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Performance, Incarnation, Conversion: Theology and the Future of Imagination

This essay explores the concepts of performance, incarnation, crucifixion and conversion, significant to both theological and dramatic discourse, in order to consider what it means to imagine in the light of the *eschaton*.¹ Any discussion of the future inevitably involves the human ability to imagine: to have the 'eyes of [our] heart' enlightened (Ephesians 1:18), to grasp the 'assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Hebrews 11:1).² Such imagining is at the heart of eschatological thinking and inextricably involved with, and shaped by, its theological formulation. In turn, the way individuals perform their various public and private selves to some extent incarnates their imaginative apprehension of the future.³ Conversion results from a revelation of that 'which God has prepared for those who love him' and which cannot be seen, heard or imagined by the human heart except by the Spirit's enlightenment (1 Corinthians 2:9).⁴ This transformation can be figured as 'learn[ing] Christ': 'to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life...and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness' (Ephesians 4:22-24). A Spirit-led imagination is central to the continual transformation and performance of this new self. It is the enlightened 'eyes of [the] heart' that enable one to 'know the hope to which he has called [us], the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people' (Ephesians 1:18). An alternative biblical image of eschatologically orientated transformation is that of the 'unveiled face': those who behold 'the glory of the Lord' are 'transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another' by the

I am grateful to Dr Ian O'Harae and Dr Samantha Rayner for their constructive feedback on earlier

¹ Natalie Carnes has offered an important critique of the way in which 'contemporary theologians and ethicists, in their eager embrace of the theater metaphor, deny at crucial moments the limits it imposes and thereby distort power, freedom, and selfhood', 'The Mysteries of Our Existence: Estrangement and Theatricality', *Modern Theology* (28.3) 2012, 403.

² For a theological exploration of how the human function of 'imagining' can be defined in the light of the biblical text see Alison Searle, *The Eyes of Your Heart: Literary and Theological Trajectories of Imagining Biblically* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008).

³ This is explored in detail by Kristen Deede Johnson in 'Brave New World? Faith, Hope and the Political Imagination', eds, Trevor A. Hart and Steven R. Guthrie, *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), 91-113.

⁴ Lynne Enterline analyses Shakespeare's use of this biblical text when creating the character of Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. She notes that 'like the sixteenth-century schoolboys trained up in the techniques of verbal, vocal, and bodily performance necessary for eloquence, Bottom tries to memorize a dramatic rendition of a Latin precursor...only to embark on an emotional experience made flesh.... His metamorphosis changes organs of perception.... When Bottom wakes up and reaches for synaesthesia to capture his translation's ecstasy, not only sensations cross, but so do word and body: "The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was" (4.1.211-14)'. Lynne Enterline, *Shakespeare's Schoolroom: Rhetoric, Discipline, Emotion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 3.

Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18). In these Pauline epistles, the envisaged end is a person; at the heart of the final consummation is communion with God as he has revealed himself in his incarnate Son (John 1:18).

Theology and drama both use the metaphor of *theatrum mundi* in order to explore relationships between God, humanity and the universe. The apostles, in Paul's terminology, became a θέατρον – spectacle, play or theatre – displayed by God to the world, angels and humans (1 Corinthians 4:9). In an alternative formulation, John Calvin identifies God as the chief actor; each person is 'formed to be a spectator of the created world and given eyes that he might be led to its author by contemplating so beautiful a representation'.⁵ Perhaps most famously, William Shakespeare's melancholic Jacques observes:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts....⁶

The English nonconformist, John Bunyan, imagines the suffering Christian as one 'set upon a Hill, upon a Stage, as in a Theatre, to play a part for God in the world'.⁷ While there are theoretical issues that limit the usefulness of the theatre as a theological metaphor or paradigm, the broader concept of performance offers a constructive way of thinking about how the imagination apprehends an eschatological vision of the future and renders it concrete in the present – whether it is incarnated in a life of faith or a work of art.

These issues are explored in the following essay through a case study of the Quaker, James Nayler. His attempts to perform Christ led to great suffering. They precipitated a heated parliamentary interrogation of the concepts of 'sign' and 'actor' that elucidate important aspects of what it means to imagine and act now in the light of the scriptural narrative and its promised future. Nayler demonstrates how the biblical performance of creaturehood can transform the believer into a spectacle or play. His actions exemplify the way in which the crucifixion inverts accepted norms of beauty, truth and decorum in both life and art. Nayler's creative endeavour to 'put on Christ' clarifies how the imagination apprehends and incarnates aspects of the biblical narrative. Extrapolating from this case study of Nayler, I conclude with a theological exploration of its implications for our understanding of imagination, interpersonal human relations and artistic creation.

