

CHAPTER 1

READING KARL BARTH

RHETORIC AND THEOLOGY

Rhetoric, classically defined by Aristotle as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion,”¹ often has been set on the margin² of those discourses that fall short of (a perhaps unrealistic ideal of) the apodictic demonstrations of science. In this view rhetoric has been limited to the traditional dichotomies of means and ends (persuasion as opposed to demonstration) or form and substance (appearance as opposed to essence), functioning either to show what is already known or to convince when there is no known. Today, however, it can serve more theoretical than practical purposes by contributing diverse analyses to any field of inquiry: a theory of the many and mixed levels of argumentation employed in any pattern of persuasion; the location and reception of a text or event in particular situations with various audiences; an analysis of the relationship between discourse and forms of power in the formation of communities; and an examination of the employment of figures of speech and other literary and rhetorical categories.³ In all of these cases, rhetoric, which now subsumes or at least cuts into such fields as philosophy of language, literary theory, linguistics, and aesthetics, facilitates inquiry into the ground and aim of communication; broadly construed, it is moving toward the center of the self-reflection of any discipline that becomes conscious of its own linguistic structure and communicative praxis.

Theology, in its attempts to make deep truths clear and to defend its own legitimacy, has always had a stake in rhetoric, and recently, following the lead of David Tracy, Sallie McFague, and others, theologians have begun the task of reflecting systematically on the many productive connections between these two fields. In *Plurality and Ambiguity*, for example, Tracy advocates an essentially rhetorical model for theology with his theory of conversation: because of the “dialogical reality of all human life,” theology is, to a significant extent, constituted by its many dialogue partners and has no

single or simple structure or ground.⁴ McFague also has done much to promote a rhetorical version of theology, arguing that religious reality can only be imagined figuratively, not conceived abstractly: "The point is that difficult, strange, unfamiliar matters must be approached with the utmost cunning, imagination, and indirection in order for them to be seen at all."⁵ McFague suggests that it is not sufficient to acknowledge the poetic basis of first-order religious language — scripture, hymns, confessions, prayers — but that second-order theological reflection must also confront its rhetorical construction.⁶

Yet many theologians, perhaps concerned over the charge of being "merely rhetorical" and anxious over the precarious status of theology in both the academic and wider publics, are hesitant to acknowledge the various claims of rhetoric.⁷ Their concern is that rhetoric will detract from or minimize the significance of specifically theological problems. This is the case not only for theologians. As Michael Leff explains, "At base, academic antipathy toward the study of rhetoric arises from the fear that, in pursuing this subject, intellectuals might chart a course for their own destruction."⁸ When rhetoric is conceived as a tool of persuasion regardless of the content of communication, many scholars are motivated to battle against it: rhetoric is thought to be radically unsystematic and, therefore, threatening, reducing all judgments to the question of immediate persuasive effect. Rhetoric is an art, not a science, which manipulates words without showing any concern for the objects with which words should correspond, thus implying an epistemologically disruptive separation of language and reality. At the root of this view is a philosophical tendency to contrast rhetoric and reason; rhetoric can thus be opposed with the warning cry of relativism, which it is thought to represent.

Even if rhetoric is treated in a positive manner, it is usually allowed to function only if it is subordinated to the rules of reason. Questions of style, some believe, should be contained by the canon of good taste and should only serve to embellish the subject matter under discussion. Although this view does not treat rhetoric as unsystematic and relativistic, it does manage to demote rhetoric to a merely practical discipline, implying that it is void of any philosophical significance of its own, not even as a representative of relativism. Rhetoric is thus good for certain problems of communication but not worthwhile for the development and explication of theories. At best, this position holds, rhetoric comes after the fact: that is, it helps to communicate an already established theory or finding. This is evident in theology, where any treatment of rhetoric is often relegated to the neglected field of practical theology and the problem of preaching; note, for example, Schleiermacher's

influential *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology*, where the question of communication and style is raised only in the discussion of the structure of the church service.⁹

Some voices run counter to these generalizations. One recent model of the renewed use of rhetoric as a theoretical tool is Clifford Geertz, who fights against the usual prejudices in his attempt to offer a rhetorical reading of anthropologists in *Works and Lives, the Anthropologist as Author*.¹⁰ Geertz argues that ethnographic texts are author-saturated (as opposed to author-evacuated texts, common in the natural sciences), and he tries to make this rhetorical basis of anthropology productive, not destructive. Those who criticize his approach, he argues, imply that, "Exposing how the thing is done is to suggest that, like the lady sawed in half, it isn't done at all."¹¹ To meet this objection, he tries to focus on the rhetoric peculiar to the anthropological texts he discusses, instead of importing rhetorical theories that might be foreign to his field's concerns. His goal is to show that anthropologists have particular styles that shape their observations, methods, and theories. Displaying this style does not detract from but instead adds to our knowledge of anthropology. This is a strategy I will follow, but, as chapter two will show, I will not forego theoretical reflection on rhetoric itself, something Geertz's book is lacking. Without such reflection it is too easy to view rhetoric as style separated from, even if important for, content.

