

WONDER IN THE FACE OF BEAUTY AND THE POETIC WORD. AN AESTHETIC AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE*

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RESUMÉ : *L'émerveillement devant la beauté et la parole poétique. Une perspective esthétique et théologique.* L'objectif de cet article est de montrer que Hans Urs von Balthasar et Karl Rahner ont présenté une esthétique théologique centrée sur l'émerveillement : tous deux le considèrent comme une réponse du sujet à la révélation divine, qui révèle une belle figure à voir et une parole poétique à entendre. La paire esthétique émerveillement / réponse correspond à la paire anthropologique amour / liberté, de sorte que le mouvement de l'émerveillement s'enracine dans la disposition amoureuse et la réponse dans la liberté. Dans l'horizon épistémologique du dialogue interdisciplinaire entre Littérature, Esthétique et Théologie de notre propre recherche, nous appliquerons ces médiations aux Quatre Quatuors de T.S. Eliot, en le trouvant comme représentatif de l'émerveillement esthétique théologique décrit en son sein.

Mots clés : Paul Ricoeur, Hans Urs von Balthasar, T.S. Eliot, Les Quatre Quatuors, Merveilleux, Esthétique théologique, Littérature.

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REZUMAT: *Minunea în fața Frumosului și a Cuvântului poetic. O perspectivă estetică și teologică.* Scopul acestei lucrări este de a arăta că Hans Urs von Balthasar și Karl Rahner au prezentat o estetică teologică centrată pe uimire: amândoi o consideră ca răspuns al subiectului la revelația divină, care dezvăluie o figură frumoasă de văzut și un cuvânt poetic de auzit. Perechea estetică uimire/răspuns corespunde perechii antropologice iubire/libertate, astfel încât mișcarea de uimire este înrădăcinată în dispoziția iubitoare și răspunsul în libertate. În orizontul epistemologic al dialogului interdisciplinar între Literatură, Estetică și Teologie al propriei noastre cercetări, vom aplica aceste medieri la cele Patru Cvartete ale lui T.S. Eliot, găsim-le reprezentative pentru mirarea estetică teologică descrisă în cadrul acesteia.

Cuvinte-cheie: Paul Ricoeur, Hans Urs von Balthasar, T.S. Eliot, Patru Cvartete, Minunea, Estetică teologică, Literatură.

The first methodological stage of the interdisciplinary path covered between Literature and Theology is indebted to the reflection on the *aesthetic figure* conceived by Hans Urs von Balthasar. Though not in the last place, among the consequences of this choice we find the confirmed need for some philosophical mediation that confers such dialogue both the metaphysical universality granted by analogy as well as the interpersonal dynamism inherent to the phenomenological horizon referred to of theological aesthetics open to action and truth.

In a second stage, the addition of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics allows us to maintain the figure as the core of mediation. On the one hand, this was developed based on the theoretical framework of the living metaphor, the triple mimesis, the oneself as another; and, on the other hand, based on the *text* found in the interpersonal tension of *testimonial call and response* on which the French philosopher laid the core of his biblical hermeneutics. Therefore, the Swiss theologian's vision methodological of wholeness of the self in the figure did not prevent the inclusion of the poetic word which demanded to be heard before being seen, and interpreted, before being perceived: the path towards the search for a new mediation which encompassed seeing the figure and hearing the word was thus traced out.

WONDER IN THE FACE OF BEAUTY AND THE POETIC WORD.
AN AESTHETIC AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*², considered from the organising perspective of this conference, turned out to be a suitable "theological setting" to explore the possibility of *expanding the figural and textual horizon* to new categories, while keeping the pre-eminence of the literary text as our methodological premise. The *beauty of the figure*, which is perceived itself as wonder (*Wunder*) to the eyes that see it, thus arousing admiration (*Bewunderung*) and shudder (*Schauer*), seemed to become qualitatively enriched with the inclusion of the hearing dimension present in the *beauty of the poetic word*. In an attempt to show the convergence of both perspectives into the same aesthetic wonder and admiration, in addition to the already assimilated Balthasarian and Ricoeurian categories, we will include on the one hand, *silence* and *hospitality* as the ways of aesthetic reception proposed by phenomenologist Jean-Louis Chrétien, and, on the other, *receptiveness* (*Empfänglichkeit*) and the *sublime* (*Erhabene*) as two essential ideas of Karl Rahner's theological Aesthetics. Our presentation will follow the trillogical scheme of interdisciplinary interpretation whose epistemological statute we have already proven in prior research studies. Along this line and starting *from* the aesthetic figure, we will take our place *in* the free exchange of love's scenery of existential drama in order to move *towards* the theological truth that only the literary text will have unveiled in the peculiarity of its essentially figural, metaphoric, and symbolic language³.