Any attempt to undertake a biblically inspired, eschatologically driven performance of Christ incorporates personal sacrifice, hermeneutical complexity and prophetic promise. This is clearly demonstrated by the entry of James Nayler into Bristol on 24 October 1656 and its

⁵ Quoted by Belden C. Lane, *Ravished By Beauty: The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 58.

⁶ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed., Alan Brissenden (Oxford, 2008), 150-1; II.7.139-42.

⁷ Quoted by Richard Greaves, *John Bunyan and English Nonconformity* (London: Hambledon Press, 1992), 182.

reverberations in the English public sphere.⁸ A hostile contemporary, John Deacon, describes the procession, modelled on the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, in the following manner.

James Naylor of Wakefield in the County of Yorke, a deluded and deluding Quaker and Impostor, rode October last through a village called Bedminster, about a mile from Bristol, accompanied with six more, one whereof a yong man, whose head was bare, leading his horse by the bridle, and another uncovered before him, thorough the durty way in which the Carts and Horses and none else usually goe. And with them two men on horseback with each of them a woman behind him, and one woman walking on the better way or path. In this posture did they march, and in such a case, that one George Witherley noting their condition, asked them to come in the better rode, adding that God expected no such extremity: but they continued on their way, not answering in any other notes, but what were musicall, singing Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabbath, &c. Thus continued they, till by their wandring they came to the Almsehouse within the suburbs of Bristol, where one of the women alighted, and she with the other of her own sex lovingly marcht on each side of Naylor's Horse. This Witherley saith, he supposes they could not be lesse deep in the muddy way then to the knees, and he saith they sang, but sometimes with such a buzzing mel-ODIOUS noyse that he could not understand what it was. This the said Witherley gave in upon his oath. Thus did they reach Ratcliff-gate, with Timothy Wedlock of Devon bare-headed, and Martha Symonds with the bridle on one side, and Hannah Stranger on the other side of the Horse; this Martha Simonds is the wife of Thomas Simonds of London, Bookbinder, and Hannah Stranger is the Wife of John Stranger of London Combmaker, who sung Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Israel. Thus did he ride to the high Crosse in Bristol, and after that to the White-hart in Broadstreet, where there lies two eminent Quakers, by name Dennis Hollister, and Henry Row; of which the Magistrates hearing they were apprehended and committed to prison.⁹

Even in the radical and innovative religious climate of Interregnum England the imaginative appropriation that Nayler and his companions made of the biblical text in this performance was viewed as extreme. Nayler's 'sign' precipitated an intense, anguished and combative debate in the English Parliament that lasted ten days before his body was subjected to an excruciating, but by no means unusual, sentence as punishment for his 'blasphemous' action. There was undoubtedly an element of political expediency in the way the majority of conservative Puritan MPs decided to suppress Nayler, who was viewed in several quarters as a key leader of the rapidly increasing and belligerent sect of Quakers. But while the political dimension is significant, I do not wish to focus on it here. The different ways in which Nayler, his companions and his contemporaries interpreted his re-enactment of Christ's entry into Jerusalem elucidate important aspects of the role played by

⁸ For a full discussion of this incident see Leo Damrosch, *The Sorrows of the Quaker Jesus: James Nayler and the Puritan Crackdown on the Free Spirit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

⁹ John Deacon, *The Grand Impostor Examined: or, The Life, Tryal and Examination of James Nayler, the Seduced and Seducing Quaker* (London, 1656), B1r-B2r.

the imagination in Christian tradition with implications for our understanding of its relationship to incarnation, performance and eschatology.

The eminent theologian and pastor, Richard Baxter, recorded in his autobiography (published posthumously in 1696) that the Quakers' 'chief Leader *James Nayler* acted the part of Christ at *Bristol*, according to much of the History of the Gospel, (and was long laid in *Bridewell* for it, and his Tongue bored as a Blasphemer by the Parliament)'.¹⁰ It is clear from contemporary records of Nayler's examination by Parliament that he did not identify himself as Christ in the blasphemous manner in which he was accused. Nayler states clearly when asked, 'if any prayed to Christ in him, whether he did dis-own it? [he] answered, As a Creature I do disown it'.¹¹ Similarly, he observes unequivocally regarding his entrance into Bristol, 'I do abhor that any of that honour which is due to God, should be given to me as I am a Creature; but it pleased the Lord to set me up as a sign of the coming of the righteous one; and what hath been done in my passing through the Towns, I was commanded by the power of the Lord to suffer such things to be done to the outward as a sign, I abhor any honour as a Creature'.¹² Despite this Nayler was indicted by the Parliament as a blasphemer who claimed to be the Son of God; he was also disowned by many of his fellow Quakers, including George Fox, who did not need the unhelpful publicity that Nayler's act provoked when many were already suffering imprisonment for their Quaker beliefs.