One of the leading contemporary theoreticians of rhetoric has been Paul de Man. He argues that rhetoric has less to do with persuasion than with an inherent capacity within language itself. He defines the rhetorical as any language that does not mean what it seems to say. In fact, he equates "the rhetorical, figural potentiality of language with literature itself."¹² Rhetoric is the flexibility that disrupts the one-to-one relationship between words and things. In order to defend this view de Man insists that rhetoric cannot be reduced to grammar; thus, the logic of language is never coincident with its structure. Indeed, language really does not have a logic: "Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration."¹³ Restricted to the realm of literature, this definition poses no problems; however, when rhetoric is connected to allegedly literal texts—a move which is part of de Man's project—rhetoric becomes a potentially explosive and controversial force. If the language of science and scholarship is less referentially stable than it appears, then the problem of interpretation can become nearly insurmountable. This is, in fact, de Man's position: rhetoric makes the otherwise seemingly simple process of reading problematic.¹⁴ Indeed, to read a text rhetorically is to question the process of reading. Yet this kind of reading does not have to be narcissistic, con-

cerned only with its own inabilities; a recognition of the limits of interpretation and the ambiguities of language can lead to very sensitive, even precise textual analyses.

The question that remains is whether such a reading can be applied to theological texts. Thus, before the interconnection of rhetoric and theology can be cemented, the importance of rhetoric for theology *as theology* must be demonstrated. To accomplish this, at least two issues need to be addressed: How is rhetoric crucial for theology? That is, in what ways is rhetoric pervasive throughout the entire theological spectrum? And what are the benefits and limits of a rhetorical analysis of theology? In other words, how can the analysis of rhetoric both deepen and challenge the self-understanding of theologians?

READINGS OF KARL BARTH

In order to initiate a response to these broad questions, I propose to offer a figurative or tropical reading of Karl Barth as a test case of this interdisciplinary frontier. I want to show that rhetoric lies at the heart of theology by giving a systematically rhetorical reading of Barth, which will reveal Barth's theological depths. My decision to focus on figures does not exhaust the resources and possibilities of a rhetorical reading of Barth. One could also analyze the argumentative structures of Barth's thought; reconstruct the history of the reception of his works; or relate his rhetoric to the social and political powers of his time and to the present. However, I want to argue that Barth's theology is especially suited for a figurative approach. In fact, Maurice Wiles has suggested that Barth could be read best as a kind of theological poet.¹⁵ I do not mean to imply that tropical readings of theologians are best practiced on writers like Barth who wear their rhetoric on their sleeves; on the contrary, as I hope to show in chapter two, every theologian of any sophistication could be illuminated by a figurative reading. However, Barth's case is particularly instructive because although he rarely discussed his own rhetoric, many have noted its power and, moreover, his theology did arise from a deliberate reflection on the problem of religious communication.

Barth spent about ten years as a pastor at Safenwil, a village in Aargau, Switzerland, and much of his early work was a result of his many struggles over the question: How is preaching possible? T. F. Torrance has argued that the problem of preaching is central to all of Barth's work: "His primary concern then [in Safenwil] as now was the question as to what preaching really is as a task with its own independent right and action."¹⁶ Certainly this problem is a key to the early Barth, and it gives his writing its characteristic

restless urgency. Barth wanted to preach the Word of God, but he was unsure of the ability of his own words to do it justice. In Barth's own formulation of this problem:

Is one single word of mine perhaps *the* word I am searching for, a word which I out of my great urgency and hope would like to say? Can I speak in such a way that one word does not nullify another?¹⁷

Here, in an important passage, we can feel a significant tension in Barth's work: faced with the blank page of theology, he tries to erase his marks just as he is making them. Yet Barth could also make pronouncements on God with the most confident enthusiasm, portraying grace as a "shattering disturbance, an assault which brings everything into question."¹⁸ In fact, when Barth speaks of God's grace as a lightning bolt, both illuminating and destroying human existence at the same time (*R*, 227), the reader today can only think of Barth's work itself, and the effect it had on the theology of its day. The contour of this anxious writing, as these examples make clear, wavers, I will argue, between bombastic exclamations and cunning retractions. The resulting mixture is often explosive, a style that has rarely been matched in modern theology.