² T. S. Eliot, *Cuatro cuartetos [Four Quartets]*, bilingual edition by Esteban Pujals Gesalí, Madrid 1999. Verses are numbered as in this edition.

³ As a reference to this subject matter, please take note of some titles of the issues published as a result of research studies conducted using the interdisciplinary method among literature, aesthetics, and theology. Cf. C. I. Avenatti de Palumbo, *La literatura en la Estética de Hans Urs von Balthasar. Figura, drama y verdad*, Salamanca 2002; Prolegómenos para el diálogo entre literatura, estética y teología, in: *La literatura en la Estética de Hans Urs von Balthasar. Figura, drama y verdad*; Juan Quelas (coord.), *Belleza que hiere*, Buenos Aires 2010, 17-39; *Figura y método*, *Teología* 93, 2007, 271-283; Las figuras del exceso y el anonadamiento como mediaciones estético-dramáticas del diálogo entre literatura y teología en América latina, in: C. I. Avenatti de Palumbo (coord.), *Miradas desde el Bicentenario. Imaginarios, figuras y poéticas*, Buenos Aires 2011, 127-135; La simbólica de la acción y la metáfora del teatro. Correspondencias entre las mediaciones de la hermenéutica de Paul Ricoeur y la teodramática de Hans Urs von Balthasar en el diálogo literatura y teología, *Taller de Letras*, Número Especial 2, Santiago 2012, 91-98.

1. From the inaudible music and the invisible look: silence as wonder of being

Which beauty can still be an act of sending towards something else? The beauty which may cause that shudder (*Schauer*) regarded by Goethe as the best part of humanity⁴. The one which arouses our admiration for the wonder of being. The beauty which, having restored its alliance with the sublime, gives us back our renewed ability to shiver. The beauty which, having awoken our nostalgia for the absolute, causes a wound that sends shudders to the bottom of our soul, as described by Plato in *Phaedrus*⁵. Ultimately, an ontophanic beauty in which the self reveals as an abyss of both endless love and donation. That is precisely the aesthetic experience dealt by T.S. Eliot in his *Four Quartets*. And, while aesthetics as a subject matter becomes evident throughout its entire poetic structure, its highest concentration can be found in the overture and the epilogue –specifically in the first and fifth movements of *Burnt Norton* and the last movement of *Little Gidding*, which concludes the poem–, reason why we will address both of them. This will be the *from* or textual starting point of our analysis.

No sooner has the poem started, we are surprised to find out that the rose garden metaphor is the space chosen by the poet to display his own aesthetic experience.

Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind⁶.

We also immediately learn that this space is inhabited by voices whose mission is to guide the reader deep into their own aesthetic experience. The

⁴ Cf. J.W. von Goethe, *Faust*, Teil II, Akt. 1, Frankfurt am Main 2009.

⁵ Cf. Platón, *Fedro*, Instituto de Estudios Políticos, Madrid 1970, 251a; cf. 246e and 250a-251e.

⁶ Eliot, *Four Quartets*, “Burnt Norton” I, vv. 11-15.

WONDER IN THE FACE OF BEAUTY AND THE POETIC WORD.
AN AESTHETIC AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

text expresses the convergence of sight and hearing in such a way, that the response of admiration to the manifestation of the beauty of being in the visual image of the rose garden begins with the calling of an echo which resounds inside, in the depths of memory. Thus, figure and word, visible and audible, converge in the same act of unveiling the truth of being which occurs in the creative process of both the poet and the reader.

Which other question does the text reveal about the specific quality of this aesthetic perception of being which becomes, in turn, the foundation of both creation and interpretation?

