic Categories," 177–80.

<sup>98</sup> García-Rivera, "On A New List of Aesthetic Categories," 182.

<sup>99</sup> García-Rivera, *St. Martín de Porres*, 20–21.

<sup>100</sup> García-Rivera, *St. Martín de Porres*, 2.

<sup>101</sup> García-Rivera, *St. Martín de Porres*, 20–21.

These “little stories” become a dramatics under the sense of Beauty. The sense of Beauty offers a horizon, a “Big Story,” that provides a glimpse of a theo-drama, a drama in which our “little stories” can be seen in that strange aesthetics that is peculiar to drama. It is the experience of a vulnerable beauty, the beautiful seen through its fragility and weakness, indeed, even in its tragic dimension.<sup>102</sup>

García-Rivera has the cross specifically in mind here, and even more specifically, the Esquípulli crucifix, a Guatemalan image of the crucifixion beloved “throughout Latin America.”<sup>103</sup> The Esquípulli crucifix mediates between Christ’s passion and its devotees’ “little stories” of suffering, allowing them to empathize with Christ. In turn, it expresses their prayer that God might sympathize with them. García-Rivera continues:

A mutual catharsis emerges from the dramatic dimension of the sense of Beauty interlacing the sacred “Big Story” with the profane “little story,” sanctifying and healing the latter, even raising it to a new level. Such is the Roman Catholic understanding of grace. In its dramatic dimension, the sense of Beauty is also an experience of grace.<sup>104</sup>

Thus, the cross becomes a sign of “divine pathos,” which moves us to participate in the drama of salvation.<sup>105</sup>

García-Rivera favors examples like that of the Esquípulli crucifix and the mass-produced prayer card of St. Martín de Porres because they capture the dramatic or “lived-with” character of his aesthetics.<sup>106</sup> It is dramatically different from “aesthetic disinterestedness,” which is his analogue to “epic” in *A Wounded Innocence*.<sup>107</sup> His theological aesthetics belongs outside the art museum, where a beautiful prayer card becomes more beautiful still with

<sup>102</sup> García-Rivera, “On A New List of Aesthetic Categories,” 177.

<sup>103</sup> García-Rivera, “On A New List of Aesthetic Categories,” 175. See page 176 for a photograph of a replica of the Esquípulli crucifix at the San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio, Texas, taken by García-Rivera. It depicts the cross before a bank of votive candles, as well as the offerings and prayer requests left by pilgrims. “At the feet of the crucifix,” García-Rivera explains, “people have placed photos, prayers, requests, in short, their ‘little stories’” (177). For a freely accessible picture of this same shrine, see R. E. Blue, *El Cristo Negro (The Black Christ) Shrine*, June 2008, photograph, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/reblue/2874878644>.

<sup>104</sup> García-Rivera, “On A New List of Aesthetic Categories,” 177.

<sup>105</sup> García-Rivera, “On A New List of Aesthetic Categories,” 177.

<sup>106</sup> García-Rivera, “On A New List of Aesthetic Categories,” 175.

<sup>107</sup> García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence*, 77.

every fingerprint and crease.<sup>108</sup> It is this “sensibility,” born of *mestizaje*, born of popular piety, born of St. Martín de Porres and of the Esquipuli Christ, that is García-Rivera’s contribution to science.<sup>109</sup>

### ***The Garden of God***

I argue now that *The Garden of God* confirms and completes this contribution without succumbing to the epic genre. Though García-Rivera does draw explicitly on Teilhard in *The Garden of God*, I contend that, by centering his cosmology on *place* instead of *time*, he produces an original work, which does not fall victim to the postmodern critique.

Granted, Castillo’s reading of *The Garden of God* as a Teilhardian epic is not without evidence.<sup>110</sup> García-Rivera’s choice of words in *The Garden of God* is not always felicitous. His framing question, first of all, causes worry. “Are we at home in the cosmos?” he asks.<sup>111</sup> In her version of the postmodern critique, Lisa Sideris faults just this question for lending itself to narratives that flatten out difference by reducing the alien wonder of the cosmos to a human scale.<sup>112</sup>

And a particularly infelicitous expression in the introduction to *The Garden of God*, which Castillo highlights, appears to frame the whole project as an explanation of suffering.<sup>113</sup> “Only a cosmic theology of heaven and earth,” says García-Rivera, “can truly answer the questions raised by a human hell [i.e., the hell of nuclear apocalypse].”<sup>114</sup> And that theology he characterizes in the critical, penultimate chapter, as “a cosmic story. . . . [in which] the theologian cannot help but see . . . the eternal music coming out of the divine life itself, the dynamics of the paschal mystery heard through the strings of living, dynamic forms.”<sup>115</sup> Hence Castillo attributes to García-Rivera the “cosmological meta-narrative of progress” that he regards as a common problem in Teilhardian projects.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>108</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 116; see Tirres, “Theological Aesthetics and the Many Pragmatisms of Alejandro García-Rivera,” 61.