This explosiveness is especially true of his early work, which has been called, and the image is both a compliment and a warning, a bomb thrown into the playground of the theologians.¹⁹ The figure is appropriate because many of Barth's own metaphors and analogies from this period are military ones.²⁰ This helps to explain why Barth's early rhetoric was shocking, fascinating, intimidating, and even insulting to his generation. Recall, for example, his own ironic self-description from his early period as a wandering gypsy who, having only a few leaky kettles of his own, for compensation occasionally sets a house on fire (*RTM*, 79–80). The appeal of that inflammatory rhetoric, although not widespread, is still present today. Note John Updike's persistent obsession with Barth's work, an interest that is often expressed in writers' terms.²¹ The question, then, naturally arises concerning Barth's writings: Why is he so troubling and seductive, even to those who vehemently disagree with him and wish to disregard him?

Langdon Gilkey perhaps best captures this reaction in a memorable reflection on his many careful readings of Barth:

There is no arguing with this man *while* you are reading him — his thought has entirely too much dominating or overwhelming power. If you wish to dispute with him, close the book, lock it in a closet and move away — preferably quite out of the house. Then and only then can you succeed in constructing a critique.²²

Even a theologian whose work has been a development of Barth's, Hans Frei, can write, "He was decisive, and could be frustratingly, even infuriatingly contrary and stubborn . . . Certainly Barth actually relished opposition even though he could drive opponents to distraction by his confidence that he was right."²³ Frei suggests that Barth often used irony to deflect and refract his more aggressive tendencies, an insight that I will try to develop in a systematic manner in chapter five.

Both of these theologians point to the fact that Barth's self-confidence, mixed with the clever candor of irony and the sometimes brutal exaggerations of polemics, leaves no room for an indifferent reaction. To say that Barth forces a decision on his own work from those willing to wade through the thick of it, however, is not to say, as many commentators have pointed out, that to follow Barth is an easy task. In fact, it is surely easier to disagree with him than to try to trace over the tortured logic and the fragmented prose of his early work or to step into the tightly structured and isolated world of his later thought. One reason for this difficulty is that Barth was a thinker of extremes, and as Hans Frei has pointed out, his various extremes could be mutually contradictory.²⁴ Especially in his early work he pushes theology to dialectical, paradoxical, and contradictory limits. Both prophetic and poetic, his work cannot be easily followed or simply paraphrased. How then can anyone begin to understand the cutting vigor and the broad but weighty expostulations of Barth's many theological travails?

This question can be restated simply: How can we best read Karl Barth? John Bowden is a good example of the way scholars note Barth's rhetorical power without reflecting on the implications of that observation. Bowden at first seems to understand that Barth's style is integral to his theological content, and he wrestles with an explanation of that style.

Several analogies have been used to sum up Barth's style. He has been seen as an architect, building on mediaeval scale and with a mediaeval freedom that is not afraid of inconsistency. He has been seen as a poet or painter, setting down what has escaped less penetrating eyes. And probably most appropriately of all, he has been compared with the great musicians . . . 'Symphonic' is a good adjective for Barth.²⁵

However, Bowden goes on to say that such attempts to understand Barth's style

would be only to skate the surface. The long hours in the study were not spent polishing style . . . What he was like, how he put what he had to say, were immaterial in the face of the question whether what he saw was right, and whether he communicated his vision faithfully.²⁶

Precisely at the moment of rhetorical insight, Bowden succumbs to the prejudice that rhetoric has nothing to do with reason and truth. Perhaps the problem here is that Bowden's stylistic analysis does not go deep enough; an analysis that could do justice to Barth's style might show that his style is more than just the immaterial surface of his theological constructions. In any case, Bowden is an example of the tendency of writers to praise Barth's style but also to draw back from the use of rhetoric as an explanatory tool in theology.

