



# **A Theology of Criticism: Balthasar, Postmodernism, and the Catholic Imagination (AAR Academy Series)**

*Michael P. Murphy*

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A number of critics and scholars argue for the notion of a distinctly Catholic variety of imagination, not as a matter of doctrine or even of belief, but rather as an artistic sensibility. They figure the blend of intellectual, emotional, spiritual and ethical assumptions that proceed from Catholic belief constitutes a vision of reality that necessarily informs the artist's imaginative expression. The notion of a Catholic imagination, however, has lacked thematic and theological coherence. To articulate this intuition is to cross the problematic interdisciplinary borders between theology and literature; and, although scholars have developed useful methods for undertaking such interdisciplinary "border-crossings," relatively few have been devoted to a serious examination of the theological aesthetic upon which these other aesthetics might hinge.

In *A Theology of Criticism*, Michael Patrick Murphy proposes a new framework to better define the concept of a Catholic imagination. He explores the many ways in which the theological work of Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) can provide the model, content, and optic for distinguishing this type of imagination from others. Since Balthasar views art and literature precisely as theologies, Murphy surveys a broad array of poetry, drama, fiction, and film and sets it against central aspects of Balthasar's theological program. In doing so, Murphy seeks to develop a theology of criticism.

This interdisciplinary work recovers the legitimate place of a distinct "theological imagination" in critical theory, showing that Balthasar's voice both challenges and complements contemporary developments. Murphy also contends that postmodern interpretive methodology, with its careful critique of entrenched philosophical assumptions and reiterated codes of meaning, is not the threat to theological meaning that many fear. On the contrary, by juxtaposing postmodern critical methodologies against Balthasar's visionary theological range, a space is made available for literary critics and theologians alike. More important, the critic is provided with the tools to assess, challenge, and celebrate the theological imagination as it is depicted today.

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