And the bird called, in response to
The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery,
And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses
Had the look of flowers that are looked at.
There they were as our guests, accepted and accepting⁷.

The very own feature of both the poetic word and figure lies in its *inaudible* and *in-visible* nature, that is to say, in the source *silence* where they rise from, a secret that reveals itself only by hiding, according to the inherent dynamism underlying ontophanic aesthetics.

This is not about silence as denial of voice and image, but about that positive and creative sense that silence shares with both word and figure. The poet, the artist, and the performer need to *remain silent* if they want to *listen*, and also if they want to *see* the wonder of being. Jean-Louis Chrétien says: "Silence is not only the condition of listening alone, but also of vision. The man who observes is silent. All attentive consideration of the visible also requires silence"⁸. But the Eliotian text adds something else: in order for the creative act to occur, both the poetic word and figure need to "host" the silence present in the inaudible and invisible of things. Thus, he confirms it at the end of *Little*

⁷ Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "Burnt Norton" I, vv. 28-32.

⁸ J.-L. Chrétien, *L'arche de la parole*, Paris 1998, 56-57. (Translation into English is ours. The original text in French says : "Le silence e forme pas seulement la condition de l'écoute, mais aussi bien de la vision. L'homme de regard est silencieux. Toute considération attentive du visible veut aussi le silence").

Gidding by saying that when silence turned into word, and figure is our guest, “every word is at home / Taking its place to support the others”⁹. Here, being at home, being a guest are dimensions of inhabiting the inner space. Therefore, the manifestation of wonder being in the silence of both word and figure, matches hospitality which always means to host another one who alters one’s own understanding, and therefore worries us¹⁰.

Words and figures arising from this creative silence make us shiver, as they bring us back to the original source, the rest being merely meaningless noise. In the third movement of *Burnt Norton*, Eliot says that the last ones come from men who have: “Neither plenitude nor vacancy. Only a flicker / Over the strained time-ridden faces / Distracted from distraction by distraction / Filled with fancies and empty of meaning”¹¹.

The act of both poetic creation and the reader-listener’s experience are nourished by the same silence. “The disappearance of silence devastates and turns it [the word] into a desert”¹². It refers to that original silence where the word is conceived: silence coming from *our first world*¹³, whose mystery is expressed by the poet in the “unheard” song of the bird calling, and the “unseen” figure of the rose garden. And yet, such negative condition is not absolute. Hence, in the fifth movement of *Burnt Norton*, silence is introduced in all its creative positiveness, in terms of both word and figure: “Words, after speech, reach / Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern, / Can words or music reach / The stillness, as a Chinese jar still / Moves perpetually in its stillness”¹⁴.

Silence is part of the epiphany of being in the poetic word and figure; it is the very wonder of its manifestation. Stillness and movement are not opposite but complementary, since they are part of the same visual reality. It applies likewise to silence and word. “When language is thought of on the

⁹ Eliot, *Four Quartets*, “Little Gidding” V, vv. 217-218.

¹⁰ P. M. Malet, Silencio, hospitalidad y traducción, in: P. Mena Malet (comp.) *Fenomenología por decir. Homenaje a Paul Ricoeur*, Santiago de Chile 2006, 212.

¹¹ Eliot, *Four Quartets*, “Burnt Norton” III, vv. 99-102.

¹² Chrétien, *L’arche de la parole* 59. (Translation into English is ours. The original text in French says : “La disparition du silence dévaste et désertifie la parole”).

¹³ Eliot, *Four Quartets*, “Burnt Norton” I, vv. 23-24.

¹⁴ Eliot, *Four Quartets*, “Burnt Norton” V, vv. 137-143.

model of physical transmission, with its ‘emitters’ and ‘receivers,’ silence is merely background noise which disappears and, with it, human speech”¹⁵. The listening or visual pattern, either as word, music, or the Chinese jar, is the one which illustrates –in the universal singularity of its language- the source silence which rises from and refers to, with no need to dissolve the sensitive and finite in the endlessness of the spiritual absolute. Here, silence is not an absolute that turns into the aim of worship, but expresses the excess of being. Therefore, along with silence either as listening or response, Chrétien introduces it as ecstasy and excess: he refers to “the resurrected silence, the silence that is redeemed and transfigured by the crucified Word”¹⁶, which –far from insulting human speech–, turns it into the dwelling of silence. Its highest point is the “nuptial silence, the silence in which the lover and its Beloved intimately meet each other”, which lies beyond the words, but not beyond the Word¹⁷.

