religions

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Beyond Literal Idolatry: Expectations and Hope in the Field of Narrative Theology

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Abstract: This article examines the role of hope relative to the unexplored potential of narrative theology as a particular mode of thinking. The first section provides a brief introduction. The second section begins by discussing the world of experience as postulated by Alfred North Whitehead: I argue that literal idolatry forms as a specific technology based around the use of symbols. The third section explores the resources of narrative as a centrifugal model of metaphor that serves as a robust alternative literal idolatry: I argue that narratives develop the intellect through pattern recognition and the imagination through empathetic recognition, and then describe how narrative theory's emphasis on focalized perspectives opens hopeful expectations of the future. The fourth section explores Ricoeur's work in narrative theology, defining it as a "field" whose dynamic emphasis on tension provides an alternative to the static, "closed circuit" of religious symbols. The final section looks at Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* as a contemporary novel that seems to fit with Ricoeur's stipulations for what generates a field of narrative theology.

Keywords: Alfred North Whitehead; Paul Tillich; Paul Ricoeur; hope; narrative theology; narrative theory; Colson Whitehead; the Intuitionist

Citation: Boscaljon, Daniel. 2022. Beyond Literal Idolatry: Expectations and Hope in the Field of Narrative Theology. *Religions* 13: 430. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050430

Academic Editor: Verna Marina Ehret

Received: 30 January 2022
Accepted: 6 May 2022
Published: 11 May 2022

1. Introduction

This article is Part Two in a triptych of essays that explore the resources of narrative theology relative to the context of modern religious change and the issues created by what I call literal idolatry. As a triptych, each part shares formal similarities, and is both separable from but related to an argument that the entirety brings forth. Part One focuses on the role of faith relative to the question of why it is difficult for religion to change its identity, and Part Three argues for the importance of love in the work of naming God and liberating that which suffers through love.

This article, Part Two, examines the role of hope relative to the unexplored potential of narrative theology as a particular mode of thinking. It moves from how perspectives originate in our everyday experiences in the world to how a perspective is symbolically anchored and perpetuated through the intervention of technologies of literal idolatry, which is in itself a problematic use of metaphor's substitutionary potential. The remainder of this article then shows how the field of narrative theology generates an important and powerful alternative to literal idolatry, and the potential for hope to appear as a result of creating this kind of field. Because the discipline of narrative theology is historically anchored in the specific study of sacred texts—particularly Christian ones—this article opts to conclude instead by demonstrating how modern literature fulfills the promise of narrative theology in ways that also inspire hope.

Section 2 begins by discussing the world of experience as postulated by Alfred North Whitehead and argues that literal idolatry forms as a specific technology based around the use of symbols. Section 3 explores the resources of narrative as a centrifugal model of metaphor that serves as a robust alternative literal idolatry and argues that narratives develop the intellect through pattern recognition and the imagination through empathetic recognition, and then describes how narrative theory's emphasis on focalized perspectives

opens hopeful expectations of the future. Section 4 explores Ricoeur's work in narrative theology, defining it as a "field" whose dynamic emphasis on tension provides an alternative to the static, "closed circuit" of religious symbols. Section 5 looks at Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* as a contemporary novel that seems to fit with Ricoeur's stipulations for what generates a field of narrative theology. This essay is dedicated to Laura Rigal and David Wittenberg, whose permissiveness while I was their student allowed me to explore how narrative theory could productively contribute to theological thinking.

2. Gaining a Perspective from Experience

Literal idolatry structures both everyday and extraordinary experiences through the tendency to reduce them to a symbolic form, the type of metaphoric thinking that is based on substitution. Understood theologically as an arbitrary preference for monotheism, literal idolatry maintains its dominance by constructing a coherent set of presuppositions that present as "real" and thus distract from the domination of this optional basis for experience.

2.1. The Experience of Unity

Alfred North Whitehead began *Modes of Thought* (2010) by describing how thinking concerns itself with that which is deemed important, and offered that the question of importance generally connects two experiences of "one" that are connected on a continuum. The first "one" relates to general totalities, the infinite whole of things, the "unity of the universe"; the second "one" relates to finite particularities, the "this" or "that" of a given moment, the "individuality of details" (p. 8). He accurately asserted that the former category is measured by a standard of importance, because it is massively extensive. The second category is measured by interest, which is a relative term. These terms influence each other: what is felt as important gains our interest, and increasingly small levels of difference are discriminated, which become increasingly important (p. 31).

The twinned senses of "one" create a sense of tension that inheres within the word. Both an entire totality and a singular particularity have proper claim to the term "one." The tension constructs a continuum within the space of the concept that leads in both directions. Most people experience how the importance of the totality emerges as it influences a particular situation invested with personal meaning, and a devout interest will generally lead to a more expansive appreciation of its impersonal implications. Far from problematic, this tension frequently benefits us. It allows audiences to appreciate narratives about a particular situation or character that gradually incorporates a more vast expanse of implications without losing its particularity (transcendence), and it allows for theological thinking about "gods" who indicate universal importance to remain anchored at a local level (immanence).

We have a strong tendency to experience "oneness" in our environments. Whitehead uses the term perspective (p. 11) to define the temporary way that interest and importance intersect relative to a particular term-concept or moment-event. Often, perspective is an intuitive participation that discloses the "oneness" of the particular and the universal, or the part and the whole. The relationship of tension and continuity encountered in this experience of oneness holds our attention. By paying attention to the relationship, we experience its natural integration. We find such feelings of oneness desirable to preserve and thus use language that allows us to revisit the perspective apart from an environment that would naturally, supportively summon it. Sharing this perspective with others invites interactions focused on abstracted questions that evaluate interest and importance at a level divorced from the vibrant, interconnected totalities that anchored them for us. The conversations thus work at the level of verbal strategies that attempt to guide others to appreciate and obtain the perspective that we found so deeply meaningful.

As language begins to stabilize a perspective, and especially as others come to share it and see that it has value (that it illuminates the world in a meaningful or in a useful way), the perspective becomes an end in itself. It overshadows the experience it initially defined. This is especially true as multiple persons are invested in the truth of a perspective.

This often leads to the installation of authorities who determine what verbal phrases best define the perspective. When phrases and the authorities become foregrounded, the initial experience of fused importance (immanence and transcendence) becomes secondary.

The Greek terms *eidos* and *eidolon*, translated as "ideas" and "idols," refer to "not only 'that which' one sees but also that 'by means of which' one sees" (Hillman 2013, p. 22). The linguistic definition of a *perspective* becomes something "objective" or "concrete" about which people can agree or disagree. Whitehead (2010) notes that *importance* is abstract, and communicated in different traditions such as morality, religion, and art (p. 11) and through specific forms of thought (aesthetic, religious, moral, logical, and practical). The form of thought is the "by means of which" one sees, while the traditions provide a sense of continuity that can be studied. Each of these traditions and forms constitutes an idea (or ideas about ideas) in Hillman's sense of being both separable and indistinguishable from our perspectives.

2.2. Symbols of Ultimate Concern

Tillich (2001) provided a theological vocabulary consistent with Whitehead's terms, within a theological form of thought. Tillich defines faith as an "ultimate concern." The ultimacy correlates with the fused sense of Whitehead's importance, and concern provides a correlate to Whitehead's sense of interest. An ultimate concern is thus like a perspective in fusing interest and importance, and also like a perspective in lacking any external grounding—which is why Tillich calls it "faith" (p. 1). It differs from a perspective because it is not interchangeable with other perspectives, but acquires an absolute or totalizing hold in spite of its lack of grounding. Faith occupies a position between *eidos* and *eidolon*—it is an experiential orientation toward a perspective (idea) whose importance is total, but which has not yet become totalizing (idol): it remains faith, but not knowledge.

Tillich (2001) argues that an ultimate concern requires symbols as an expression of faith, and that "God" is the fundamental symbol of an ultimate concern, necessarily present in any act of faith. Any statement of belief based in a perspective, including the denial of God, constitutes an act of faith (p. 52). A statement of ultimacy renders other perspectives relative to one's own, which thereby is assumed to be primary—or even absolute. Tillich suggests a process by which perspectives generate religious symbols for God, beginning with a feeling that registers a non-ordinary experience (perhaps an experience of both universal and particular importance), which is then applied to a concrete element from ordinary experience. In Tillich's terms, a definition of "God" combines an element of ultimacy "which is a matter of immediate experience and not symbolic in itself" with an element of concreteness "taken from our ordinary experience and symbolically applied to God," allowing God to symbolize, in a "qualified sense . . . the fundamental and universal content of faith" (p. 53). By arguing that "God" is a symbol of ultimate concern, Tillich uses "God" and "ultimate concern" as a way to show a foundation common across cultures and forms of thinking. Each individual and culture has an "ultimate concern," the most important interest, the defining perspective. Tillich frames this insight by stating "God is a symbol for God" (p. 53), indicating that no one perspective or framing of importance should be mistaken as being identical to the divine.