<sup>109</sup> See García-Rivera, “On A New List of Aesthetic Categories,” 182.

<sup>110</sup> It is also not without support from other readers of García-Rivera. Despite viewing *The Garden of God* as García-Rivera’s “summa,” Schreiter also shares some of Castillo’s worry about the use of Teilhard in the text: “I recall pointing out to him,” says Schreiter, “that, like Teilhard, his cosmic vision downplayed the significance of evil.” Schreiter, “Spaces Engaged and Transfigured,” 45.

<sup>111</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 1.

<sup>112</sup> Sideris, *Consecrating Science*, 9.

<sup>113</sup> Castillo, “Agony in the Garden?,” 67.

<sup>114</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, ix.

<sup>115</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 93.

<sup>116</sup> Castillo, “Agony in the Garden?,” 67.

The problem with this reading is that there is no narrative of progress in *The Garden of God*, nor any cosmic stories. The only stories García-Rivera tells in it are little stories, such as the story of his vision of hell at the beginning. And the “answer” that García-Rivera proposes in response to this vision is just the kind of “answer” that one finds in the rest of his oeuvre. García-Rivera frequently comments on his readers’ frustration with his failure to provide clear, precise answers: “But can you tell me exactly what a wounded innocence means?” pleads a reader, whom García-Rivera quotes at the end of *A Wounded Innocence*.<sup>117</sup> In the case of *A Garden of God*, at least, the lack of a clear answer is an advantage, for there can be no pat answer to the problem of evil, no theoretical solution. A “theoretical solution” is not what García-Rivera has in mind for the meaning of “answer,” in any case. He clarifies what he means by an “answer” in the introduction: an “aesthetic insight,” which is García-Rivera’s aesthetic rendering of Royce’s religious insight.<sup>118</sup> Elsewhere, García-Rivera defines an “aesthetic insight” succinctly as “a *unitive revelatory experience* that touches us in a very personal way,” but an example of an aesthetic insight would perhaps serve better than a definition here.<sup>119</sup> The surge of the heart that sees the form of Christ on the cross—that surge of the heart is an aesthetic insight. In *The Garden of God*, García-Rivera means to facilitate this kind of experience as a response to his vision of hell. “It is my intention to move the heart so as to guide the mind,” he says.<sup>120</sup> The aesthetic insight he would cultivate does not explain away evil; he characterizes it, rather, as “a call to repent.”<sup>121</sup>

This emphasis on repentance distinguishes García-Rivera’s project from Teilhard’s and also links it to the rest of his oeuvre, carrying forward the ambivalence toward science characteristic of his earlier work. As Castillo observes, “It is this posture of repentance that informs the entire scope of [García-Rivera’s] theological corpus.”<sup>122</sup> Although he is no less interested in the plausibility of the Christian worldview than Teilhard, he does not ultimately treat evil as a problem needing rational explanation, but rather as a form of the cross. As such, he does not need to explain it. It has its own power to move. It is the failure to see the cross that García-Rivera finds problematic. *The Garden of God* is thus an attempt to render the form of the cross visible in cosmos—or rather, in every living form of the cosmos, so that we moderns might be

<sup>117</sup> García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence*, 119.

<sup>118</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, x.

<sup>119</sup> García-Rivera, “On A New List of Aesthetic Categories,” 177; emphasis in the original.

<sup>120</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, ix.

<sup>121</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, ix.

<sup>122</sup> Castillo, “Agony in the Garden?,” 65.



moved to repent. Our *place* in the cosmos depends on it: if we are moved by the Christ-form in Darwin's "entangled bank," then, given García-Rivera's understanding of "place," we will be at home.