“To see and to listen are entwined, for only a creature that can see can also listen, and only a creature who listens, can see”¹⁸. The wonder (*Wunder*) of beauty consists, precisely, in leaving that original silence, as a word evolved into a figure. The encounter with beauty creates a new, non pre-existing space. The discovery of beauty occurs where it unveils itself in its mystery, which reveals itself by hiding. It is an advent, rather than an event.

¹⁵ Chrétien, *L’arche de la parole* 59. (Translation into English is ours. The original in French: “Quand le langage est pensé sur le modèle d’une transmission physique, avec ses émetteurs et ses récepteurs, le silence n’est plus qu’un bruit de fond, il a disparu et, avec lui, la parole humaine”).

¹⁶ Chrétien, *L’arche de la parole* 98. (Translation into English is ours. The original in French: “Le silence que la mystique chrétienne peut louer sans outrager la parole humaine ni en venir à adorer le néant, c’est ce silence ressuscité, le silence racheté et transfiguré par le Verbe crucifié”).

¹⁷ Chrétien, *L’arche de la parole* 102. (Translation into English is ours. The original in French: “Il y va d’un silence nuptial, du silence où l’Aimé et l’amante intimement se rencontrent. Et s’il est au-delà des mots, il n’est pas au-delà du Verbe, puisque c’est Lui qu’il s’agit de rencontrer cœur à cœur”).

¹⁸ Chrétien, *L’arche de la parole* 101. (Translation into English is ours. The original in French: “Voir et entendre s’enrelacent, comme en tout ce qui est humain, car seul écoute un être de regard, et seul regarde un être qui écoute”).

The first conclusion we can draw is that the aesthetic experience described by the poetic text takes place between the wonder of the object's manifestation (dynamism of creative silence) and the admiration of the subject's shuddered response when faced with the indomitable and the excessive bursting into beauty (dynamism of hospitality.) While in the third part we will take up this conclusion again in order to associate it with the categories of glory (*Herrlichkeit*) and the sublime (*Erhabene*) developed by Balthasar and Rahner's theological aesthetics, we should first follow the planned methodological pathway and describe the opening of the aesthetic figure towards the existential drama by introducing the personal dimension of the *Thou* in the game of the objective wonder and the subjective admiration brought about by love.

2. In the hidden laughter of children: the action of love as wonder

The loving silence has introduced us into the bridal chamber of the encounter with the Word. Moreover, hospitality has left the aesthetic experience open to the irruption of alterity. Chilean philosopher Patricio Mena points out that hospitality has a passive dimension that occurs while receiving, "however, there is also an active moment whereby receiving loses its innocence to become *hostile* in order to understand better: *to receive is also to alter*"¹⁹.

Time and again Eliot insists on the need for purification: the bright aesthetic experience is followed by emptiness and dryness which are not an end in themselves but rather what will give way to the great revelation of the other person as a *Thou*:

Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light,

¹⁹ P. M. Malet, *Silencio, hospitalidad y traducción* 213. (Translation into English is ours. The original text in Spanish says: «Mas también está el momento activo por el que la recepción pierde su inocencia y ella misma se vuelve *hostil* para comprender mejor: *recibir también as alterar*»).

WONDER IN THE FACE OF BEAUTY AND THE POETIC WORD.
AN AESTHETIC AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.
Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,
Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.
Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality²⁰.

What the laughter of children reveals is the reality of love as the constituent foundation of the ontological ground on which our existence is based. This is the revelation that we cannot bear when we lose our ability to shiver at the wonder of the being in beauty. The laughter of children remains hidden in those words and figures that have emerged from silence so that, when unveiled, we immerse ourselves in the loving listening of the eloquent silence of the Thou. No hypostasis of silence, but rather the dramatic openness to one another in love, that is received with the dispossession of oneself. The laughter of children appears once again in the fifth movement of *Burnt Norton*:

Love is itself unmoving,
Only the cause and the end of movement,
[...] Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
Even while the dust moves
There rises the hidden laughter
Of children in the foliage²¹.