Overall, Tillich's structure adheres to what Ricoeur would understand as a substitution model of metaphor. We use the substitution model to transform a process into a nominalization or thing, or to allow one thing to stand for another. At a verbal level, a statement such as "God is a symbol for God" uses the term "is" as an equal sign that argues one element can be exchanged (stand for) for another. This form of substitutional logic is at the heart of basic dialectical thinking, which understands the synthesis as a substitute for the tension generated by the opposition of thesis and antithesis. In Christian terms that dominate Western modernity, the notion of substitution is presented in the sacrifice of Jesus as a substitute for a fallen humanity. In Capitalist terms, which also dominate Western modernity, money is a substitute for hours of labor, and is also a substitute for commodities. In democratic politics, officials are substitutes for the perspectives of their electorate.

The substitution model of metaphor provides a self-replicating sense of continuity: most symbols (that stand for a more complicated thing, set of things, or process) represent not only the whole, but function on a particular substitutional form of symbolic logic that also informs the whole.

2.3. The Role of Myth

Tillich (2001) argues that myths, like symbols, are a necessary precondition for faith (pp. 27, 55). To the extent that symbol is analogous to a perspective, then myth can be seen as similar to the verbal apparatus that allows others to share that perspective. This includes both the traditions and forms of thought discussed above. Just as a myth traditionally functions to help audiences understand why a particular symbol represents the divine, so also do forms of thought frame why a particular perspective involves an ultimate concern. Myths provide a sense of linear time, building in a sequence, which supplies a sense of continuity for those invested in a particular perspective. In addition to a sense of continuity through time, myths and forms of thought also provide content for subsequent forms of thought (thinking about stories, and thinking about thinking): this supplies both means of access and modes of navigation toward the non-ordinary forms of experience that are the potential of perspectives and symbols.

Tillich argues that all myths resist attempts to point out their relativity by exposing their symbolic structure. This supports Whitehead's contention that importance involves a sense of wholeness or feeling the unity of the universe—feelings that weaken when they seem only partial. Tillich (2001) names resistance as seeing the *mythic* or symbolic structure of thinking relative to a perspective, which takes on ultimate concern as *literalism*, and finds that literal resistance "is supported by authoritarian systems, religious or political, in order to give security to the people under their control and unchallenged power to those who exercise the control" (p. 59). He adds, further, that "Faith, if it takes its symbols literally, becomes idolatrous! It calls something ultimate which is less than ultimate" (p. 60).

This argument also pertains to forms of thought about perspectives, which would include political ideologies and philosophies. By pointing toward what is important, perspectives and symbols tend to eliminate as extraneous that which otherwise would potentially be seen (Neumann 2017) and thus have a tendency to fall into varieties of the unthought as forms of the cognitive non-conscious (Hayles 2019). Once a perspective or symbol becomes identified with an ultimate concern, once a form of thought becomes the lens through which one always sees (forgetting that it is a lens), it exercises a totalizing effect. The category of the extraneous includes what the perspective deems as unhelpful, merging the overlooked, the repressed, the forgotten, and the undesired. When a moral component is introduced around the perspective, adding a sense that one *should* adopt it, these extraneous elements often become understood as being wrong or incorrect.

2.4. The Technology of Idolatry

The perspective that governs modernity prioritizes knowledge and certainty over faith and wonder, rendering many potential forms of thought extraneous. Society tends to agree on the existence of only what passes through a certain criteria of judgment, a lens that informs its totalizing perspective. In terms of traditional Greek philosophy, ontology has become wholly circumscribed by a particular epistemology. This criteria of judgment is "a primal prejudice treated as an absolute principle so that its ungrounded character can be disguised," which Miller (1992) uses as the definition of an *arche* (p. 14). The *arche* becomes a defining first epistemological step whose presumed truth filters out other potential perspectives as innately less valuable.

The *arche* supports the modern perspective by excluding forms of knowledge that would not fit into its scheme of symbolic substitutions. The core myth of the modern perspective is dominance as progress in linear time (including scientistic supports of this myth, such as "survival of the fittest"). The core form of thinking is the use of binary oppositions, paired contraries that privilege one over others: for example, white/black,

male/female, rational/emotional, and knowledge/belief. Because this form of knowledge desires certainty and consistency, it tends to elevate homogeneity over heterogeneity, sameness over difference, and individuals over collectives. Because the *arche* introduces oppositions as necessary to thinking, it provides an artificial value of continuity (when the favored term is empowered) and an equally artificial threat of discontinuity (the presupposition that the terms could be reversed). The resulting framework involves a hierarchy that normalizes or treats as "objective" certain kinds of traits and qualities, excluding other kinds of knowing and learning as less adequate, ultimately as extraneous.

This tendency shows how the *arche* that supports a perspective through traditional forms of thought and mythic narratives has similarities to religion. Ricoeur (1988) identified accusation and protection as the corrupt parts of religion, traits that align with the elimination of perspectives that do not share the same *arche* (or interpretations of it) and the sense of resulting safety and security (p. 451). He showed how Freud and Nietzsche provide conceptual tools to show how the literal Christian God is a cultural illusion, rather than thinking error or moral lie (p. 442), and then further investigated Nietzsche's atheistic attack on the idol of Christian onto-theology, which was premised on a problematic use of the substitution model of metaphor. This form of thinking equated Greek philosophical reasoning (Being) with Christian religious revelation (God), providing an *arche* (philosophical rationality) and a symbol (Jesus Christ) that defended the imposition of Western bias as a form of beneficence. The death of God occurs due to a cultural process that exposes the emptiness at its core. Following the terminology above, this cultural process unfolds when the support of an elevated perspective has become an end in itself, no longer gesturing beyond itself.

Tillich (2001) was aware that symbols have the dangerous tendency to become a closed circuit, creating a barrier to the divine instead of a wondering portal toward it. He argued that the most accurate symbol of faith "implies an element of self-negation . . . not only the ultimate but also its own lack of ultimacy" (p. 112). Tillich was a Christian pastor as well as a theologian, and understood the need for a lived expression and experience of one's faith. Perhaps this is why he does not resist the impulse to argue for the superiority of Christianity and particularly that of Protestantism (symbolized by the self-negating cross). He argues that a way to judge the ultimacy of a symbol is by measuring its "yes" (refusal to reject the truth of faith in whatever form it appears) and its "no" (which accepts only the ultimate truth that no person possesses it). And thus, for Tillich, "[t]he fact that this criterion is identical with the Protestant principle and has become reality in the Cross of Christ constitutes the superiority of Protestant Christianity" (pp. 110–13).

Whitehead (2010) argued that great advances in thinking result from fortunate errors that result from oversimplification (p. 11). Tillich's fortunate error was oversimplifying the issue of literal idolatry, relating it solely to the symbol of faith and preserving an uncritical (literal) belief in his form of thought. He raised the structure of symbolic thinking and its unity of opposites to the level of the divine. The Christ myth for him symbolized reconciliation and literally engaged in a dialectical form of triumphalism. He provided an advance in thinking by identifying how literal idolatry disavows attempts to dethrone the superiority of its perspective (a lack of ultimacy), but taking literal idolatry literally (at the level of symbol and not as a form of thinking) caused him to re-enact this at a different logical level. Hillman (2013) described a parallel issue in the psychological mode of thought: "Despite the historical evidence of religions, there is a fond notion without adequate foundation that monotheism is the pinnacle," which caused a "psychological bias of the historians of religion who put monotheism on top in the name of integration" (p. 131). The wish for an idea that serves as a way to access a single, integrating principle all too often becomes an idol that excludes every rival.

2.5. Forms of Thought

A separate problem in idolizing forms of thought is the sense that the history of each form of thought is not in itself consistently homogenous; instead, the "suspect"

forms of its history are ignored as extraneous material. Miller (1981a, p. xviii), for this reason, argued that "the *monotheistic theology* of Christianity has many meanings living in it, a rich multifaceted constellation of possibilities whose articulation corresponds to the *polytheistic mythology* of classical Greece" given the debt that Christian theology owes to Greek philosophy, which is itself indebted to the theological and mythological structures active during that time. Miller (1981b, p. 47) also argued that "Monotheism came about in the evolution of a self-consciousness that thought and spoke about itself in a certain way. It is not that all thinking is monotheistic; it is rather that all abstract, formal, logical, and speculative thinking is inevitably monotheistic."