Baxter had no problem with the punishment meted out to Nayler for his behaviour, but he is clearer in his analysis of the central issue than the MPs who asserted that Nayler was identifying himself as Christ – Nayler *acted* the part of Christ.¹³ Anxiety as to what this looks like in practice and whether or not the metaphor of theatre can usefully be appropriated in order to assist in understanding what it means faithfully to follow Jesus Christ in the light of the coming kingdom of God remains real. According to Natalie Carnes this 'anxiety about hidden motives has stubbornly returned over the centuries because it speaks to something inescapable about what it means to be human in the world'. She suggests that 'theater theologians use theater to describe the way Christians perform Christ or church in a way that misses what is unique about performing Christ: that it turns on the performance of a role that discloses and realizes one's personhood, that it requires a set of descriptions attributable to one subject'. 'That Christians can "put on virtue" and "put on Christ" is important to recover', however, "'putting on Christ" remains a type of performance significantly different from theatrical and occupational performances'.¹⁴ That is why I am using the term 'performance' in preference to the categories of 'actor' and 'theatre'; Carnes notes in passing that '[n]arrative is a much more fundamental category than "theater" (though *performance* might be similarly fundamental)'.¹⁵ Nayler emphasises his identity as a creature in order to refute the accusation that he is blasphemously equating himself with Christ. This resonates with Carnes's explication of the theology of Gregory of Nyssa:

¹⁰ Richard Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (London 1696), Part I, 77.

¹¹ *A True Narrative of the Examination, Tryall and Sufferings of James Nayler* (London, 1657), C1-C1v.

¹² *Ibid.*, D3v.

¹³ Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, Part I, 77.

¹⁴ Carnes, 'The Mysteries of Our Existence', 409-10. For a subtler attempt to negotiate the ways in which theatre can inform theological reflection see Ivan Khovacs, 'The Intractable Sense of an Ending: Gethsemane's Prayer On The Tragic Stage', eds, Trevor Hart and Wesley Vander Lugt, *Theatrical Theology* (Eugene: Wipf&Stock, forthcoming).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 421 n. 35.

There is a way of describing what Gregory is doing, not as interpreting a role against itself, nor as positing humanness over and against roles, but as simply identifying one role – creature – as the determinative role of one's life. One can even add that Gregory is concerned with what it means to perform creatureliness well and that he is concerned with creaturely becoming. But “creature” is not a character one plays, as one might play, for example, Antigone or Hamlet. Creature is who we are, and we never arrive at a place where we are not a creature, where we retire the mask of our creatureliness. The performance of creaturehood, then, like the performance of Christ, is not a theatrical performance. Further, creaturehood does not come with the material realities – the costumes, the props, the supporting cast – that makes a role concrete. Thus Gregory turns us to the most concrete reality he can – decayed bones – to remind us of a creatureliness that interrupts all roles'.¹⁶

For Nayler, as for Gregory in this account, recognition of one's creaturehood prevented a false elision of his individual identity with that of Christ, but his entry into Bristol was also shaped by a particular theological semiotics emerging within the Quaker movement that proved opaque to many of their contemporaries. George Fox identified words, writing and signs as the means by which Quakers were to communicate with nonbelievers. Signs included those that were ‘produced by the Quakers themselves and...consisted in the public performance of shocking, dramatic actions, intended to convey, by nonverbal means, an expression of moral reproof and/or prophecy. The charter for these semiotic enactments was biblical...’¹⁷ Here Richard Bauman positions Nayler's act alongside the nonverbal prophetic witness of the Old Testament prophets. Ezekiel, for example, was commanded to shave off his hair, separate it into three groups and burn, cut and scatter it (5:1-5). On another occasion he lay on his side for three-hundred and ninety days indicating the duration of God's judgement upon Israel (4:4-5); he also baked his food on human dung heaps in response to God's explicit direction (4:9-12). Such ‘performance art’¹⁸ was intimately connected with messages of judgement, even apocalypse and here, too, the biblical material forms a telling parallel with Quaker practice.¹⁹

Nayler's prophetic performance can be elucidated further through consideration of Celia Deane-Drummond's argument that Christian ethical orientation towards the future should be governed by a dramatic rather than a narrative mode of discourse. ‘Drama reflects the indeterminacy typical of human life, including the unforeseeable interactions of circumstances, and the ambiguities of existence’. It ‘has the characteristics of ‘event’ through the dynamic staging of particulars in a particular way’ and ‘an irreducibly *social* dimension, including the audience as much as those taking part in the play. In addition, drama includes the idea of anticipation, but this is not the same as resignation, rather, it is ongoing consuming involvement in the work of interpretation’.²⁰ Commenting on the biblical book of Revelation she notes: ‘Christian apocalyptic

¹⁶ Ibid., 422, n. 49.