Though García-Rivera nowhere defines the concept of place explicitly, Robert Schreiter distills this definition:

Place . . . speaks of space that is indwelt, marked by a density of relationship, by beauty, and by truth. Place must be large enough to encompass the visible and the invisible, indeed the whole cosmos. It is a space in which humanity and indeed all of creation is to dwell and to flourish. Place, [García-Rivera] says at one point, engenders love and recognition of beauty, while place is "home," where one can dwell with memory, with hope.<sup>123</sup>

Though Schreiter uses the term "space" in his definition, García-Rivera strongly contrasts the two concepts, following Walter Brueggemann's argument in *The Land*.<sup>124</sup> "The dominion of God cannot be delocalized," says García-Rivera. "It is not space. It is not even a time such as the future. It is place."<sup>125</sup> Space connotes a flat, empty uniformity for García-Rivera, in which different locations are distinguished only by distances and relative orientations. Place, on the other hand, connotes *particularity*—all the unique characteristics that make a place other in relationship to every other place, as far as those who love that place are concerned. In asking if we can be at home in the cosmos—that is, if we have a place there—García-Rivera, then, does not so much ask if we can reduce the cosmos to a comfortable size, as Sideris might fear, so much as he asks whether it can make our heart surge.

García-Rivera uses Teilhard because Teilhard so clearly saw Christ's form in the cosmos, but at the same time, he is not an uncritical reader. He faults Teilhard primarily for an overemphasis on the future, at the expense of the here-and-now.<sup>126</sup> Teilhard, in García-Rivera's estimation, does not give sufficient attention to the particular because of his "preoccupation with the future."<sup>127</sup> In this regard, García-Rivera could not differ more strongly from Teilhard. What matters for García-Rivera is place. "Where is Jesus now?" he asks, with the emphasis on where.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>123</sup> Schreiter, "Spaces Engaged and Transfigured," 45.

<sup>124</sup> See Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith, Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977), chap. 1.

<sup>125</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 44.

<sup>126</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 45; he also criticizes Teilhard for lacking a pneumatology (42–44).

<sup>127</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 51.

<sup>128</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 42.

A passage early in *The Garden of God* brings out this distinction.<sup>129</sup> “We are going to the *garden of God*, our home in the cosmos,” García-Rivera says.<sup>130</sup> Although this passage clearly shows Teilhard’s influence, it also introduces a subtle but significant change of emphasis. Teilhard’s vision, as Haught underlines, looks to the future.<sup>131</sup> But for García-Rivera:

This garden is not so much a future as it is a place. It is not a question of When will we get there? but Where are we going? Putting it this way exposes what has been a classic modern obsession with time that has dominated contemporary theology far too long. As such, it has obscured our traditional connections to the cosmic nature of redemption.<sup>132</sup>

García-Rivera regards an emphasis on place as a way to connect theological cosmology to the biblical tradition of the Promised Land,<sup>133</sup> which he regards as one missing link between Teilhard’s cosmic Christ and the church’s Christ.<sup>134</sup> Haught would point out that García-Rivera’s critique of Teilhard misses the connection between the biblical theme of promise and Teilhard’s emphasis on the future.<sup>135</sup> But in any case, García-Rivera’s emphasis on place rather than time signals that there will be no overarching narrative, no “cosmic story” on offer in *The Garden of God*, on par with Teilhard’s invitation to find hope in future convergence.

García-Rivera’s concept of place further distances his theological cosmology from Teilhard’s by linking the theological aesthetics of *The Garden of God* to that of his earlier work. He does find an incipient aesthetics in Teilhard, which is one reason he finds Teilhard congenial to his project. Haught brings out this aspect of Teilhard’s vision, which Haught calls an “aesthetic cosmological principle.”<sup>136</sup> “All the moments of an evolving world,” he says, “are harvested into the divine experience in an ever intensifying aesthetic pattern. Here all the suffering, struggle, loss, and triumph in evolution are finally endowed with eternal meaning.”<sup>137</sup> Beauty here lies in the future pattern of the whole. García-Rivera’s emphasis on place, however, takes the aesthetics

<sup>129</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this passage.

<sup>130</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 6; emphasis in the original.

<sup>131</sup> Haught, *The Cosmic Vision of Teilhard de Chardin*, 189.

<sup>132</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 6.

<sup>133</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 9.

<sup>134</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 40–41, 44–45.

<sup>135</sup> See, for example, Haught, *God after Einstein*, 10–11; Haught, *The Cosmic Vision of Teilhard de Chardin*, 41–44.