This is significantly problematic for more than just academic reasons when the perspective "by means of which one sees" and the forms of thought one uses provides a distorted lens or guides as "morally justified" actions that bring acute harm to life. Jantzen (1999) attempted to puzzle out how "high-principled and moral men" nonetheless "bring so much oppression to the world and its people" and realized that "what counts as moral principle in the west is already built on a foundation of violence, a symbolic of domination." She clarified that, "the morality which is derived from the western onto-theological tradition is centred on appropriation, grasping, mastery" and so "the decisions made and the actions taken on the basis of moral principles generated from this ontology are only too likely to enact the violence and oppression on them. And such violence could at an important level remain quite unintentional and unconscious…" (p. 234). Here, the *arche* provides a primal principle that presupposes and validates an orientation to the world that replicates the problems that it ostensibly attempts to solve. Just as the Greek pantheon is part of Christian theology, so also are domination and violence hidden in the *arche* that supports the form of thinking called morality. The fault is at the level of a cultural illusion, the "by means of which" one might identify a "problem" or a "solution."

Our basic way of orienting toward experiences involves interest and importance (divided into the universal and the particular) that fuse to provide a perspective. Because a perspective does not have a foundation outside of itself, it orients those who occupy a perspective into a position of faith or wonder—the ability to experience the absolute in a particularizing way that cannot be translated into the universal (even if others also occupy a relatively similar perspective). The kinds of faith that are central to a person's self-understanding are ultimate concerns, which induce a sort of anxiety because they demand the totality of a person's commitment.

The gap between a perspective (which is finite) and a commitment (which is total) is socially overcome by three totalizing technologies that combine to create a modern perspective based on *literal idolatry*. These all operate on the metaphoric model of substitution, creating a singular element to stand for a more complex process or set of terms. The first technology, the *arche*, posits an identity of epistemology and ontology: it refuses to accept or recognize that which does not conform to its primal prejudice. It results in a situation where how we know (the *arche*) determines what exists. The second technology is that of the *symbol*. This symbol is informed by myths (of linear progress, individual heroes, and violent conflicts) and traditional forms of thought (based on a metaphoric logic of substitution), which combine to provide a sense of depth and totality. The third technology is *moralistic monotheism*, which assumes the desirability of a superior "one" that is capable of authorizing judgment of the binary oppositional logics presented by the *arche*. Whatever myth supports the dominant symbol of the "one," whether a revealed God, elected official, natural selection, or market economy, provides a basis for authority.

The system is self-perpetuating and welcomes differences at certain levels. It welcomes dissent at the level of *arche* because it provides a cultural illusion of discrimination (and occasional justifies a "civilizing" use of violence). It welcomes dissent at the level of *symbol*, because it creates a cultural illusion of tension regarding which symbol is dominant. It finally welcomes dissent at the level of moralistic monotheism, because it gives the illusion of different perspectives that can judge each other. What all of these "alternatives" have in common is a way of maintaining the centrality of a perspective that engages in *literal*

idolatry by taking one or more of these levels from a perspective that is not self-negating. Focusing discontent at each level of technology helps to keep more robust alternatives as extraneous knowledge.

3. From Substitution to Tension

Misusing the metaphor's power of substitution creates the almost ubiquitous, but still problematic, form of thinking identified as literal idolatry. The second capacity of metaphor, tension, is understood in its centrifugal expression—as narrative. Narratives provide ways of relating that retain a number of levels of tension obviated in literal idolatry. Narrative theories foreground the levels of tension that necessarily inhere within a story, and also explore how narratives provide practice in developing skills of integrated attention. This involves pattern recognition and empathic recognition. Allowing tension and choice is important beyond storytelling, which is important for understanding both how we can know things as well as how we should act: accordingly, examples demonstrate how narrative theory opens up new options for ethics and theology. The section concludes with how the virtue of embracing the tensive power of metaphor is the development of a character expressed as wisdom (the ability to discern the best story), and eventually as hope (the ability to discern patterns in reality at odds with what appears to be total).

3.1. Metaphor

Ricoeur (2008) wrote *The Rule of Metaphor* prior to constructing his *Time and Narrative* trilogy. He moved from looking at metaphor at the level of word (as name), to how it functions at the level of a sentence (as definition), and from there to the role of models and metaphors as a means of redescribing reality at the level of a longer linguistic work (pp. 4–6). He concluded that

> " . . . the 'place' of metaphor, its most intimate and ultimate abode, is neither the name, nor the sentence, nor even discourse, but the copula of the verb *to be*. The metaphorical 'is' at once signifies both 'is not' and 'is like'. If this is really so, we are allowed to speak of metaphorical truth, but in an equally 'tensive' sense of the word 'truth'". (p. 7)

As described above, the perspective of *literal idolatry* occurs through an exclusive substitution of *is like* (Capitalism, Individualism, Protestantism) relative to a field of opposition constituted by the *is not* of the extraneous. The *arche* renders complementary binary pairs as mutually exclusive in the modern forms of knowing. In this way, the excluded extraneous generates a semblance of tension in excluding "other" terms, which allows the symbolic substitution of what are deemed homogenous terms within a larger and familiar-feeling field of sameness. Rejection resolves the tension. For example, modern forms of thinking would argue that, when evaluating the pair rational/emotional relative to truth, the "rational" invariably is held in the space of *is like* and the "emotional" is rejected as *is not*.

When Lorde (2017) argued that the master's tools could not destroy the master's house, she acknowledged the need to "make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish." (p. 112). The emphasis on *all* suggests that instead of keeping the *arche* of exclusion and merely flipping the terms, Lorde wished to forge a system that integrated the tension caused by incorporating difference without prioritizing sameness. Discussions of alternate epistemologies, diverse ontologies, and new post-theisms are useful in providing alternatives to consider, but the more functional alternative would be the addition of a second term to the substitution. Adding "is not" to every "is like" would supply a tension and a more fully developed kind of relationship than the kind of simplistic identifications that lend themselves to a literal idolatry.

Combining substitution and monotheism allows a symbol to appear as the result of culmination, presenting an absolute inasmuch as it is simultaneously particular and universal, allowing access to the two kinds of importance identified by Whitehead. An example of this is capitalism, which sees itself as the culmination of economic systems that

reproduces itself in both local systems as well as an increasingly globalized (universal) whole. At a metaphysical level, it favors ontologies of Being and presence, which allows it to slide from being worshipped as a being (felt as a presence) to being assumed as a perspective (felt as a given). The idea of the idol, as spectacle or as a pair of spectacles, becomes the totality relative to the believer even when experienced at the expense of the rest of reality. In Tillich's terms, the heavy lifting is done by the culture and the symbol of ultimate concern—not the faith of the believer.

Ricoeur argued that tension, which holds a term and an impertinent attribution in a dynamic, irreconcilable state, provides an alternative model to symbol and substitution: Where a symbol generates a static abundance, drawing attention to itself, metaphoric tension drives things forward. A symbol provides a sense of continuity in time through a repetition of the same. Tension opens a perspective focused on the productive relationship between the two literal points of view that prioritizes its movement and not its resolution. As a result, instead of the conjoined *both/and* of a symbolic logic, the difference moves between the "neither *is like* nor *is not like*" its description. Rather than discrete entities that are made present, *tension* is an uncertain and evolving focus on the relationships that define interactions. Because it is relational, rather than substitutional, it moves through a logic of *neither-nor*, rather than *both-and*: as such, it is innately self-negating. Without a focus on a *thing*, there is no kind of "Being" or "presence" that could be worshipped, nor a foundation that could become a fixed perspective. Its focus is on *process*, not *products*. It generates a diversity of interpretations and understandings, rather than a sense of enforced sameness.

3.2. Narrative

A narrative is like a metaphor in favoring tension over substitution, but is not like metaphor in terms of its direction. A metaphor tends to be *centripetal*, focusing its tension within the internal terms generated at the level of a sentence. The gravitational field of a narrative, on the other hand, is *centrifugal*: its overlapping modes of relations gesture continually beyond itself. Narrative fields are relational fields: they gather things and ideas, times and places, characters and readers. Because each thing named is invested with its own detailed history, and is additionally defined relative to its own set of associations and contexts, relating any story brings into potential awareness a seemingly infinite number of possibilities. A narrator who presents a text is thus required to make choices from the outset, selecting what details will be included and which will be omitted. The frustration regarding what details to include or exclude that necessarily arises when relating a narrative innately undermines the kind of certainty of an authoritative truth that supplements a symbolic substitution. Every account can only be partial. No account can be total—or even definitive.

Narratives relate (Genette 1983). A narrative theory is a theory about emergent relationships. Telling a story relates its contents to an audience, and invites the audience to relate themselves to the content. An engaging (even modestly engaging) story will retain the interest of the audience and make the horizon of its terms somewhat important—at least during the time it is presented. In formal narratological terms, a narrative relates a *fabula* (or an imaginable origin set of events), filtered through a *szujet* (or the order and sequence of a story), presented as a text (a fixed presentation of a narrative given at a certain time—visual, literary, and auditory). Any text thus relates to an audience an interrelated set of parts that emerge as a non-limited, non-total, uncertain whole (Bal 2004). One way to understand a symptom of *literal idolatry* is when preoccupation with a particular presence that is potential in a text is embraced, distracting from the broader reality that overlapping sets of relations perpetuate as many *is not* modes of understanding as *is like*.