¹⁷ Richard Bauman, *Let Your Words be Few: Symbolism of Speaking and Silences among Seventeenth-Century Quakers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 84.

¹⁸ Yvonne Sherwood, ‘Prophetic Performance Art’, *The Bible and Critical Theory* (2.1) 2006, 1.1–1.4. DOI: 10.2104/bc060001.

¹⁹ Damrosch, *The Sorrows of the Quaker Jesus*, 167.

²⁰ Celia Deane-Drummond, ‘Beyond Humanity's End: An Exploration of a Dramatic versus Narrative Rhetoric and its Ethical Implications’, Stefan Skrimshire, ed., *Future Ethics: Climate Change and Apocalyptic Imagination* (London: Continuum, 2010), 248.

is characterized by a confident hope not only that things *can* be different, but *will* be different.... The characterization of apocalypse as drama offers...a much greater sense of the importance of particularity and individual response compared with more fatalistic narrative approaches. Apocalypse understood as a way of bringing the truth about the situation invites a sense of what is, to what must be done'.²¹ I argue that we should view Nayler's entrance into Bristol on a horse, with his companions singing praises in the pouring rain, as both prophetic performance art – his own role by all accounts was nonverbal – and as a dramatic mode of discourse. It was both a 'sign' and 'event' that was deliberately designed to include an audience as well as participants. It was envisaged in apocalyptic terms, as many Quaker signs were during the 1650s, and meant to be a witness both to the truth and against the contemporary spiritual situation of an England governed by mere 'professors', (that is, those who claimed to follow Jesus Christ but did not authenticate it according to the Quaker understanding with their lives).²²

The Bristol magistrates wished to make an example of Nayler and sent him to be examined by Parliament in London. After a lengthy interrogation by special committee and a ten-day debate by the second Protectorate Parliament, where they also considered whether they had the right to conduct a trial, Nayler was found guilty of 'Horrid Blasphemy'. This upheld the findings of the committee that: 'First, *James Nayler* did assume the gesture, words, honour, worship, and miracles of our blessed Saviour. Secondly, The names and incommunicable attributes and titles of our blessed Saviour'.²³ He avoided the death penalty by a small margin (96 to 82 votes), but the actual penalty imposed made Nayler, like the apostles, a θεάτρον (spectacle, play or theatre). It was decided that his tongue should be bored through with a hot iron; the letter B stigmatized on his forehead; that he be set in the pillory for two hours; whipped by the hangman; wear a paper containing an inscription of his crimes; be committed to solitary confinement in a London prison and have no access to pen, ink or paper.²⁴ Nayler responded simply, '*He that hath prepared the body will enable me to suffer; and I pray, that He may not lay it to your charge*'.²⁵ Leo Damrosch observes: 'In the opinion of his supporters Nayler's prophetic sign had now produced its logical conclusion, a symbolic crucifixion'.²⁶

²¹ Ibid., 251-2.

²² It is important to note here that Nayler himself saw a stark contrast between his dramatic sign and the theatrical performances of contemporary actors during the Interregnum. He notes: 'As I was passing down the borough of Southwark not many days ago, I saw the greatest abominations acted that ever mine eyes beheld: in several places in the open streets [there were] men upon scaffolds [i.e. temporary stages], by two, three, four or five upon a scaffold, transformed into several shapes, lifting wickedness up on high, and acting such abominable folly in words and actions in the sight of the sun, as might make any tender heart, fearing God, to tremble at the sight of. And this was in many places of the streets openly, besides what was within the houses, where several trumpets were sounding to gather vain-minded people thereto; which wounded my heart to see, that ever such things should be tolerated under your government, for whom God hath so wrought that you might reform these evils', *To The Parliament of the Commonwealth of England*, cited by Damrosch, *The Trials of the Quaker Jesus*, 184.

²³ *A True Narrative of the Examination, Tryall and Sufferings of James Nayler* (1657), D4v, B2r-B2v.

²⁴ Ibid., E2r-E2v.

²⁵ Ibid., Ir.

²⁶ Leo Damrosch, 'Nayler, James (1618–1660)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/19814>, accessed 20 March 2013]

Nayler's imaginative appropriation of the life of Christ and its consequences are, admittedly, an extreme case. However, his dramatic sign and its aftermath raise questions of more general concern. What constitutes a faithful performance of creaturehood for Christian believers? How do we fulfil the biblical injunction to 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ' (Romans 13:14)? Who has the right to determine whether a particular performance is 'horrid blasphemy' or a Christ-like martyrdom? To some extent, as Jürgen Moltmann demonstrates, this tension is an inevitable and ongoing characteristic of Christian experience and results from the juxtaposition of two key scriptural themes:

[D]o the apocalyptic contradiction and the messianic correspondence of the kingdom of God to the conditions of this world constitute mutually exclusive ideas?...apocalyptic sects which cut themselves off from 'the wicked world,' and modern Christians who want to keep up with every movement of 'the spirit of the age'....Again and again there have been times when the people of God have been persecuted, and martyrdom has been enjoined. Then nothing more is possible in history...all that remains is the sole decision: to confess or to deny....Yet again and again there have also been, and are, times of open doors....Then we stand face to face with almost unlimited possibilities...the kingdom of God is at hand....Then hope turns into action, and we already anticipate today something of the new creation of all things which Christ will complete on his day.²⁷

There are no simple answers. '[I]t is the dogma that is the drama' and each believer must 'work out [their] own salvation with fear and trembling' (Philippians 2:12). At the heart of the Christian faith is the doctrine of the incarnation: 'the terrifying assertion that the same God who made the world, lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death'.²⁸ This dogma has profound implications, not least for a biblical understanding of the imagination, and theological reflection on and for the future. If Nayler's performance is considered in the light of the incarnation then his rather dramatic sign can be seen as a faithful attempt by one believer to 'put on Christ'.

What he did in Bristol...was to permit his followers to stage the passion of Christ, with himself as protagonist like an actor in a mystery play, enacting in a deliberately challenging form the daily taking up of the cross that was commonly invoked as a mere metaphor, but that needed to be internalized and lived as a potent sign. The tragic absurdity of the actual performance, the handful of bedraggled singers trudging knee-deep in mud, was actually essential to the enactment. To be despised and rejected, to be mocked by the world, was precisely to imitate Christ....²⁹

Attempts to apprehend the implications of the incarnation through faithful imagining and performance can result in mutilation and persecution, as Nayler discovered, or even martyrdom, as

²⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, 'Hope and Reality: Contradiction and Correspondence,' ed., Richard Bauckham, *God Will be All in All: The Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1999), 84-5.

²⁸ Dorothy Sayers, 'The Dogma is the Drama', *The Whimsical Christian* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 27-28.

²⁹ Damrosch, *The Sufferings of the Quaker Jesus*, 172.

Moltmann indicates (see also Revelation 6:10-11). But it is important, too, to consider the time of ‘open doors’ when ‘the kingdom of God is at hand’. The doctrines of the incarnation and the resurrection enable ‘hope’ to turn ‘into action’ and the imagination plays a critical part in ‘already anticipat[ing] today something of the new creation of all things which Christ will complete’.³⁰ Truth must be incarnated in a concrete, material way if others are to ‘taste and see that the Lord is good’ (Psalm 34:1). Faithful performance, inspired by a Spirit-led and sanctified imagination, is at the core of this lifestyle. As Luke Bretherton comments: ‘It is the Christocentric performance of hospitality that furnishes the world with the concrete, non-Utopian vision of “just generosity”...essential for human flourishing’.³¹ Such acts and lives anticipate the new creation to be ushered in at the *eschaton*.

Nayler’s performance of creaturehood rendered him a θέατρον – spectacle – in Paul’s terminology. His attempt faithfully to follow Jesus Christ inverted his culture’s accepted standards of beauty, decorum and truth. His act is, in many ways, similar to that of the woman who had ‘an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly’, which she broke and poured over the head of Jesus (Mark 14:3). Her audience responded with self-righteous indignation: ‘Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor’ (v. 5). However, Jesus defended her: ‘Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me....She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial....what she has done will be told in memory of her’ (vv. 6, 8 and 9). This biblical inversion of commonly accepted or utilitarian definitions of beauty and service requires us to rethink our own aesthetic categories and the way our imaginations apprehend and ‘put on Christ’ daily in the light of the gospel narratives, particularly the crucifixion. It can be characterised as a crucified aesthetics and it requires a converted imagination.³²

‘To refer to the “beauty” of the cross is to speak in terms of a “converted” sense of beauty. The cross challenges us to re-think and to expand our notion of what is beautiful, and indeed of the “beauty” of God itself.... The Christian notion of beauty...must be able to include even the cross, “and everything else which a worldly aesthetics...discards as no longer bearable”’.³³ Consequently, as Karl Barth has noted: ‘If the beauty of Christ is sought in a glorious Christ who is not the crucified, the search will always be in vain’. The cross is not a beautiful object in itself, but it symbolises a beautiful act – the self-giving of Jesus and the role of the Father in raising him from death. Further, the beauty of the cross can only be understood as a ‘moment in God’s *poiesis*’, its ‘significance is incomplete except in the *dénouement* of the narrative’.³⁴ Yet, whilst the category of narrative ascribes meaning to this central biblical event or symbol, it does not exhaust it. Unpicking a retrospective temporal construction by asking ‘whether despite the presence of this happy ending [of the resurrection] and the imaginative backwash from it, there might nonetheless be some significant...concurrences and resonances’ between the genre of tragedy and the Christian story, allows space for the incomprehensible pain, grief, absurdity and mess of human existence. Precisely

³⁰ Moltmann, ‘Hope and Reality’, 84-5.