The most common answer to the problem of reading Barth has been to bypass the question of style altogether by extracting a theme from the Barthian corpus and demonstrating its significance and centrality.²⁷ Many such motifs have been put forward as candidates for the key to unlocking Barth's complexities. An abbreviated list of such attempts should include the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the problem of Justification, the Word of God, the problem of the Other, political theology, grace, the church, and hermeneutics.²⁸ Most recently, George Hunsinger, wearied by the single-mindedness of this strategy, has argued that there is no single motif in Barth but instead there are five key themes.²⁹ While this work is surely an advance on previous scholarship, one is forced to wonder whether multiplying motifs is really the best way to resolve the problems inherent in the thematic approach. As Hunsinger himself has noted, the symphonic complexities and ceaseless self-questionings in Barth serve to resist the quest to reduce his work to one or even several different key themes. Barth himself requested that readers approach his book not with the intention of finding in it some school or theme (he was especially concerned that people would see him through the spectacles of Emil Brunner) but "to read it as though they knew nothing of those well-known glosses and catch-phrases" (*R*, vii). To disregard what has been made of *Romans* is not an easy task, but to pay attention to the specificities of the language of this book is surely a first step toward appreciating it "on its own merits" (*R*, vii).

When it comes to reading the early Barth, the problem of theme hunting is only exacerbated. Some of the defenders of the motifs catalogued above argue that these same themes pervade the early Barth as well. Berkouwer, for example, has argued that the triumph of grace was present in Barth from the very beginning. Others have found a greater divide between the early and late Barth, and they focus on themes distinctive to his early period, such as dialectics, the Wholly Other God, the idea of crisis, and the critique of religion. Many debates, therefore, have centered on the nature and development of this turn in Barth's thought. Hans Urs von Balthasar has claimed that a reconstructed principle of analogy and a Christological concentration separate the later from the earlier Barth,³⁰ and T. F. Torrance, turning Bon-

hoeffer's charge into a virtue, has argued that theological positivism and objectivism best characterize the later Barth, although he claims to find such methodological principles implicitly present even in the earlier Barth.³¹ In chapter six I will put forward my own, rhetorical reading of the shift in Barth's thought in the 1920s. Even the early Barth, however, must now be divided into different periods, with Barth's earliest liberal writings giving way to the first and then the crucial second edition of *Romans*.³²

I want to focus my own attempt to read Barth on this second edition of Barth's commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans*, published in 1922, which was one of the most significant, influential and extreme responses to the crisis situation of post-war Europe. By choosing this focus I cannot do justice to all of Barth's thought, especially his later work. Indeed, I want to take seriously the fact that he often dismissed the importance of *Romans*, as in the 1932 preface to the English edition: "When, however, I look back at the book, it seems to have been written by another man to meet a situation belonging to a past epoch." (*R*, vi) However, it is *Romans* that left the deepest and most disturbing impression on theology of all of Barth's works, and it is in *Romans* that the question of style in theology is most fervently raised. In fact, the style of *Romans* was provocative from the very beginning: one problem with the reception of the book was that nobody knew what genre it was—was it trying to be a scholarly commentary, an aid to preaching, speculative theology, practical edification, or some mixture of these? Indeed, some readers had difficulty in finding any coherency to the book at all, so that the translator for the English edition asked Barth to explain that it should not be treated as a collection of fragments (*R*, vii). These stylistic confusions continue to the present day, as I have tried to show. Commentators try to resist the essentially rhetorical configurations of this text by isolating and extracting themes. I want to suggest that such moves do not do justice to a real reading of *Romans*; as de Man has argued, to read a text rhetorically is to call into question the process of reading itself. Such a strategy will raise questions in the place of making generalizations. For this strategy, a theological rhetoric is required. My hope is that by learning how to read this work, its theological content will become more deeply understood.

BARTH AND EXPRESSIONISM

Fortunately, Hans Urs von Balthasar has put the answer to the problem of reading Barth on the right track by offering an aesthetic analogue to the *Romans* commentary. "In methodology," von Balthasar writes, "it is theological expressionism."³³ The lack of harmony in the work, the striking juxtaposition of images and ideas, the disturbing ambiguity and ceaseless

striving after paradox, and the breaking of old forms combined with a hesitation to create new ones, all point to a revolutionary program that demands rhetorical as well as theological reflection. Expressionism thus serves as a stylistic or rhetorical precedent for *Romans*, which is markedly different from the usual attempts to find philosophical or theological precedents for the work — such as the search for Platonic idealism, Kierkegaardian or Hegelian dialectics, Overbeckian cynicism, Kantian dualism or religious socialism latent in Barth's thought, not to mention the influence of Luther, Calvin, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Feuerbach, Christoph Blumhardt, and Wilhelm Herrmann.