The term *story* relates to a constellation of different *kernels* of recognizable events that become part of a cultural tradition (Chatman 2007). The journey of the hero provides an example of story. Some of its *kernels* include a call to action, helper/guide, confrontation with the underworld, death and rebirth, and return with gift. The Christ myth is another story, with kernels such as miraculous birth, baptism, ministry, choosing of the twelve, last supper, crucifixion, and resurrection. Incorporating these *kernels* into an ostensibly different

text—even if in a different order—provides audiences with additional patterns through which to interpret it.

Myths provide a sense of how good narratives function: they can sustain a reader's interest when its stakes are recognized as being important. The scale of importance in a narrative—as is true of all kinds of importance—ranges from a cosmic battle of good and evil to a coffee cup blowing down an alley on a windy afternoon. The ability to discern importance develops, in large part, through our interaction with narratives. Narratives allow audiences to become sensitive to pattern recognition. Stories and myths provide linear vectors of plots through time contextualized by cycles of recurrence, resulting in upward and downward spirals of fortune. The mind uses the intellect, developed through pattern recognition, to recognize similarities and differences relative to other patterns. Through the accumulation of scenes, audiences learn the nature of how parts relate to a whole (which becomes more than the sum of its parts), and how the importance of a part relates to the harmonization of the whole. Temporal rhythms and patterns become communicated as narratives provide an awareness of synchronicity and anticipation. Spending time learning the rhythms of narrative structure allows us to understand our own lives in similar terms.

Time itself is largely a question of pattern recognition conveyed through narratives and personalized in a life: rather than taking us by surprise, each sunrise is taken as a recurrent event in a larger pattern that we expect. No matter how lovely, it becomes part of the matter of fact. But because narratives always involve a relation of something in the past, and also because they allow for more advanced abilities to anticipate the future, a narrative also greatly enhances our sense of cycles of days and lives. Its ability to allow us to navigate through the future invites a deeper appreciation for the past. Narratives generate ever more expansive realms of relations.

The fusion of interest and importance provides a perspective within a narrative, but this perspective is not a passive orientation; instead, it expands the capacity latent in one's awareness into a more intentional ability to pay attention. Narratives convey perspectives to readers, often through the mediation of a narrator. Such narrators often provide readers with nuanced (imagined) practice at how to pay attention to the world, expanding the mundane world into an expansive feast for the senses. The time spent imagining how a narrator bathes a kitchen with attention, scouring over scrubbed pots left in the sink that sparkle in the sunlight, translates into an improved way of seeing one's own home. By transferring the learned property of attention in this way, it becomes integrated into one's life. Narrators are also often deft translators of beliefs, behaviors, and motivations and provide ways of understanding how actions and intentions can be powerfully congruent or remain problematically separate. Narratives relate to us the importance of our interest as its own commodity, allowing us to learn lessons in non-actual worlds regarding what other of our capacities we choose to expand.

3.3. Narrative Ethics and Theology

The field of narrative ethics has shown how the example of a good protagonist provides an imaginable guide for one's own future conduct (Booth 1988), and also how insightful narrators who provide complex, loving descriptions of the world also invite readers to see the world in similarly enhanced ways (Nussbaum 2009). Narrators portray characters as embodying patterns of action and learning that teach the audience that sometimes an important insight follows a tragic turn of events. Narrators themselves provide patterns of language and a way of understanding time, not to mention a way of creating worlds, that compel us. Many people, in thinking about their lives, see themselves as the protagonist of a life story. Perhaps a more thoughtful group sees themselves as narrating their life stories. These are forms of empathic recognition that often appeal to an audience's sense of interest through the use of the imagination.

This approach to narrative ethics assumes a symbolic relationship to texts: idealizing a protagonist's way of behaving or a narrator's way of noticing encourages substitution. Inherent limits to this process exist, however, that do not occur within the symbol. Even if

one becomes forgetful of one's subjective history and anxiety for the time of engaging in a good book (or bad book, or even binge watching a television show), this process comes to an end once the story stops. The substitution is finite, and to the extent that the narrative offers a perspective on reality, it generally requires sorting through the story's particulars and its differences, and ultimately features the sort of effort people make relative to their own lives anyway. So long as the process of relating remains dynamic, including how a character's situation *is not* like as well as how it *is like* one's own, the risk of literal idolatry remains diminished.

One practical application of this sense of narrative relative to theology is demonstrated by looking at the different kinds of perspectives, the stories and the narratives that theologians use when discussing religion. Schewel (2017), in *7 Ways of Looking at Religion: The Major Narratives*, provides a succinct and clarifying illustration of eight distinct ways that scholars and adherents have tended to relate "religion" in modernity. Schewel is careful throughout the book to present these as differently true or useful options, to be understood relative to each other, rather than foregrounding one as superior. The plurality of perspectives helps the audience of this book become more informed about ways that theology depends on mythic structures (*szujet* and *story*) as much as religious revelations. Such *perspectives* are important to keep in mind because the way that the truth is framed (through non-apparent structuring forms of thought) joins with the content (*fabula* and *kernels*) as the non-literal elements of a text that influence the audiences who retain them.

The perspective earned through an integrated attention is not left on its own. It is balanced by a functional term that modifies perspective. Narratologists refer to this as *focalization*, which attends to the filter(s) placed over perspective's discriminating lens (Bal 2004). If perspective limits what is available to be viewed from the very beginning through the standards of importance and interest, then focalization provides a way to think about *how* the narrowed "relevant content" becomes displayed. Questions of value are communicated by narrative interest in certain details or events, and questions of mood and tone also tend to enhance or diminish, render banal or wondrous. It is for this reason that narratives communicated from an ostensibly "omniscient" or "objective" stance nonetheless feel as though they are directed by some motivating personality. Even if one could argue that the perspective is a limit to what could be known about which a narrator might experience frustration, focalization is a sort of limit that arises from what humans would recognize as a "subjective" or "interior" set of judgments or values. It indicates a sense of a desirable good, that which directs the focused attention. Raising the question of focalization prevents literal idolatry by indicating the non-total potentialities that rest within any and every perspective, and also reminds observers that they are contributors and participants who are responsible for what is viewed and how it is judged. Questions about how to feel about abstractions such as "the knowable" and "the unknown" generate potential alternatives to an *arche*. Remembering that the knowable is not totalizing, that some positive virtues remain unexamined within what is "known," undermines the *arche*'s ability to determine ontology through epistemology.

One of the best theological discussions that indicates the importance of focalization in the presentation of a religious story appears in *Becoming Divine*. In it, Jantzen (1999) revisited the *fabula* of Jesus from the perspective of someone who is interested in the story's importance—how it fuses the ordinary and the non-ordinary elements of this life. Her reading questions the focalization that traditionally amplifies the presence of death throughout the story, finding that elements such as the crucifixion and an afterlife are thematically ill fitting, even if also familiar. This part of her interpretation exposes the traditional focalization and fixation on death and suffering that has permeated Christian theology. This emphasis is part of the *arche* that has historically contributed to unnecessary oppression, exploitation, and suffering perpetuated in Western culture.

Jantzen also attended to the "unseen" elements in the story of Jesus in ways that show a powerful but unrecognized potential of the text. This focuses on *natality*, birth rather than death, and the potential for human flourishing in this world. This focalization provides an

equally coherent but incredibly different understanding of Jesus's importance as a religious figure, thus opening a new way of appreciating Christianity in terms that expand beyond the traditional *arche*. By providing a new light from which to read the story of Jesus, Jantzen exposed the potential of the text to serve as an *arche* from which a very different kind of present and future could be explored.

Whereas a symbol influences believers to passively accept its supremacy, foregrounding tension requires more activity and participation on the part of the audience. Tension enhances the ability of imaginative empathic recognition to hold a space between neither being like nor unlike characters or narrators, viewing both what is seen and how it is shown from a compassionate distance. Secondly, it holds this play of differences relative to the level of intellectual pattern recognition as an awareness of anticipation and memory are brought into the foreground (both in relation to the text at hand as well as in relation to patterns gleaned from other cultural texts). Finally, it develops the integrated attention, which focuses on the content included by the limited perspective and even more limited focalization without losing sight of the bigger picture as it unfolds.