³¹ Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006), 138.

³² For a discussion of what such a crucified aesthetics might look like see my reading of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* in *The Eyes of Your Heart*, 66-9, 201-203.

³³ Richard Viladesau, ‘The Beauty of the Cross’, eds, Oleg V. Bychkov and James Fodor, *Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 137.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

the contradiction and pain that Nayler’s re-enactment of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem and its grisly aftermath bring to the fore. Trevor Hart has argued that the failure of theology to learn from tragedy about its own story can lead to self-deception. Narrative and event exist in a productive tension because of the ‘sort of happy ending’ that the resurrection is and ‘its peculiar relationship to the shape of all that precedes it’. In J. R. R. Tolkien’s resonant neologism the biblical metanarrative is neither a comedy, nor a melodrama, but a *eucatastrophe*.³⁵

Acceptance of this crucified aesthetic and its implications in the light of God’s promised future is dependent upon a prior spiritual enlightening of ‘the eyes of [the] heart’ – conversion. ‘Clear vision is the result of grace: of having our moral imagination and aesthetic sensibilities infused by the Spirit of God who enables a ‘right seeing’.³⁶ As Jonathan Edwards notes: ‘[s]uch is our nature that we can’t think of things invisible, without a degree of imagination.... As God has given us such a faculty as the imagination, and has so made us that we can’t think of things spiritual and invisible, without some exercise of this faculty’. However, Edwards also identifies the human imagination as the source of some of the strongest prejudices ‘against truth of any kind’; it is so powerful that it has the potential to imprison individuals in self-delusion and fantasy.³⁷ This recognition of the centrality of the ‘analogical imagination’ to seeing things whole has led James Fodor, following Stanley Hauerwas and Iris Murdoch, to focus on ‘vision’ as a means of integrating aesthetics and ethics – through the medium of the imagination. He suggests that ‘the central aim of the Christian life is not so much a matter of right action’ as ‘a truthful vision of God’. The moral life is ‘better understood on the analogy of the aesthetic mode of seeing and beholding than in terms of discrete actions and decisions. For the right answer...is mainly a matter of really *looking* while avoiding the constant temptation to return to the self with the deceitful consolation of self-pity, resentment, fantasy, and despair’.³⁸ Whilst in fundamental agreement with Fodor’s project, I think an overemphasis on ‘vision’ or ‘sight’ can be problematic. The metaphor of sight is only one of the ways in which scripture describes our apprehension of the beautiful, good and true. Sight needs to be held in tension with other metaphors as, for example, tasting God’s goodness (Psalm 34:1); marriage and feasting (Revelation 19:6-9); or walking and getting dressed (Ephesians 4:17-23). Only in this way can justice be done both to the multifaceted nature of the biblical text, with its resolutely tactile and concrete descriptions of the coming of the kingdom of God, and the doctrine of bodily resurrection. The power of Nayler’s vision and performance resulted from ‘his enacting in a deliberately challenging form the daily taking up of the cross that was commonly invoked as a mere metaphor, but that needed to be internalized and lived as a potent sign’.³⁹ It was tangible, pathetic and unavoidable.

The human ability to imagine is ‘absolutely necessary as the mode or capacity relevant to eschatological expectation and statement....It is precisely imagination, the capacity which is able to take the known and to modify it in striking and unexpected ways, which offers us the opportunity to

³⁵ Trevor Hart, ‘Unexpected Endings: Eucatastrophic Consolations in Literature and Theology’, eds, Trevor Hart, Gavin Hopps and Jeremy Begbie, *Art, Imagination and Christian Hope: Patterns of Promise* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 183.

³⁶ James Fodor, ‘Alien Beauty’: Parabolic Judgment and the Witness of Faith’, eds, Oleg V. Bychkov and James Fodor, *Theological Aesthetics After von Balthasar* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 191.

³⁷ Cited by Terrence Erdt, *Jonathan Edwards: Art and the Sense of the Heart* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 52-5.

³⁸ Fodor, ‘Alien Beauty’, 191.