<sup>136</sup> John F. Haught, *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008), 137–38.

<sup>137</sup> Haught, *God after Darwin*, 136.

of *The Garden of God* in the direction of *The Community of the Beautiful* and *A Wounded Innocence*, not Haught's aesthetic cosmological principle, because "place" concerns García-Rivera with present *topoi*—with difference and form—not future *telos*. Whether the living and dying of cow, trout, and finch moves us now is of greater import to García-Rivera than the ultimate aesthetic pattern of the whole.<sup>138</sup>

Haught resists imagining this future pattern now because to do so would expose his interpretation of Teilhard to the postmodern critique. "Full intelligibility is something human minds can anticipate, not possess," he says. "Meaning is something for which we must—in some way—always wait. If it is to be a constant source of nourishment, we can only draw upon it, never master or control it."<sup>139</sup> To describe the shape of the cosmic pattern now would not only falsify the pattern; it would also lay claim to the very overarching perspective singled out by the postmodern critique as autarchic. But for García-Rivera, it is critical to see cosmic Beauty, in all its particularity, because seeing Beauty means participating in the ethico-aesthetic act of lifting up the lowly.

The heart, in fact, of *The Garden of God*, is García-Rivera's empirical aesthetics of pied Beauty, or actually a refinement thereof. A version of it appears in *The Community of the Beautiful*, where García-Rivera argues that the very being of the cosmos is objectively beautiful, in virtue of the relation between the haecceity of the various creatures of the cosmos and their contingency.<sup>140</sup> The architecture of the argument belongs to Royce: the interrelation between different existents contextualizes and gives positive value to existence over non-existence, "charg[ing] the very being of the world with the sense of a 'higher' and a 'lower,'" and leading García-Rivera to exclaim that "being is . . . essentially aesthetic!"<sup>141</sup> But while this argument works to overcome the "existential negative symmetry" between "to be or not to be," considered in the abstract, it leaves implicit the form of Christ as the ultimate reason for valuing existence over non-existence.<sup>142</sup> In *The Garden of God*, García-Rivera makes that link explicit.

Royce still remains a source, though García-Rivera leaves Royce's influence mostly implicit in *The Garden of God*.<sup>143</sup> He interprets Royce in an evolutionary

<sup>138</sup> Compare Hopkins, "Pied Beauty," lines 2–3.

<sup>139</sup> Haught, *The Cosmic Vision of Teilhard de Chardin*, 24.

<sup>140</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 163.

<sup>141</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 164.

<sup>142</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, 163–64.

<sup>143</sup> Compare García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, x, 128–29. García-Rivera opts for an architectural interpretation of Royce in *The Garden of God*, based on Christopher Alexander's notion of "centers"; *The Phenomenon of Life*, vol. 1, *The Nature of Order* (Berkeley, CA: Center for Environmental Structure, 2002), 85–86. However, his use of

key by grounding living form in the different, unique shape it gives to time. Every living form is a form in virtue of its contingency—its individual history in relation to other living forms. As in his aesthetic interpretation of Royce in *The Community of the Beautiful*, difference makes for form here too, only in this instance, it is a difference apparent in the dynamic interplay between living forms over time and not just a static difference.<sup>144</sup>

He takes this empirical aesthetics one step further, however, by providing an explicit account of living form's power to move. The Beauty of living form is explicitly paschal. We perceive that Beauty not just because living forms are contingent but because they are *kenotic*. Referring to Darwin's famous "entangled bank," García-Rivera writes, "It is a place where time takes shape and form in the kenotic self-emptying of life unto life."<sup>145</sup> The individual drama of every living thing, its "little story," takes on an immense power to move when seen in the cruciform light of the paschal mystery.<sup>146</sup> Here is Jesus now: in the kenotic drama, the theo-drama, of the dappled tangle of life lived on the bank.