A final way to look at internal tensions inherent in narratives is suggested by Baldwin (2011), as he contrasts how revelation and resolution function in story. A story achieves a sense of resolution (releasing the tension) at the expense of revelation, keeping elements hidden in the field of extraneous knowledge. On the other hand, a story that is interested in revelation, showing a maximal perspective, shows the difficulty in aiming for a happy ending. Baldwin writes that, in such cases, "The resolution of a story must occur in us, with what we make of the questions with which the story leaves us" (p. 46). The way an audience resolves the story is undertaken through a personal investment in making realizable the conclusions drawn from non-present worlds. If the stakes of the story are adequately pressing, the relationship of narrative/resolution would possess a structure similar to that of Tillich's relationship of symbol/faith—but with a lessened danger of becoming *literal idolatry* at the level of *ultimate concern*. The audience, in this case, becomes a potential resource that participates in bringing about a desired perspective on reality that is focalized in the good that can be done. This moment transforms faith into hope.

Focusing on narrative tension rather than on symbolic substitution shifts the emphasis of ontology from epistemology to ethics. Rather than how we know, which makes inquires to the recent past and present, the focus becomes *what we will do*. Following Adam Zachary Newton's insight in *Narrative Ethics*, ethical consequences emerge from the specific situation of narrating and witnessing. Newton (1997) focuses on maintaining the tension between "ethics" and "fiction/reading/criticism," rather than collapsing the tension in favor of one or the other pole of importance (p. 10), and this choice opens an intersubjective field in which ethics "signifies recursive, contingent, and interactive dramas of encounter and recognition, the sort which prose fiction both crystallizes and recirculates in acts of interpretive engagement" (p. 12). Such an ethics eschews an appeal to a universal duty in favor of a localized occurrence, and greets audiences with an "immediacy and force" that adheres to a pragmatic and interactive logic and avoids a prescriptive, legislative duty (p. 13). The force reveals one's inner resources and potency and provides a focalized sense of future good that can be realized by an action—but it addresses itself to the unique person and situation in ways that demand the lightness of creative response rather than the heaviness of dutiful obligation.

3.4. Wisdom and Hope

Each audience comes to each text from a different personal perspective, and a relationship to a specific text alters with each interaction. Instead of the comfort of sameness, the reward for engaging with narrative tensions that resist symbolization is *wisdom*. Symbols are often accompanied by universally valid statements of belief and protocols of behavior, easily memorized and checked. Tension provides practical knowledge, gradually obtained through the interaction of the integrated attention, the caring heart, and the concerned mind. The wise reader translates the loving and gracious modes of description into real

situations, able to render with a kindly glance or gentle touch at crucial moments in reality what no character, author, or narrator ever performed in a world of fiction. This fusion of integrated capacities allows those enhanced by narrative perspectives to understand that each part of each thing is itself a precious and unique whole that fractally enfolds into rich and deep patterns that extend forward and backward throughout time.

Miller (1992) argued that the path of wisdom exchanges its primal prejudices and the seeming stability of dogmatic systems in favor of the abyss of questioning (p. 30). Far from the possibility of a literal idolatry, narrative situations require moving through a series of contingent focalized perspectives and diverging possibilities for inclusion, exclusion, and interpretation. Exploring narrative as an abyss, a set of options that allow relations to non-present possibilities, is not an embrace of nihilism (the process that ends up corroding idols from the inside), but an opportunity to exercise skills of practical decision making. Learning forms of thought, pattern recognition, empathic recognition, and sustained attention through engaging with narratives provides a sense of faith as confidence in one's own ability to wisely assess and act in whatever circumstances arise.

The emphasis on focalized perspective is crucial when choosing the abyss over the *arche*, because such an act is often associated with despair. This looks at the abyss with a sense of expectation. Etymologically, the word "expect' relates *spect* (the term for vision) and *spes* (the term for hope). Contemporary culture often associates expectation with a sense of entitlement or as a demand. But to peer into the abyss, looking at narrative tensions rather than symbolic substitutions, provides a glimpse at new resources and directions that can influence the future. This act of expecting changes the kind of change that greets our eyes. Rather than what is unchanging (the static symbol of literal idolatry) or the kind of chaotic tumult that associates in its wake (superficial change), this view peers into the substantial depths of reality.

Moltmann (1993) described this kind of hopeful expectation as contrary to "positivistic realism" (or wishful thinking that draws only superficially given resources). Rather than seeing the world as "a fixed body of facts," it finds "a network of paths and processes" that attend to a narrative logic. Seeing that a network of paths, rather than a single one, persists encourages the view that " . . . the world does not only run according to laws" (which the *arche* of a literal idolatry would suggest), "but these laws themselves are flexible," which suggests seeing such laws with the focalized perspective Jantzen uses to read the story of Jesus. Moltmann added: "so long as it is a realm in which necessity means the possible, but not the unalterable" (p. 25), which shows that necessity (which emerges as a virtue of temporal development) may be given—but that the current vector of the future may not necessarily be what follows from one particular focalized perspective of the past. This kind of expectation introduces a hope that looks at the substance of what endures as being deeper than what appears, and finds the potential for new directions that can be explored.

Writing from the perspective of a Christian theology, Moltmann (1993) also discusses how a "Christian hope cannot cling rigidly to the past and the given and ally itself with the utopia of the *status quo*," a perspective that is not unique to Christianity. Instead, "it is itself summoned and empowered to creative transformation of reality for it has hope for the whole of reality." The holistic vision of hope, that comes from finding the courage to look into the abyss, understands the ever present potentiality of substantial change. Moltmann's emphasis on "creative transformation" authorizes the person looking at what is fully revealed with an expectant focalized perspective to become part of how this becomes realized in resolution. Finally, Moltmann adds that "the believing hope will itself provide *inexhaustible resources* for the creative, inventive imagination . . . to give shape to the newly dawning possibilities in the light of the promised future" (p. 34). It activates these resources within the self and foregrounds them in the world with the promise that all that is necessary is provided. Learning how to use these transformative powers is itself undertaken appropriately, as the latent resource of an inner wisdom developed through practice suggests. This work of creative transformation allows a new kind of "story" to be assembled from the "kernels" of reality.

The notion of "substance" is not necessarily limited to the imaginable; instead, recent work in materialist studies indicates that Moltmann's approach to transforming reality includes physical substance and material reality. In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett (2010) offered a robust and compelling depiction of vital materialism. By showing the inadequacy of traditional theories of will and causality, Bennett made room for seeing how a variety of causes and forces inform our behaviors and decisions. She provided a variety of literary, historical, and theoretical descriptions of this viewpoint. Vital materialism is sometimes a "generative field" of "conjoint action" (p. 95) that informs how a public assembles with a variety of motives, and sometimes as an assemblage that weaves in laws, lifestyles, water, computer programs, and profit motives (p. 25). Not all parts of an assemblage are created equal: operators (p. 41) have a relatively significant influence over the direction or function of the whole. Bennett depicted how problems summon diverse publics (including non-human actors) to meet them. Reading Bennett through Moltmann, the future could be seen as an impersonal force that humans (who serve as operators) can experience as "hope," creating generative fields of conjoint actors appropriate to meet this future. This kind of hopeful vision occurs as humans become more fluent kinds of storytellers, moving beyond restrictions to the human world to embrace new kinds of substantial potentialities.

4. The Potential of Narrative Theology

All narratives provide a centrifugal tension as they relate new and different kinds of possibilities. Narrative theology creates a unique field of interest and importance that allows an impactful point of convergence, understanding "field" less as a specific discipline and more as a quantum field. Ricoeur offers a robust model of the field of narrative theology that offers a coherent alternative to the substitutional foundation of literal idolatry.

4.1. The Tensions within Theology

One of the fundamental tensions that persists in theology is that between the divine and the human. Structurally, the metaphor that commonly allows us to conceptualize God is the human (Aslan 2017), while God is the metaphor that we use to understand ourselves (Hillman 2013). A logic of symbolic substitution leads to literal idolatry to the extent that an "I" and a "God", which occupy a focalized perspective framed by traditional forms of thought, become equivalent. One powerful framing form of thought is an *arche* that renders invisible, as extraneous knowledge, other possible kinds of content or forms of thought. It does this by rejecting as a matter of fact (on the basis of the presumed importance of continuity through certainty and authority) the potential value that unauthorized forms of epistemology might have. Harari (2017) described an appropriate outcome of literal idolatry in *Homo Deus*: "in seeking bliss and immortality," terms that seem synonymous with how Ricoeur defined the corrupt elements of religion, "humans are in fact trying to upgrade themselves into gods" (p. 43).

Looking at the relationship of God and human in terms of *tension*, rather than substitution, forms a bridge that spans conceptions of the human and the divine and allows people to develop an interest in an expanding, ever-shifting sense of importance. Traversing the bridge from human to the divine allows for an empathic recognition of a humanized world from diverse perspectives, and moving from the divine to the human often allows for a pattern recognition of a conceptual world. The primary movement tends to emphasize linear, temporal experience that oscillates between moments of potential identity (*is like*) and difference (*is not*), ultimately resting on neither one nor the other. The secondary movement, from divine to human, offers a sense of the eternal and cyclical and moves between *monotheistic* and *polytheistic* modes of emphasis. In addition to the intellectual and conceptual vision that often serves as a substitute for divine spirit (which largely reflect the religious sentiment), it is important to remember that matter presents itself as something additional that endures through time. Understanding that the material world itself retains potential resources, learning from its enduring patterns, provides a substantial (and renewable) set of resources from which to learn.