³⁹ Damrosch, *The Sufferings of the Quaker Jesus*, 172.

think beyond the limits of the given'.⁴⁰ However, as finite human beings we cannot have empirical certainty as to the shape and nature of the future. Scripture invites us, on the basis of the self-revelation of God in his incarnate Son, to undertake an adventure of faith – 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Hebrews 11:1). Imagination is the aspect of human nature or identity that enables us to envisage the eschatological future that God has promised. But if the promise inherent in the biblical text is to be realised in the experience of individuals and communities here and now, then the Spirit of God needs to breathe life into dry bones and words. To bear faithful witness to the promised kingdom of God it is essential that individuals and communities who have been transformed by the Spirit perform and incarnate (literally 'make flesh') the word of God revealed in scripture, just as Nayler and his companions did during the Interregnum. Imagination is central to this process; like the poet, our calling is to body forth the 'forms of things unknown' and give 'to airy nothing/ A local habitation and a name'.⁴¹ This may mean, like Nayler, that the metaphors need to be enacted literally. The biblical determinatives for establishing the vitality and truth of such a Spirit-led imagination are conversion, crucifixion, incarnation and the hope of resurrection. We are to perform or 'put on' Christ not despite, but through, the limitations imposed by our creaturely existence.

None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him' – these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit...Now we have received not the Spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:8-13).

James Nayler's incarnation and enactment of the life of Christ in his own performance of creaturehood not only established him as a spectacle that inverts, in biblical fashion, commonly accepted cultural standards of beauty, decorum and truth. His example also demonstrates how the imagination apprehends and renders concrete the biblical narrative and the future that God has promised here and now. W. H. Auden observes: 'It is just when the would-be proximity of mimetic art to truth fails that the distance of analogy, with its 'feebly figurative signs,' manages to succeed...The imagination is to be regarded as a natural faculty the subject of which is the phenomenal world, not its creator'.⁴² The inadequacy of the created artefact is its saving grace, for 'it is just here, among the ruins and the bones, that we may rejoice in the perfect Work which is not ours';⁴³ rather as the bedraggled and dirty state of Nayler and his band of followers was an essential element ensuring the dramatic potency of their prophetic sign.⁴⁴ For Auden, communion with the

⁴⁰ Trevor Hart, 'Imagination for the Kingdom of God? Hope, Promise, and the Transformative Power of an Imagined Future', ed., Richard Baukham, *God Will Be All in All* (London: Continuum, 2005), 75-6.

⁴¹ William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed., Peter Holland (Oxford, 2008), 231; V.1.16-17.

⁴² Alan Jacobs, *What Became of Wylan: Change and Continuity in Auden's Poetry* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998), 24.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁴ Damrosch, *The Sufferings of the Quaker Jesus*, 172.

divine, and communication of the divine, was achieved uniquely and finally through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The closest the human imagination can come to a perfected work, from a biblical point-of-view, is the hopeful orientation of a crucified aesthetics anticipating the *eschaton*, when ‘we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is’ (1 John 3:2). It is the imagination that enables humans to grasp a vision of what will be and then to live here and now in anticipation of that transformed future. ‘[M]etaphors and stories entice us to find a way to bring into existence the reality that at once should be but will not be except as we act as if it is. Morally the world is always wanting to be created in correspondence to what is but is not yet’.⁴⁵ Or, alternatively, in the language of Romans 8:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning in the pangs of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved.⁴⁶

This anticipation of the kingdom of God finds expression in interpersonal human relationships, but it is essential to reject any conception of the self as a monadic kingdom that engages with others as self-sufficient entities. Attempting to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ (Matthew 22:39) by visualising ‘one’s outward image in imagination’ and attempting ‘to ‘feel’ oneself from outside’ is not enough, as ‘we lack any emotional and volitional approach to this outward image that could vivify it and include or incorporate it axiologically within the outward unity of the plastic-pictorial world’.⁴⁷ Alan Jacobs builds on Mikhail Bakhtin’s insight that human beings are intrinsically dialogic or relational, and thus, ‘neither the self nor the other is expendable, since self cannot be purely self nor purely other’,⁴⁸ by noting that God in Christ has become the other for us, in his atoning death on the cross. This enables an individual, by first answering to the divine other, to genuinely give themselves on behalf of other people. Through responsible action, Bakhtin suggests that the individual can live, not simply for themselves or by attempting to annihilate their own self, but rather ‘from within’. By expending themselves on behalf of others in this way they achieve a genuinely answerable personhood.⁴⁹

If I actually lost myself in the other (instead of two participants there would be one – an impoverishment of Being), i.e., if I ceased to be unique, then this moment of my non-being cannot become a moment in the being of consciousness – it would simply not exist for me, i.e., being would not be accomplished through me at that moment. Passive empathizing, being-possessed, losing oneself – these have nothing in common with the answerable act/deed of self-abstracting or self-renunciation. In self-

⁴⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, ‘Vision, Stories, Character’, eds, John Berkman and Michael G. Cartwright, *The Hauerwas Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

⁴⁶ Romans 8:19-24.

⁴⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin in *Towards a Philosophy of the Act* cited by Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2001), 58.

⁴⁸ Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading*, 106.