When we can see things in this light, we enjoy communion with them, and we are at home in the cosmos. This conclusion to *The Garden of God* brings us back to both *The Community of the Beautiful*, on the one hand, and *A Wounded Innocence*, on the other. First of all, it is not some overarching, cosmic meta-narrative that provides a place for humanity in the cosmos. Nor is it even our inchoate apprehension of the cosmos as a beautiful whole, allowing us to hope that all of the pain and tragedy in human and evolutionary history will turn out to be "all creation groaning in labor pains even until now" (Rom 8:22). On this point, García-Rivera's further critique of Teilhard could serve equally well as a critique of Haught, as he asks:

Is sanctification part of the human phenomenon? Are we sanctified as we evolve or do we evolve because we are sanctified? Also, what is the relationship of sanctification to salvation in an evolving cosmos? Are we saved simply by evolving? Or must we sanctify our evolving to be saved? These questions are some of the most troubling in Teilhard's vision.<sup>147</sup>

Haught calls Teilhard's vision a cosmic drama, but García-Rivera asks, Where is the drama? Where is there a place in this vision for "the tragic sense of life," the

Alexander is unfortunately a case of explaining the obscure by the more obscure, so I will bracket the concept of "centers" here.

<sup>144</sup> See García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 92.

<sup>145</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 92.

<sup>146</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 93.

<sup>147</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 94.

place for sin, salvation, and sanctification?<sup>148</sup> In response to these questions, García-Rivera suggests the following:

Evolution is a work *in* progress but not necessarily *of* progress. Sanctification is more than progress. Sanctification has more to do with reconciliation and communion than with simply advancing to a higher level.<sup>149</sup>

This claim need not read as a condemnation of Teilhard. As Haught points out in his defense of Teilhard, Teilhard holds true to the Trinitarian principle that “true union differentiates,” so progress for Teilhard means more than just leveling up.<sup>150</sup> But progress toward the Omega Point, even read charitably, is simply not the focus of García-Rivera’s theological cosmology.

He does claim that we can apprehend a kind of unity in the cosmos, but it is not the unity of a future whole:

Natural complexity is ill served by the notion of an emergent, irreducible whole. It is the plurality of forms in a special kind of unity that together describes nature’s complexity. While such unity leads to a whole, this unity is not the whole itself. If it were then there would be no real significance to the parts that make the whole. No, the unity is more subtle and profound. It is the unity that binds the parts and the whole.<sup>151</sup>

This unity is, in other words, the Community of the Beautiful: the relational unity of the transcendental in García-Rivera’s theological pragmatism, which respects the difference of the unique individuals belonging to it. The Community of the Beautiful is not the cosmos, nor the creatures that inhabit the cosmos: it includes both cosmos and creatures. In *The Garden of God*, García-Rivera defines it as a spiritual unity, which has its ground in the reconciling work of the Sanctifier here-and-now, not in its anticipation of Christ to come. Thus, García-Rivera does not propose an “ever intensifying aesthetic pattern” as the form of his theological cosmology; rather, he proposes the Community of the Beautiful.

As such, García-Rivera’s theological cosmology calls for our dramatic participation. In *The Community of the Beautiful*, the true perception of Beauty requires us to “lift up the lowly”: only in doing so do we complete the kenotic movement within ourselves by foregrounding those whom the Creator has foregrounded. In *The Garden of God*, the true perception of cosmic Beauty

<sup>148</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 120.

<sup>149</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 102; emphasis in the original.

<sup>150</sup> Haught, *The Cosmic Vision of Teilhard de Chardin*, 220–21.

<sup>151</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 92.

requires us to “en-joy” our place in the cosmos, through our cooperation with the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>152</sup> “We are not just to enjoy the beauty of living forms,” says García-Rivera. “We are also to be formed by their beauty.”<sup>153</sup> We are to see the form, in von Balthasar’s sense: to give our fiat to the cosmos by letting it be ever more fully a place of Beauty.

And thus, García-Rivera’s theological cosmology calls also for our vulnerability. Only through the kenotic embrace of our own woundedness—only by the way of the cross—will we receive the aesthetic insight that García-Rivera names “the garden of God.” This place is neither a paradise lost nor a paradise to come.<sup>154</sup> “It is a place found not in the past nor in the future but in the present,” says García-Rivera.<sup>155</sup> And it interprets the relationship between humanity and the cosmos as a relationship of shared vulnerability and of tender devotion. Tending the garden is not a matter of eventual triumph over but rather cooperation with the natural world, which expresses an appropriate relationship to the tragic character of this world. The garden is not Eden—it is not a utopia that can only exist in the imagination. It is a real place, which objectively signifies the right human relationship to the woundedness of creation, including our own fragility and woundedness. We arrive there not by a return to Eden but by the way of the cross. It is a wounded innocence that sees the garden of God.<sup>156</sup> And in the garden of God, the wounds of creation call for our tender, repentant care.