Literal idolatry remains possible by emphasizing either of these poles (seeing the self as God, or seeing a literal God as other than self). Maintaining the tension opens a series of focalized perspectives in which one experiences existence as a participatory process that invites my wise action in the world to resolve situations that confront me. Moving from the safety of universalized norms and standards, narrative invites me into the abyss of self-authorizing actions, where my intellect, imagination, and attention become tools that allow me to responsibly engage with levels of complexity.

Wisdom supplies confidence (from the Latin "with faith") in the ability to respond to situations that generate concern, and enhances a sensitivity to actions informed by an ultimate concern that avoid the perils of literal idolatry. Combining the tensions of narrative with those of theology generates a dynamic field that resists the stability of symbolic substitution. The theological element provides the field with a sense of ultimate concern, a desire for depth and the resources to navigate the space that is neither "like" nor "unlike". The narrative element provides a sense of temporality and movement, a centrifugal energy that is expansive beyond the ability for any *arche* to curtail it. It provides the capabilities of pattern recognition, empathic recognition, and integrated attention that become integrated within the depths opened by theology. Narrative supplies the interest, theology the sense of importance. Narratives offer a polytheistic set of optional focalized perspectives, and theology provides an orientation for focused, finite actions. The properties of the resulting intersubjective field are more akin to quantum physics than a traditional academic discipline: it provides a conceptual space in which emergent questions prompt new potential answers.

4.2. The Context of Ricoeur's Narrative Theology

Initial attempts at exploring narrative theology, developed in the 1980s, were hampered by the desire to protect the *arche* and form of thought presented in Christianity. The best work on the topic from this era—an essay from Ricoeur (1995)—provides a rough vision for the potential of a narrative theology that never developed. Narrative, for Ricoeur, balances discordance (or interruptions of plot) and concordance (the sense of unity). These contradictory impulses are each necessary: concordance in isolation becomes stagnation (which is the problem with symbolic substitutions), while discordance alone creates overwhelming confusion to the point of total meaninglessness (the nihilistic abyss). Relation requires both a notion of identity and difference in a constant process of balance. This balance is less likely to be quantitatively measured, in ways that would throw a switch between "right" and "wrong", but is instead more likely to be qualitatively sensed, measured, and assessed. Determining how to relate with something requires thoughtful calibration and nuanced responses that lack the speed allowed by an abstracted form of thinking, or an objective reliance on external rules or duties. This slowness is more likely to allow the discordant elements within terms and thoughts (such as the Greek pantheon hidden in Christian theology) to emerge resonantly, adding texture and depth.

Ricoeur's work presents a style of thinking that is slow and opposed to literalism. This bias shows itself in his brief treatment of narrative theology. He contrasted an ideal narrative theology against a triumphalist theology of history (that would measure things from a fall to salvation) and also against a monolithic conception of Biblical thought that would discount the "multiplex network of Biblical narratives." Both of these dangers lurk within a Christian pattern that would "abolish the peripeties, dangers, failures and horrors of history for the sake of a consoling overview provided by the providential schema of this grandiose narrative" (p. 238). From Ricoeur's perspective, a narrative theology would resist merely moral, speculative, or existential simplifications of theological import; put otherwise, it welcomes the limits of a particular, historical theological tradition.

Notably absent in Ricoeur's narrative theology is any sense of nostalgic theism. Rather than focusing on any being (God, text, or reader) or presence, Ricoeur's narrative theology is wholly relational. Nothing in the text is an "object," much less described independently. The entirety of the essay consists of his exploration of significant relationships as irresolvable

tensions that fuel the process of both thinking and doing. He avoided the Tillichian line of proclaiming the superiority of Protestant Christianity but nonetheless clearly allowed that the Bible holds a uniquely valuable place in *his own* particular thinking. This is based on his contingent, living reverence for the Bible's unique properties, which he found both useful in developing his own hermeneutics and also rare in the world of literature. Despite his personal biographical debt to the Bible and its unique properties, Ricoeur remained mindful that what is sacred comes from function rather than from either argument (justified true belief) or traditional status. A functional relationship is vital and capable of giving life: no remnant here can be taken literally. When navigating through sacred texts in an active relationship, its elements are offered to be either consciously enjoyed, unconsciously experienced, or forgetfully discarded.

Additionally, Ricoeur's emphasis on the ongoing relationships emergent between inherent polar tensions as basic principles suggests that the work of interpretation is necessarily ongoing. Once one enters into the field of narrative theology—understanding, again, "field" as an alternative to Tillich's symbol, constituted by overlapping energetic forces and tensions—it clarifies and shapes future experiences of the world. Rather than a core *arche* that serves as a protected foundation for belief, Ricoeur related the possibility of an ongoing theological quest of interrelatedness that opens future potential relationships from a prior model.

4.3. The Resources and Challenges of Narrative Theology

Ricoeur (1995) briefly provided four achievements of narrative theory (pp. 239–40). These offer resources that allow theology to resist the allure of a literal idolatry. Based in textual relations, these four elements are independent of Ricoeur's parallel belief that a narrative theology would remain beholden to Christian and Jewish symbols.

1. The first resource is situated between discordance/concordance: *emplotment* mirrors the relationship of story and kernel in respecting both the need for linear sequence as well as ways that story can be grasped as a whole. This balance of discordance and concordance resists tendencies to look at a notion of time as continual evolutionary progress (wherein "new" is automatically "better") as well as tendencies to slip into ahistorical forms of thought.
2. The second resource is situated between pattern and *phronesis*: wisdom emerges because narratives emphasize practical knowledge in the context of abstract theory, balancing empathetic and pattern recognition. As argued above relative to Newton's *Narrative Ethics*, readers intuitively appreciate how patterns of behaviors portrayed in texts open up new epistemological opportunities through the presentation of a character. As Baldwin suggests, wisdom is a *lived* universality, rather than abstracted one: we *resolve* narrative questions in our own lived experiences.
3. The third resource is situated between innovation and sedimentation: its *fluid* nature arises between what is fixed (a particular text, a way of telling a story) and what is flexible (permutations opened for each individual audience given situations are unique and unpredictable). This fluid nature relative to texts seems to complement Moltmann's discussion of the hopeful path between certain futurity vs. despairing resignation and mere wishful thinking. It chooses neither the determination of the first nor the possibilities of the second but uses a fluid, focalized perspective that sees something new in what reveals itself.
4. The fourth resource combines these three achievements at the level of *meaning*. Ricoeur argues that the level of meaning is a continuum that moves from an author's intention to an audience's reception. From Ricoeur's perspective, narratives are meaningful inasmuch as they transform the reader's relation to self and the reader's relation to world by suggesting a new potential for living wisely.

Ricoeur also outlined the difficulties of narrative theology (pp. 243–48), with particular appreciation for and attention to the unique status of the Bible. He first discussed the sacred function of Biblical language, which roots theological discourse in ordinary terms

and possesses the sedimentation of tradition, authority, and liturgy lacking in merely mundane literature. Secondly, he argued that the Biblical narratives uniquely offer a crisis of temporality, as the stories are neither documentary history nor merely fiction. Third, Ricoeur argued that the Biblical narratives are importantly written relative to other Biblical voices: law, prophecy, wisdom sayings. Finally, Ricoeur argued that the Biblical texts possess significance in supporting theological thinking. And yet, he concluded by considering ways that Biblical narrative was special because it "never existed without embryonic theological *thinking*," based on the always present incorporation of "some principles ruling the interpretation at work through narrative," an embryonic thinking juxtaposed against its "polar counterpart, praise." He paused to note the sedimented traditions of theology, and then concluded the whole essay by saying: "But the question of the origin of regulative concepts remains open" (p. 248).

Especially given his emphasis on the resources that narratives offer to theology, it is not surprising that Ricoeur found that one important task of narrative theology involves refusing modern forgetfulness. Narrative theology reminds us of "the capacity to tell stories and to listen," which would lead to a "rebirth of narrative in general" (p. 238). Even if they were not Biblical in nature, such a rebirth would likely be determined by a fusion of a sedimented power that would have a sacred function (beyond literally repeating traditional language) in rooting contemporary symbols of ultimate concern (p. 243). They would need to be written with a peculiarly estranging form of temporality that would resist being categorized as either mere fiction or mere history. They would need to be written in a way that integrates a variety of texts. And finally, they would need to incorporate both embryonic theological thinking (and a process of making this intelligible) alongside a sense of praise. Such a text would then create a field of narrative theology, fusing the three inner tensions (concordance/discordance, pattern/*phronesis*, and sedimentation/innovation) in a way that readers could meaningfully activate. Further, and most importantly, contemporary narratives that successfully generated this field would offer theology new regulative concepts.