Thus, we are amazed that both in the aesthetic and interpersonal experiences, love reveals itself precisely as *another one* beyond the subject's control, and that a response of admiration is provoked exactly because of that. The personal and aesthetic paths converge in phenomenological Aesthetics – which lies at the base of Balthasar's theological Aesthetics. In the personal encounter, "love granted to me can only be understood as wonder" (*als eine Wunder verstehen*)²². The wonder consists precisely in this *freedom* of the Thou

²⁰ Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "Burnt Norton" I, vv. 34-43.

²¹ Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "Burnt Norton" V, vv. 163-164; 169-172.

²² H. U. von Balthasar, *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*, Einsiedeln 2000⁶, 33 (Translation is ours).

which bursts into the existence of the Thou as an inexplicable *gift*. This occurs likewise in the aesthetic path, where:

What we encounter is such an overwhelming wonder (*wie ein Wunder*), that cannot be sought by the person who perceives it. And yet it possesses its intelligibility precisely as such although it is true that as wonder (*als Wunder*) it has the possibility of making itself understood, and it is something that binds and frees at the same time, and presents itself at the same time as «nascent freedom» (Schiller) of an inner, unproven necessity²³.

Both *gratuitousness* and *distance* should be added to the *freedom* whereby the *gift* of love from the Thou and the beautiful object flows. In fact, to Balthasar:

only in the acknowledgement of the pure grace of being loved can the lover claim the plenitude of its being as love [...] *eros* is the chosen place of beauty: whatever we love [...] always appears radiant with glory (*Wunder*); and from an objective point of view, it is not perceived as glorious (*Wunder*) [...] except through the specificity of an *eros* which he experiences²⁴.

Gratuitousness as a sign of beauty and love turns the appearance into something wonderful. While there could not be a greater convergence, both “are transcended in the realm of revelation, where God’s Logos, kenotically emptying and humiliating himself, reveals himself as Love, *Agape*, and thus as Glory”²⁵.

In addition to the note of *gratuitousness*, the aesthetic root grants love the *distance* of being totally other, of being the absolute that comes out to meet the subject without the subject being able to imagine beforehand what will be manifested about both the other and itself in that unexpected and unprecedented space. In *Truth of the World* Balthasar says:

²³ Balthasar, *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe* 34 (Translation is ours).

²⁴ Balthasar, *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe* 35 (Translation is ours).

²⁵ Balthasar, *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe* 35 (Translation is ours).

WONDER IN THE FACE OF BEAUTY AND THE POETIC WORD.
AN AESTHETIC AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The subject is ready to receive the object in its boundary, but it is impossible to estimate in advance what will result from that reception. In the same way, the object is ready to reveal itself in the space that the subject has placed at its disposal, but he himself cannot guess or infer how it will unfold there. [...] Both subject and object will be fulfilled by coming together, but the fulfilment will be a wonder (*Wunder*) and a gift for both. Their encounter will reveal one to each other, but the revelation of the other will contain at the same time for both, the revelation of themselves, which can only come about in the other²⁶.

Just like Eliot, Balthasar also associates the laughter of children with the original love in a conclusive chapter in which he addresses the glory of modern metaphysics, precisely titled: “The *Wonder* of Being and the Fourfold Difference”²⁷. The theologian believes that the first metaphysical experience occurs both as wonder and play, since the child is brought to consciousness of itself when its being reveals itself as ‘the other’ in its mother’s smile²⁸. The child smiles back at its mother’s smile because this is its first experience of the wonder of being, and the place in which to acknowledge its *I* in the *Thou* that holds it, sheltering and nourishing it, and from which it will differ as it grows. This aesthetic and interpersonal experience is essential for the subsequent relationships with the being of both things and people to such an extent that our identity is based on it. Thanks to it we experience gratuitousness and gift as hints of the wonder that awaits us in both the interpersonal and the aesthetic dimensions since, as Chrétien points out, “the plenitude of proximity does not come to fulfil me, to fill an emptiness that I already had to its exact extent, but to leave a new emptiness in me, inflicting a wound that I could not avoid or cure by myself”²⁹.