It is this call that is truly distinctive of García-Rivera’s contribution to science as a theologian. He does not tell an epic universe story that would convince the science-engaged skeptic by reconciling the deep suffering of evolutionary and human history with the existence of God through the promise of a beautiful future. I have argued that he does aim to convince the skeptic, and not just in *The Garden of God*. But he does so by inviting the skeptic to take leave of the page and discover God in God’s garden, by tending to the lowly.

As such it is theo-drama, not epic. Its convincing power lies not in the coherence of a master narrative but rather in the capacity of its little stories to move the heart. While García-Rivera does labor to make an empirical aesthetics plausible, ultimately, he presumes the objective Beauty and Goodness of the Christ-form as having an intrinsic power to move, following von Balthasar. Following Teilhard, and with the help of Peirce and Royce, he sees the Christ-form in the deeps of the cosmos. But he directs the skeptic to look for those

<sup>152</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 102–04.

<sup>153</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 99.

<sup>154</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 127.

<sup>155</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 132.

<sup>156</sup> See Goizueta, “The Theologian as Wounded Innocent,” 40.

depths, not in the far-flung future nor in the cosmos as a whole, but rather in little places: at a Lutheran church called St. Martín de Porres, in the intimate space between a bank of votive candles and a replica of the Esquípulli crucifix, and even in a hellish trailer, on the tarmac at Boeing field.

### Conclusion

Can theology really not see its true eschatological mission in our day? As we run out of room for an ever-growing population, as the polar caps melt into the sea and the weather becomes more unpredictable and hostile, as we continue to consume ourselves into extinction, can theology not see their eschatological import?<sup>157</sup>

Early in his career, García-Rivera asked what contribution he could make as a “Hispanic physicist-theologian” to the dialogue between theology and the natural sciences. Late in his career, he asked the rhetorical question that begins this conclusion. It speaks directly to the contribution he made. With Teilhard, García-Rivera understood the need for a proclamation of the Gospel that could convince a deeply science-engaged and skeptical world. Thanks to our science, Teilhard realized that we hold the future in our hands. He likewise realized, as did García-Rivera, that we also hold the power of apocalypse.

Neither Teilhard nor García-Rivera rejected science, and both strove to make the Gospel convincing and intelligible in the Areopagus of today. I would argue that Teilhard’s insistence on calling *The Human Phenomenon* “science” signals an apologetic intention to make his claims as widely accessible as possible. Similarly, García-Rivera’s career-long insistence on an “empirical aesthetics” signals his attempt to make his claims about Beauty accessible to the scientific mind as well. Together with Teilhard, García-Rivera challenges us to stretch our understanding of what belongs to the empirical study of the world so that we might put our science to good use.

I have argued, however, that García-Rivera’s attempt to do so is uniquely his own. He did not develop, nor did he intend to develop, an evolutionary theology. Rather, he gave us a theological interpretation of evolution, which directs our attention to the particularity and the fragility of all things counter, original, spare, strange. It was the Beauty of such things that he himself found profoundly convincing, or rather, moving, and by directing our attention to them, he sought to move us as well: to see them, and to see Christ crucified in them; to repent; to lift them up; to tend them.

<sup>157</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 130.

To do so, he relied on his unique style of theological *mestizaje*, piecing together a mosaic of radically different thinkers and traditions. If that style at times frustrates, it also exhibits the virtue of what García-Rivera called “theology from the perspective of the *mestizo*”: a theology that brings together “popular wisdom” and the “disciplined wisdom” of academia in order to seek change.<sup>158</sup> Another Areopagite theology might seek to revise or reformulate Christian doctrine in light of modern science in order to make it more convincing. García-Rivera, however, sought to bring the wisdom of the pueblo to the Areopagus, finding, in the end, a prayer card of St. Martín de Porres far more moving than any new doctrinal formulation.

His approach deserves greater recognition, study, and development because he was right: “Reason guided by right pathos becomes a marvelous sensibility, the sense of Beauty. And, reciprocally, the sense of Beauty takes reason into a new redemptive reality, the personal realm of community and communion with one another and with a sensible Mystery.”<sup>159</sup> It was this sensibility, and this Mystery, that was García-Rivera’s gift to science.

<sup>158</sup> García-Rivera, “A Contribution to the Dialogue Between Theology and the Natural Sciences,” 58.

<sup>159</sup> García-Rivera, “On A New List of Aesthetic Categories,” 182.