Other writers, including, for example, Wilhelm Pauck, have also made the expressionist analogy in describing *Romans*, so that it has now become commonplace in the secondary literature.³⁴ Yet none of these writers develop this observation with an analysis of Barth's style. In fact, von Balthasar at one point attributes Barth's style to his faithfulness to God: "He did not write well because he had a gift for style. He wrote well because he bore witness to a reality that epitomizes style, since it comes from the hand of God."³⁵ Both von Balthasar and Pauck use the expressionist analogy to label or place the power of Barth's rhetoric, but then they go on to examine isolated themes in *Romans* as if that rhetoric did not affect the substance of Barth's thought. I think this analogy is a helpful start for a rhetorical reading of Barth, but it is only that; it must be further developed in aesthetic and rhetorical categories if it is to prove to be more than just an incidental observation.³⁶

One difficulty with the expressionist analogy is that it is a general movement that is exemplified in many different genres. Barth himself would not have found this analogy very helpful if painting were used as the representative of expressionism. Although his verbal imagination is indisputable, and his delight in Mozart is well known, his theological comments on the visual arts were "few and mainly negative in character."³⁷ I have found only one reference to artistic expressionism in his early work; he begrudgingly approves of it only because it is not art for art's sake.³⁸ He did make the acquaintance of two expressionist painters in 1921, but there is no evidence that he was especially interested in their work.³⁹ The painting he most often and almost solely commented on was Grünewald's *Crucifixion* from the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, which, interestingly enough, the expressionists considered to be one of their forerunners and Paul Tillich considered to be a great example of expressionism, but I will return to Tillich later.⁴⁰ It is interesting to note that what Barth always likes about Grünewald's *Crucifixion* painting is that John the Baptist's forefinger — exaggeratedly elongated — is pointing away from himself and imperatively toward Christ. In other words, Barth

likes the painting because it does not draw attention to itself; he does not commend it for any of its intrinsic, or artistic features. If *Romans* truly is an expressionist work, then that is due not to any direct influence but rather to traits that both expressionism and Barth's theology hold in common.

What both do hold in common is their relationship to a culture in crisis. I will return to this theme when I examine Barth's use of the metaphor of crisis in chapter three. For now I merely want to note that Barth himself, in the several prefaces to *Romans*, is the best commentator on his uneasy relationship to World War I Germany and the later Weimar culture. He initially defended *Romans* as a reproduction of the biblical message, not a representation of German culture. In the preface to the first edition, published in 1918, Barth states that his purpose in writing the work is to demonstrate that the differences between biblical and modern times are "purely trivial" (*R*, 1). In the preface written in 1921 for the second edition, he reiterates this theme of a hermeneutics glued to the subject matter of the Bible alone. Barth wants to get to know the author of the epistle so well that "I allow him to speak in my name and am even able to speak in his name myself" (*R*, 8). This strategy of loyalty and obedience to the text has the goal of letting the text speak without translating it into concepts that might be foreign to its original intention.⁴¹ It is an attempt to avoid the problems of rhetoric by reflecting a language already formed, and it is a move that Barth will more successfully accomplish in his later work.

Barth anticipates various objections to his method, including the criticism that he is a Biblicist, which he preempts with this bit of understatement: "When I am named 'Biblicist,' all that can rightly be proved against me is that I am prejudiced in supposing the Bible to be a good book, and that I hold it to be profitable for men to take its conceptions at least as seriously as they take their own" (*R*, 12). Yet, already in the preface to the second edition he expresses doubts about his hermeneutical program, realizing that an understanding of Paul "involves more than a mere repetition in Greek or in German of what Paul says: it involves the reconsideration of what is set out in the Epistle, until the actual meaning of it is disclosed" (*R*, 6–7). In the preface to the third edition, he begins to realize that his book was not written in the hermeneutical vacuum, which he had once supposed. He laments the irony of the modern situation that "a man says something, and then finding it echoed in the mouths of others, fears to say it again, lest its meaning be altogether lost in the noise of its echo" (*R*, 15). He is beginning to wonder if he said what the Bible said in his book or if he spoke to a more contemporary scene.