²⁶ H. U. von Balthasar, *Theologik I. Wahrheit der Welt*, Einsiedeln, 1985, 58 (Translation is ours).

²⁷ H. U. von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine theologische Ästhetik. III/I. Im Raum der Metaphysik. 2. Neuzeit*, Einsiedeln, 1975², 943-957 (Translation is ours).

²⁸ Cf. C. I. Avenatti de Palumbo, La sonrisa femenina como configuradora de la subjetividad: el tú de la madre y el tú de Beatriz, *Teología y vida* 50, 2009, 199-213.

²⁹ J.-L. Chrétien, *L’effrai du beau*, Paris 2008, 24. (Translation into English is ours. The original in French: “La plénitude du proche ne vient pas me combler, combler un vide qui eût d’avance été en moi, et à son exacte mesure, mais ouvrir en moi un vide qui n’était pas, et me blesser d’une blessure que par moi-même je ne pourrai ni fuir ni guérir”).

The second conclusion that can be drawn from the thoughts caused by the hidden laughter of children is that, from the point of view of phenomenology, theology, and aesthetics, the action of love appears as wonder in which the interpersonal way and the *via pulchritudinis* converge by reason of their constitutive alterity, gratuitousness, and distance. Hence we have arrived at the gates of Balthasarian glory (*Herrlichkeit*) and the threshold of the Rahnerian sublime (*Erhabene*).

3. Towards the theological glory and the theological sublime: beauty as wonder

Midwinter spring is its own season
Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown,
[...] And glow more intense than blaze of branch, or brazier,
Stirs the dumb spirit: no wind, but pentecostal fire
in the dark time of the year. Between melting and freezing
The soul's sap quivers. [...]
Where is the summer, the unimaginable
Zero summer?³⁰

At the beginning we explained that, just like Plato and Goethe, Eliot places us in front of the beauty that makes us shudder and so transforms our existence. "The soul's sap quivers" in the face of the revelation of the bursting excessive, in the face of the "pentecostal fire" that burns in the "unimaginable zero summer" –that is here, now, and there where the eternal becomes time. That is what the poet refers to in *The Dry Salvages*: "The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation"³¹. This is the source of the wonder of beauty.

A brief review of the history of aesthetics would give enough evidence to show that, by the late 18th century –i.e., at the very moment of its foundation–,

³⁰ Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "Little Gidding" I, vv. 1-2; 9-12; 19-20.

³¹ Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "The Dry Salvages" V, v. 15.

WONDER IN THE FACE OF BEAUTY AND THE POETIC WORD.
AN AESTHETIC AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Kant could no longer support the vibration of this wonder and drew a distinction between beauty and sublime, ascribing pleasure and harmony to the former and the elusive and the enigma, to the latter³².

Balthasar's theological aesthetics set out to recover this beauty through the path of biblical glory (*Herrlichkeit*), in which the Son –whose figure reveals both the Father and the Spirit– is presented as the “humiliated majesty” of absolute love. Just like in the original beauty, the love expressed by this glory is the eternal comparison, since it is “the Wholly-Other and Ever-Greater (*Liebe das Ganz-anders- und Je-immer-grösser-Sein*)”³³. A wonder of love revealed in the Figure whose ever-greater irradiation attracts and calls upon for a radical experience of wholeness that both the believer and the reader of the *Quartets* accomplish across the path of vision.

A different path was taken by Karl Rahner, whose thinking –according to recent research– was found to provide enough material to support a significant aesthetic orientation³⁴. With ontophanic roots, his theological aesthetics is indebted to Heidegger, though not to the one of *Being and Time*, but to that of the 1934-1936 summer lecture courses, with Heidegger's re-reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* among its most outstanding topics. This influence extends beyond *Spirit in the World* to the subsequent Rahnerian work on aesthetic topics, among which recovering the unity of sublime and beautiful holds a prominent place in the post-modern context. According to Fritz's thesis, which we owe so much to, the source of Rahner's theological aesthetics would be precisely the catholic sublime, whereby his approach would imply a harsh critique on the modern centre of the subject, though for reasons other than Heidegger's, while the latter culminated in nihilism, the former leads us to the threshold of the sublime along an aesthetic path that blends the beautiful and the sublime.