The question of regulative concepts is perhaps the most crucial to understand, because these relate to our presumptions about what makes a story worth telling. Problems emerge when "mediating sources" include "summaries, confessional formulas, and doxologies grafted mainly on the sapiential and hymnic expression of the faith" because such elements inform the focalized perspective that, following Jantzen, problematically fixate on death rather than life (and draw attention away from other potential expectations). Altering the "regulative concepts" for what determines good narratives and good theology is key to the "rebirth of narratives" that Ricoeur recognized as necessary. Such a shift would include an enhanced epistemology more open to the subjective, lived environment that Ricoeur's work so frequently foregrounds.

5. From Narrative Theology to the Second Elevation

From Theoretical Elevators Vol. 2 by James Fulton

> "An elevator is a train. The perfect train terminates at Heaven. The perfect elevator waits while its human freight tries to grab through the muck and find the words. In the black box, this messy business of human communication is reduced to excreted chemicals, understood by the soul's receptors and translated into true speech". (Whitehead 1999, p. 87)

Ricoeur's description of narrative theology is built on the foundation that he knew best: the Biblical tradition and his hermeneutic skills that gestured him outside toward a world in need of wise and compassionate actors. To understand the importance of the field of narrative theology as a set of transformative tensions that sustain the sacred within the ordinary, inspiring graceful influences and charitable interpretations, it is important to depart from the Ricoeur's sketch of narrative theology and accept his invitation to explore a new universe of potential meanings that emerge as a new field of narrative theology.

This section explores the expectation that a contemporary novel would be suited to contribute to the field of narrative theology. Ricoeur's description of the uniqueness of the Bible offers considerations for core elements that are important to generating a field of narrative theology; in particular, a combination of *emplotment*, wisdom, fluidity, and meaning. Most cultural narratives are commodities meant to be consumed and discarded. As such, they substitute the thrill of a plot for tension, generate a sense of secular time, reproduce a world that is already familiar, and deprive the audience of a sense of meaning. Such products are addictive to the extent that they are empty. That said, works of genius that fulfill Ricoeur's expectations occur consistently throughout human history.

The price of entry to this potential field, as is true of the entry into any world, is to leave behind the safety of an *arche* and plunge with love and wonder into a new world that opens. Miller (1992) described how our capacity to love becomes our capability of moving from one world to the next, as any element or incident in the everyday world can unexpectedly reorient our values, attitudes, and lives. He wrote, " . . . to participate in the play of any universe requires . . . a willingness to surrender wholeheartedly to its gravitational field. The passionate character of such a surrender enables a world to mean the world to us" (p. 96). The movement toward a new universe of meaning requires a step of faith, the investment of one's intellectual mind, imaginative heart, and integrated attention. This is similar to Tillich's definition of faith as *ultimate concern* because leaving behind an *arche* and stepping into the unknown abyss requires a similar quality of passionate, mindful action. The field of each universe of meaning has its own gravity, its own rules, its own way of blending the universal and the particular. Entering the field of narrative theology thus depends on a willingness to leave behind the security of traditional symbols and explore new universes of potential meaning as they appear.

Whitehead's 1999 novel, *The Intuitionist* provides an example of how a novel opens a field of narrative theology that does not rely on traditional religious symbolism. The narrative focuses on Lila Mae Watson, a Black woman who works as an elevator inspector in an unnamed modern city whose practices are overtly racist. In the world of the text, Lila Mae's position is distinct not simply because she's the *only* Black woman honored with that position, but also because she practices as an Intuitionist. The great majority of elevator inspectors are Empiricists, who are suspicious of Intuitionism even though it consistently yields more accurate results. The inciting incident of the novel is the inexplicable catastrophic failure of an elevator, which becomes politicized. Much of what sustains the narrative involves James Fulton, whose groundbreaking two-volume *Theoretical Elevators* transformed the world of elevator inspection (especially as the mystically tinged *Vol. 2* provided the underpinnings of Intuitionism), and who was rumored to have developed (but hidden) plans for a revolutionary new kind of elevator that will make current models obsolete.

Opening the field of narrative theology begins at the level of *emplotment*. Whitehead's novel moves between two diverging temporal structures at the core of the book. On one level, the book rests on the kind of *concordance* offered by most standard noir detective fictions, which operate on a deterministic basis of cause and effect. The structure of the book provides a *concordance* through the revelation of a primal scene that offers the investigator (and reader) a sense of *resolution* for a seemingly irresolvable struggle. Berlant (2011) argues that "[t]he detective plot [Lila Mae] initiates . . . does reveal multiple crises in the kinds of knowledge that make will [as volition] reign. . . " as she journeys through "a secretly racialized map of twentieth-century capitalism, seen as a utopian technology gone haywire" (p. 74). In the novel, relative to the homogenized, technologized white world that lives by the *concordance* of causal logics, Lila Mae's free choices (along with other entities in the book) show how her status as heterogenous (Black, woman, Intuitionist) provide her with the opportunity to move toward the unknowable—lived alternativity. This is not constrained to the fictional world, however; as Berlant notes about Fulton's text, "[t]heorizing opens up the present to a lived alternativity *in the present*" (p. 75). Lila Mae demonstrates how this mode of theorizing is a key to the novel's field of narrative theology.

What is opened by this key aligns with what Carter (2020) named the "Black radical sacred," a kind of "astrophysical dark matter with the unknowable force of a dark energy that exceeds racial capitalism's gravitational pull by exerting a force from within that exceeds this (racial) world's epistemological and material circumscriptions," working against a political theology that produces "a discourse that seeks to eviscerate such an imagination of the sacred" (p. 171). Carter posited the Black radical sacred as a domain that cannot be reached within a traditional symbolic theology, nor through its economy of substitution and equivalence. *The Intuitionist* makes the Black radical sacred accessible as a field of narrative theology.

The novel's conclusion provides *revelation* in place of *resolution*: Lila Mae decides to trust her intuition concerning the timing of the second elevation (unveiling of the new kind of elevator based on Fulton's plans) and the birth of the new city. Whitehead (1999) frames this as a delivery through free indirect discourse, offered through the focalized perspective of Lila Mae: " . . . there are other cities, none as magnificent as this, but there are other cities. They're all doomed anyway, she figures. Doomed by what she's working on. What she will deliver to the world when the time is right. They are not ready now but they will be" (p. 254). Lila Mae is resolved, heading toward an uncertain future that forces her to trust herself and her sense of what to do: "She is never wrong. It's her intuition" (p. 255). Her decision to wait for a sense of the fullness of time leaves intact systemic racism, misogyny, corruption. The delay ensures that these remain unchecked, just as what she delivers will doom the world. She takes responsibility for both. She looks at the world with expectation, seeing its resources and the gift that she will contribute, and understands that she will know the perfect time to activate the discordant event of the new elevator, completely changing the face of reality.

The reader is left with the protagonist's example of hope. Reading Fulton's notes about the elevator activates her intellectual mind, imaginative heart, and her embodied intuition as resources that can merge with the capitalist framework of the world to bring a revolution. Although no reader will possess the secret of the "black box", the perfect elevator that will bring the second elevation, the novel *does* provide the possibility of remaining in its field of narrative theology. The audience is empowered to work to prepare the world, to alter the assemblages of power, and to be part of the world that ascends to the new city when it arrives. Importantly, Whitehead does not provide any literal elevator that could be converted into a symbol or that could sustain a religion. Instead, the *emplotment* generates a world of meaning through an example of faith with a potency that can extend beyond the book. Because the book's ways of opening the problem of racism are not resolved by the protagonist's efforts, readers are given both intellectual and imaginative demonstrations that challenge dormant capacities to awaken and act after the story ends.

This also attends to Ricoeur's fourth qualification, the importance of *meaning* beyond the text. By emphasizing the relationship that Lila Mae develops with Fulton's text, Whitehead demonstrates a capacity for shifting from text to action. This provides a pattern that readers of *The Intuitionist* are invited to emulate. Nothing in Lila Mae's actions is directed by a *literal* Fulton or by a *literal* text; instead, her deep understanding of the relationship that Fulton had with his writing guides her ability to trust her own work, her own sense of timing, her own authority. A similar process is available when readers, dislocated from a literalist account, gauge their own sense of inspiration, intuition, and need for action relative to the field of narrative theology and the potential of a Black radical sacred introduced in but not resolved by the plot.