This concern is explicitly raised in the preface to the fifth edition, written in 1926, where Barth asks, "When I wrote the book, did I simply put into

words what was everywhere fashionable — especially in Germany after the War?’’ (R, 21). Barth’s positive but uneasy answer to this question is given an ironic release:

Every word I wrote against human — too human — vapourings, everything I wrote especially against religious vapourings, everything I said about the various causes and effects, seems now to be turned back against myself. I had set out to please none but the very few, to swim against the current, to beat upon doors which I thought were firmly bolted. Was I altogether deceived? Perhaps I was. For who is able to know even himself accurately, or to gauge his contemporaries? Who knows whether we are not being moved, just when we are moving others? . . . Am I after all one of those bad theologians who are no more than servants of public opinion? (R, 22).

Besides being a good example of Barth’s taste for irony, this passage sets the pattern for his later criticisms of this early work. Barth came to feel slightly embarrassed by his first theological success and attributed it to youthful impropriety and a cultural moment now long past. This connection between the book and its cultural conditioning is finally admitted in bald terms in the preface to the sixth and last edition of the book in 1928: “A great deal of the scaffolding of the book was due to my own particular situation at the time and also to the general situation. This would have to be pulled down [if I were to rewrite it today]” (R, 25). Barth’s original intention to create a hermeneutics of loyalty was reread, even in his own eyes, as a hermeneutics of assimilation, and he would have to begin his theology all over again to try to reach his goal.

These exaggerated self-criticisms of Barth should not be taken literally precisely because he was trying to distance himself from his early work in order to start anew. In fact, in chapter three, where I will discuss the metaphor of crisis, I will argue that Barth’s notion of crisis is not identical to the pervasive sense of crisis that was present throughout German culture at that time. However, there are definite and obvious parallels between *Romans* and other currents in German culture, and the expressionist analogy serves to bring those shared traits into focus. Barth came to see not only that his theological style was, to a significant extent, a reflection of the style then dominant in the arts, but also that this style was on the way out, for as we will see in chapter six, as the arts turned to a new objectivity, so did Barth once again follow along.

The expressionist analogy, however, has never been closely analysed in its application to Barth, and I believe such an analysis quickly shows both its benefits and its limitations. The term is notoriously difficult to define and

its range of application can be so broad as to force it to hold more meaning than is good for any such label.⁴² It was first used in France in 1901, and it was applied to painting in Germany around 1911 and to literature around 1914. Eduard Munch and Van Gogh are usually considered its forerunners, and in Germany its most consistent representatives were the groups *Die Brücke* and *Der blaue Reiter*. Although most scholars claim that it is impossible to find a common denominator in all of its manifestations, nevertheless many definitions abound. A typical characterization focuses on its revolutionary aspects: “The expressionist practice springs from a violent anti-realism and is based on the refusal to imitate, repeat, reproduce that which already exists.”⁴³ This rather negative definition paraphrases the polemical banner of the movement: *Die Welt ist da. Es wäre sinnlos, sie zu wiederholen.* (The world is there. It would make no sense to repeat it.)

Although expressionism was a repudiation of naturalism, especially in the form of impressionism, it was in no sense disconnected from reality. In most of its forms, in fact, it was an imitation of the human world, and only in its later phases did it become more abstract. Its mimetic practice, however, was not concerned with accuracy of representation. Instead, it wanted to distort, extend and even fragment and shatter the surface of reality in order to uncover something even more real hidden beneath the surface. Several scholars have pointed to exaggeration as one of its techniques.⁴⁴ Complacency could only be battled by exaggeration, and this gave the expressionists their prophetic edge. They were often caricatured as religious visionaries and ecstatic and eccentric irrationalists, yet they did not necessarily want to express their own, idiosyncratic emotions but the pathos obscured by the numbing normalities of quotidian existence. Some expressionists were, in fact, political as well as artistic revolutionaries, guided by dramatically utopian visions. After the Great War, however, their guiding visions became increasingly apocalyptic, obsessed with pain and suffering and the darker realities of life.

Ironically, the theologian who made the most of expressionism—using it as an apologetical tool, which was not *prima facie* inappropriate due to the religious and spiritual concerns of the movement—was Barth’s theological nemesis, Paul Tillich. Although Tillich did not write in an expressionistic style, that art movement was formative for his theological development. He understood expressionism as a rejection of a portrayal of the world as natural, self-contained and finite “in favor of a view of the world in which depth and ultimacy were affirmed beneath the surface of reality as then perceived by society.”⁴⁵ Tillich’s use of the term is broad indeed; it denotes any painting or period that depicts the depths of existence. An expressionist work, he suggests, “does something with the surface of reality; it breaks it; it pierces

into its ground; it reshapes it, reorders the elements in order more powerfully to express meaning. It exaggerates some elements over against others. It reduces the surface quality of natural reality to a minimum in order to bring out the depth meaning that it contains."⁴⁶ It is not an art of despair, he contends, because of the courage that is needed to penetrate to such depths. However, in Tillich's interpretation expressionism does raise questions rather than offer answers, as in his favorite painting, Picasso's *Guernica*, in which, Tillich thought, the Protestant honesty concerning the fragmentation of meaning is most vividly presented.