In Rahner's theological Aesthetics, receptivity (*Empfänglichkeit*) is related to alterity inasmuch as it means an attitude of “real abandonment to the other”³⁵. Rahner defines Catholicism's *ethos* as a radical openness to God's

³² Cf. R. Bodei, *Paisajes sublimes*, Barcelona 2011, 23ss; Chrétien, *L'effroi du beau* 27-29.

³³ Cf. Balthasar, *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe* 37-38.

³⁴ Cf. P. J. Fritz, *Karl Rahner's Theological Aesthetics*, Washington D.C. 2014.

³⁵ Fritz, *Karl Rahner's Theological Aesthetics* 33.

self-manifestation through the world. Therefore, theologically speaking, *sublime* refers primarily to the incomprehensible Mystery of God, and secondarily to how creation, particularly the human person, reflects this incomprehensibility. Then, we could say that Rahner's theological Aesthetics not only deals on how the being manifests itself, but also how the Spirit of God makes God perceptible as sublime.

*Priest and Poet*³⁶ is a fundamental text to reflect on the sublime, which is also related to the dialogue between Literature and Theology. Like Eliot, Rahner distinguishes two types of words: original words (*Urworte*) and useful words (*Nutzworte*), which many times become useless³⁷. The latter belongs to the realm of science, of practical and man-made things, whereas the former belongs to the realm of life and mystery. They always appear as *new-born* and as wonder (*Wunder*), they bring light to us, they render transparency to Reality in its origin, they *spring up out of the heart*, and they are *dark* in their endlessness, hence they dominate us by claiming the *dazzling secret of what has been said*. Since they are original words, they are at the same time seamlessly "spirit and flesh, what is signified and its symbol, concept and word, things and image"³⁸. In such *poetic words* Rahner –just like Eliot– recognises the advent of the original, that union of the sublime and the beauty whose knowledge is mere receptivity, with no intention of control whatsoever. They are essential words which, as such, are open doors to the infinity. Hence, as noted by Fritz, "the poet is an ideal example of the sublime-aesthetic subjectivity"³⁹.

We might add that wonder –in the freedom of both the glory that manifests itself as well as its receptivity in the face of mystery– is shared by Balthasar and Rahner's theological Aesthetics as a decisive theological-aesthetic element. As to their differences, while Balthasar integrates the subjective into the objective evidence, Rahner stresses the subjective dimension, insofar as the manifestation of the being is considered based on the subject's radical receptive

³⁶ Cf. K. Rahner, *Priester und Dichter*, in: *Schriften zur Theologie, Band III, Neuere Schriften*, Einsiedeln - Zürich - Köln 1964, 349-375.

³⁷ Rahner, *Priester und Dichter* 350-351.

³⁸ Rahner, *Priester und Dichter* 352.

³⁹ Fritz, *Karl Rahner's Theological Aesthetics* 91-94.

WONDER IN THE FACE OF BEAUTY AND THE POETIC WORD.
AN AESTHETIC AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

openness to the being. Hence the pre-eminence of the visible, in the former, and the auditory, in the latter, neither of which prevents an attitude of admiration in either of them as a response to the wonder of beauty.

Therefore, the seemingly impossible crossover of two theological Aesthetics with diverging starting points becomes evident in Literature. Seeing and listening have reached their convergence point in the very wonder of being, which –whether manifested in the glory or sensed in the spirit’s ontological willingness open to mystery– aimed at love as its core. In fact, love –dramatically, freely, and gratuitously experienced– is the source of such wonder that unveils at the listening eyes and the seeing ears, while broadening the semantic field of the aesthetic experience towards silence and hospitality. And all that was possible thanks to the metaphorical language typical in Literature.

Borrowing some *protowords* from Eliot’s poems, we might conclude that both the glory and the sublime are doors open to the “unimaginable zero summer”. Here the absolute still remains in the *unseen* and the *unheard*. In the *zero summer*, the eloquent *silence*, always gratuitous and excessive, awaits what we, post-modern men and women, will host, while discovering new dwelling places and new languages to translate the mystery of absolute love turned into history in beauty.