⁴⁹ Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading*, 60-1.

renunciation I actualize with utmost activeness and in full the uniqueness of my place in Being. The world in which I, from my own unique place, renounce myself does not become a world in which I do not exist, a world which is indifferent, in its meaning, to my existence: self-renunciation is a performance or accomplishment that encompasses Being-as-event.⁵⁰

Loving one's neighbour as oneself in this formulation is 'explicitly linked to other-regard'; 'one gives by making oneself the other's guarantor rather than by virtue of abandoning one's own interests'.⁵¹ Bakhtin shows how the commands to love God and one's neighbour complement one another. It is the 'divine signature' inscribed in the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross, which, 'once recognized by me, provides the ground for, or the source of, my own determination to... 'incarnate' my love for the other'. Thus a genuine relationship between two human beings, a true *kenosis* of the self on behalf of the other, has 'three – not two' as 'the dialogical minimum', as it must be underwritten by the self-sacrifice of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21).⁵²

Bakhtin's distinction between passive existence (mere embodiment or an understanding of *kenosis* where the goal is self-annihilation) and authentic action ('self-renunciation' or incarnation where 'I actualize with utmost activeness and in full the uniqueness of my place in Being') can be used as a way of explicating human creativity. It not only allows the truly ethical action to be defined, it also enables a differentiation to be made between an imitation that is truly creative, or free with nature, from unthinking reproduction.⁵³

When we incarnate rather than merely embody the act in our lives we put our signature on it.... Embodiment... refers only to the change that an individual undergoes when he or she becomes consciously aware of the fact that all human lives are different; the actual deed of ethically integrating with others follows after this awareness... both a partaking... and an incarnation.⁵⁴

The doctrine of Christ's incarnation can be linked directly to the process of artistic creation: it 'provides a superb model for what a work of art is' – 'a little incarnation' – creating 'meaning in the concrete form of images, sounds, and stories'.⁵⁵ This is precisely what Nayler achieved with his companions when he entered Bristol on a rainy October day in 1656. The artistic imagination does not involve an annihilation of the human agent's individual subjectivity. Though the artist draws upon that which has been given to them – natural talent, their indigenous culture, the traditions within which they have been trained and various environmental resources – they do not merely replicate or passively embody these things. As they draw upon these natural and cultural resources, the otherness of creation is shaped from a unique perspective, and the result is an artefact that has their own distinctive signature upon it – a responsible act.

⁵⁰ Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', cited by Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading*, 108.

⁵¹ Gene Outker cited by Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading*, 110.

⁵² Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading*, 110.

⁵³ J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', *Tree and Leaf; Smith of Wootton Major; the Homecoming of Boerhnoth* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1975), 60.

⁵⁴ Alexandar Mihailovic cited by Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading*, 62.

⁵⁵ Leland Ryken, *The Liberated Imagination: Thinking Christianly About the Arts* (Colorado Springs: Shaw Books, 2002), 17.

Nayler resisted the endeavours of the English Parliament to equate his entry into Bristol with his small band of followers as a blasphemous attempt to re-enact the gospel story and identify himself as Jesus Christ. To do so, I suggest, is an interpretive error – a misreading of what it means to perform creatureliness, or in biblical terms, to ‘put on Christ’: ‘that it turns on the performance of a role that discloses and realizes one’s personhood, that it requires a set of descriptions attributable to one subject’.⁵⁶ Nayler’s act epitomises the contradictions and challenges at the heart of any endeavour to imaginatively apprehend and concretely realise the gospel, which centres upon the crucifixion of Jesus, in the light of God’s promised future whilst we remain dwelling in a fallen world. Using Nayler as a case study, this essay has explored how faithfully following Jesus can turn the believer into a ‘spectacle’ or ‘play’ in ways that invert normative cultural understandings of beauty, decorum and truth resulting in a crucified aesthetics. What appears to be the unscrupulous waste of expensive perfume is, in fact, a beautiful act of worship: it demonstrates that the woman’s love and spiritual insight have enabled her to grasp what remains hidden to the disciples and Pharisees as, with generosity and imagination, she anoints Jesus’s body for burial and hopes for resurrection. Nayler’s performance, undertaken in community, incarnates what it means to ‘put on Christ’. Central to such performance art, like that of the prophet Ezekiel, amongst others, is a Spirit-led and sanctified imagination. This kind of eschatologically orientated and counter-cultural lifestyle – undertaken by individuals and in faith communities – can result in ridicule, persecution, even martyrdom, but it also ‘furnishes the world with the concrete, non-Utopian vision of “just generosity”’ that is ‘essential for human flourishing’⁵⁷ and anticipates the promised kingdom of God.

⁵⁶ Carnes, ‘The Mysteries of Our Existence’, 410.

⁵⁷ Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness*, 138.