Of course, expressionism was not limited to the visual arts; it also had a great influence on drama and literature, even though it is not a simple task to find the common ground that binds together expressionist literature. Some scholars have argued that the power of expressionist style in literature derives from a thwarted desire for a new reality.⁴⁷ The expressionists mix an aggressive defense of the highest ideals with self-contempt and a mistrust of the intellect. Such literature, which manifests a tendency to sermonize, makes its points by building menacing crescendos of exclamations and questions. One scholar argues that the result is an "excessive use of figurative language, whereby the figures used were often bald and phantastic."⁴⁸ Expressionist writers use crass and shocking language, exaggerated and bombastic phrases. They do not care to set their observations in a detailed historical context, but rather want to stress the essential by any possible means. Some of their favorite techniques include the use of stammering, the overuse of exclamation points and dashes, experimentation with sentence structure, the reiteration of questions, the use of repetition, the expression of ideas antithetically, a tendency to play words against each other, and a baroque tendency to write in excess, that is, to say more than is needed to make a given point. One study has called this latter characteristic a "tendency to accumulation and enumeration."⁴⁹ Certainly many of these observations could be directly applied to Barth's *Romans*, and this kind of analysis definitely informs my approach.

I should note that an analysis of Barth's expressionism is not only absent from the theological literature, but it is missing from literary and aesthetic criticism as well. In my survey of books on expressionism it is rare—even in books which focus on the religious aspects of expressionism—to find any mention of Barth.⁵⁰ Perhaps this is evidence that Frei's complaint is justified: "Had he not been a theologian, he would have been more widely recognized as one of the towering minds of the twentieth century."⁵¹ And, I would want to add, as a great writer as well. Barth was not completely neglected on the latter point; he was given the Sigmund Freud Prize by the Academy for Poetry and Speech in 1968 for the quality of his academic

prose. Yet the quality of that prose is explained only with such vague terms as volcanic, bombastic, explosive, overwhelming, and the like, hardly adequate explanatory analysis.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE EXPRESSIONIST ANALOGY

Perhaps it would be helpful to play out the expressionism analogy by making it concrete with two examples. I want to explore the benefits and limits of this analogy by commenting on a painting and a film that are productively similar to Barth's *Romans*.⁵² The painting is from Max Beckmann, a great expressionist, who wrote in the journal *Kunst und Künstler* in 1914, "I want a style that, in contrast to the art of exterior decoration, will penetrate as deeply as possible into the fundamental nature, into the soul of things."⁵³ At first he was not as revolutionary as many of his contemporaries; he did not experiment with form or repudiate impressionism as much as some of the others in the movement. However, an early work, *Large Deathbed Scene* (1906), already shows his ability to evoke intense emotion by confronting tragic subject matter. After a nervous breakdown in 1915, his subject matter increasingly turned to suffering, despair, and death—to crisis. As one of his critics noted, "The war propelled the painter into reality."⁵⁴ As I will show in chapter three, this comment could have been made equally of Barth.

One of Beckmann's most powerful works is *The Night* (*Die Nacht*, 1918), painted the year Barth was finishing the first edition of *Romans*.⁵⁵ It is a horrifying scene of torture and murder. The picture is grotesque and joyless. Although the scene depicts the action of the murder of a family, the figures are stern and the arrangement is static, making the impression that the emotion in the work is carefully controlled. Beckmann is not expressing any sentimentality toward the victims; an open window above a sprawling woman mocks any hope for escape. The picture plane is filled with sharp, angular forms, thrown violently against each other. It is a cubistic arrangement: there is no order of linear or aerial perspective. Even the coloring is insensitively muted: cool greys and light blues, with touches of dull red and hints of a bland yellow and green. It is as if all the horrors of the war were squeezed into this one small room, and the faces of the two murderers that are most clearly visible show very limited reactions, one twisting an arm in gawking intrigue and hesitant disbelief, the other looking away out of a smug weariness, not willing to confront what he is holding in his very own hands, a struggling young girl. The male victim's silent scream (perhaps a quotation from Munch, to whom Beckmann felt close) is balanced by his outstretched arm and flattened hand, empty and beseeching. Finally, the room itself looks

on the verge of collapse: slanted walls, a distorted window, a crashing ceiling, all claustrophobically encompassing a storm of brutality and agony. Beckmann's exaggerations are clear, even if they are disturbing. In his own words,