The narrative current (at the level of the *fabula*, not the *szujet*) provides a systematic approach to moving beyond literal idolatry as it cycles through different forms of thought. Toward the end of the novel, after Lila Mae learns how to read with a "double consciousness" that attends to the knowledge that Fulton was passing as white, she realizes that Intuitionism started as a "big joke" (p. 232). But such jokes are precisely what subverts the possibility of literal idolatry and exposes the gap between the message and the literal words (Hillman 2013, p. 150). Whitehead's deft use of free indirect discourse also allows

a portion of the novel (pp. 252–54) to indicate that Fulton had left behind the *arche* of reason, inadvertently putting into motion something that the reader identifies as the story. This genesis provides enough elements that a reader's pattern recognition and empathic recognition can start to sense the field of narrative theology—that perhaps reality, like the novel, allows things to work out according to a deeper wisdom.

In her reading of *The Intuitionist*, Hayles (2019) described the consequences of the book relative to a world of meaning, Ricoeur's fourth stage of integration mentioned above. Discussing how Whitehead integrates the human, the technological, the political, and the city into a cognitive assemblage, Hayles wrote that such an assemblage "may be extended to include not only other technical devices but also overtly political concerns such as racism, gender discrimination, urban infrastructural design, and institutional politics" (p. 185). Hayles gestures to a current running through and pointing beyond the plot, writing "Another realm beckons beyond the binary choice of Empiricism and Intuitionism: the undecidable" (p. 187). Her conception of the undecidable, a third option that is neither literally provided nor a dialectal integration of an opposed pair, evokes the field of narrative theology that beckons beyond the *arche*. It also recalls Moltmann's description of the hopeful world that emerges through expectation, one that reassembles the kernels of resources that assembled along one seemingly determined sort of future that can be reappropriated toward something entirely different.

During the event of a text, narratives function *centripetally*, an inward motion gathering characters, incidents, symbols, readers, thoughts, emotions, hopes, and fears. This is why Jerome Miller can refer to books as a model for a world. Gathered in this way, the field of narrative theology is fully interdependent—each part is in relation to every other part—without it thereby being determinative. This factor is what allows Hayles to understand that changing one component in a cognitive assemblage—such as the introduction of a perfect elevator—may in fact be enough to change the shape and texture of the world. The potential for disruptions of a cognitive assemblage (a potential effect of the field of narrative theology) provides a limit on the Empiricist form of thinking, which depends on the presence of an *arche*, symbolic engagement, and a determinative causality.

Narratives provide a sense of immersive presence. Being enchanted by any story allows a complete disregard of the internal experience of linear time (Poulet 1969). This can happen when engaging in consumable narratives whose plots propel readers into a drive to know what happens next. In such cases, attention is drawn to a future which is unknown—but already determined, fully resolved, and waiting for an audience to receive it. These conventional narratives often intertwine the pleasure principle and death drive, propelling readers to an end (Brooks 2003). The effect of this can feel draining, rather than vitalizing. Such narratives operate at the superficial level of the future, similar to what Whitehead (1999) summons through his initial use of a detective plot before it is subverted.

By contrast, meaningful stories, capable of generating a field of narrative theology, invite slowness and communion through a respectful deepening of the moment. This is similar to how Whitehead depicts Lila Mae's inspection of the elevator through a mystical, geometric communion. It is also echoed in the odd temporality of the novel. Hayles, with reference to Berlant, describes this as she wonders how the "path into a better future" might "affect the present in which Lila Mae lives," but also "the present of readers for whom the novel's not quite our present is already not quite our past" (p. 195). The reader's expectations become questions. Although the resulting "historical present" allows affect to "thicken and extend into prehension of historical events" (p. 197), the novel suggests that an exclusive orientation to the mystical immanence of the Intuitionist form of thinking would be escapist (the kind of "wishful thinking" that lacks the substance of hope). Were Lila Mae have chosen this kind of engagement, there would be no pull toward the future of the second elevation.

Empiricism and Intuitionism are each useful for certain situations, but neither strategy alone—nor a dialectical combination of both—provides a way of being most conducive for sustaining the kind of hopeful orientation invited by the field of narrative theology.

Paralleling the experience of reading narratives, the former supplies information about the past (what has been written), the latter about the present (what I am reading). Narratives have the potential to launch audiences *centrifugally* toward a future, after the encounter with the event of the text reaches its conclusion. While a consumable narrative may install a restless craving for more, a meaningful story propels us outward in a particular direction, inviting our resolute actions in the worlds we inhabit. This mode of propulsion is not based on an *arche* that could be universally into the language of now. It is one that is revealed as a whole, an image of potentiality that authorizes people to recreate reality, offering resolution to what the text revealed.

Humans look at the present through a focalized perspective that senses some goods as more desirable than others. This is also true of the future: we see time with a sense that some endings are more desirable than others. An imagined expectation inspires wisdom, an embodied attunement toward a future that summons us. This is part of why it is important that Lila Mae make "choices, at once ethical, political, and technological" (fusing different *forms of thinking* but acting beyond them) that "indicate the shift of mindset that has positioned her as the leader and designer of the future, rather than as someone who can at best only react to actions that others take" (Hayles 2019, p. 200).

That Whitehead's novel opens up new possibilities of freedom is consistent with the themes of black utopian fiction. These operate on the expectation of a different kind of future than what is linearly generated by the often violent force of surface level of cause-and-effect plotting. In *Black Utopia*, Zamalin (2019, p. 142) argued that black utopia teaches that "optimism is not the inevitability of progress but the potential for a more free existence." This freedom comes through the work of opening "of oneself to oneself, and, by extension, to the world." The resulting freedom is interactive and dynamic, rather than static, as it "can become a new way of acquiring relationships of fulfillment and agency, of dispensing with fantasies of control and order." Crucially, Zamalin's sense of freedom describes not only how it adheres to a logic of hopeful expectation but also how it empowers people to stand against the tyranny of literal idolatry:

> "Creative discovery of oneself, an opening up of what one didn't know they knew, challenges absolute self-certainty. Only by acting, engaging oneself directly, could one know who they were and what they wanted. This means appreciating the opacity and fleetingness of agency. Freedom is terrifying and beautiful. Its terror can lead to the valorization of arbitrary authority, but its beauty can lead to greater equality". (p. 142)

The terror of freedom can lead to the embrace of the future that seems pre-determined or to a resigned glimpse into the abyss. But our ability to engage in a reconstruction of our senses of our selves and of the world are grounded in substantial, potential currents of hope.

The world sketched out by Whitehead additionally fulfills Zamalin's intuitive understanding that an unelaborated black utopia is "less a failure of imagination and more a defense of keeping alive a horizon, which would exist as unfulfilled possibility," in a way that acknowledges both the fears of antiutopians who "lamented mechanized instrumental reason, simple progress, and science unchecked by moral authority" based on "the terrors of global war, mass genocide, and the violent legacy of imperialism," but also who wished to "advance an alternative vision to liberation" alongside black utopians whom Zamalin sees as "remaining committed to a critical form of reason serviceable for collective life" (p. 14). This fulfills the expectation of freedom that Kelley (2002) described, an image of a mother who gives birth to a liberating vision experienced as both freeing the one who sees and the world that is seen:

> "She simply wanted us to live through our third eyes, to see life as possibility. She wanted us to imagine a world free of patriarchy, a world where gender and sexual relations could be reconstructed. She wanted us to see the poetic and prophetic in the richness of our daily lives. She wanted us to visualize a more

> expansive, fluid, "cosmos-politan" definition of blackness, to teach us that we are not merely inheritors of a culture but its makers".(p. 2)

The world of the third eye is the world that sees below the surface of the given, to the material substance that endures. It activates the potential of this world, realizing it in each daily movement.

It is quite relevant to the discussion of the field of narrative theology that emerges through *The Intuitionist* that it empowers a new kind of authority. The beginning of the novel is dominated by the power of white men who engage in violent politics in order to secure their *arche*. The middle of the novel reveals how Fulton, a black man who passes as white, held the secret to the power that the white men desire. The novel ends as Lila Mae, whose combination of pattern recognition and empathic recognition allow her to ghost write as Fulton, becomes "the keeper" (p. 254), the one who holds the divine power of doom and deliverance. Far from the literal idolatry trapped in the figure of a "God" or a "Christ figure", Lila Mae nonetheless ends the novel situated in a field of narrative theology, generative and wise. It is also perhaps relevant that her choice is neither to *act* nor to *refuse*, but to *wait*: an active form of inaction, a use of power that does not exhaust it, a work of vigilant faith that hearkens to the Black radical sacred Coda:

> From the Notebooks of James Fulton:
>
> "The walls are falling away, and the floor and the ceiling. They lose solidity in the verticality. At ninety, everything is air, and the difference between you and the medium of your passage is disintegrating with every increment of the ascension. It's all bright and all the weight and cares you have been shedding are no longer weight and cares but brightness. Even the darkness of the shaft is gone because there is no disagreement between you and the shaft. How can you breathe when you no longer have lungs? The question does not perturb, that last plea of rationality has fallen away floors ago, with the earth". (Whitehead 1999, p. 222)

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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