There is nothing I hate so much as sentimentality. The stronger and more intense my wish to record the inexpressible things of life becomes, and the more heavily and deeply distress over our existence burns in me, the more tightly I close my mouth, the cooler my desire becomes to seize this frightful twitching monster of vitality and to cage it in glass-clear sharp lines and surfaces, to suppress it, to throttle it. I do not weep, I hate tears as a sign of slavery. I always concentrate on the essential thing.⁵⁶

Matthias Eberle has written a study, *Max Beckmann, Die Nacht, Passion ohne Erlösung*, which argues that this painting is central to Beckmann's career. In interpreting the painting he draws several comparisons to Karl Barth.⁵⁷ His main point is that Beckmann's perspective of the world is similar to Barth's, but Beckmann does not allow for redemption, whereas Barth does. Eberle does not point out that Barth's first chapter of *Romans*, after an introduction, is entitled "The Night," and there his portrayal of humanity could be seen as a gloss on Beckmann's painting of the same name. At this early point in *Romans*, Barth is in no hurry to open the back door of human depravity to an easy exit of redemption. His driving rhetoric forces humanity into the very same room that Beckmann has painted. For Barth, the night is a time when we cannot see our way to God. "In this world men find themselves to be imprisoned" (*R*, 37). Life is a contradiction to which there is no solution. Even more importantly, our vision, like the numbed stares of the villains in Beckmann's painting, is too darkened for us even to begin to see our true situation. "Life moves on its course in its vast uncertainty and we move with it, even though we do not see the great question-mark that is set against us" (*R*, 43). The night is the time of God's wrath, and Barth portrays it with the same relentless courage combined with the same lack of sympathy that can be found in Beckmann. Both, in very controlled ways, are exaggerating and distorting the human situation in order to lay bare its very essence of pain, suffering, and ignorance, not willing to offer cheap answers as a way of avoiding and denying this fundamental reality, the never-ending blackness that is the night.

My second comparative example is one of the most celebrated artifacts of the Weimar Republic, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*), a film released in Berlin in February 1920, during the time that

Barth was rewriting *Romans*. The film's expressionistic sets (which look like the room in Beckmann's painting) and nightmarish plot make it an especially vivid representative of the crisis of post-war Germany. Peter Gay has described the original plot for the film, written by two pacifists horrified by the war.⁵⁸ It is a horror story with a revolutionary message, the story of the mad Dr. Caligari, who exhibits his somnambulist, Cesare, at fairs. Wherever Caligari goes, death follows. A student, Francis, wanting to solve this puzzle, creeps into Caligari's wagon and finds Cesare asleep. But while Francis is at the fairground, Cesare has kidnapped his friend, Jane. After a long pursuit, Cesare drops the girl and dies, and the police discover that what Francis had seen in the wagon was only a dummy. Now the plot begins to unravel: Cesare has been committing crimes at his master's bidding. Caligari eludes arrest by taking refuge in an insane asylum, where it is discovered that he is really the asylum's director. He has been experimenting with one of the patients of the asylum, Cesare, inducing him to murder. In the end, Caligari is restrained by a straightjacket. The message here is clear: authority has betrayed its trust and falls victim to its own machinations of power. Caligari represents the unlimited power of the German state, an authority that ruthlessly violates all human rights and values in its lust for dominion, while Cesare stands for the common person who, under pressure from the authorities, sleepwalks his way through murder and terror.

However, the director of the film, Robert Wiene, gave the original story a new frame, over the writers' vehement objections. The result was that the film now begins and ends in the insane asylum, and at the end it is clear that the student and his girlfriend are the real mad ones. Francis's belief that the director of the asylum, Dr. Caligari, induces Cesare, one of Francis's fellow patients, to murder is just one of his many delusions. Actually, the director is a compassionate man who announces that he will finally be able to cure Francis, now that he knows the nature of his psychosis. The original plot, therefore, has been turned into a chimera, an insane person's nightmare. Gay argues that the film was changed from a radical protest against authority to a rejection of rebellion itself and an acceptance of conformity, and because he interprets expressionism under the rubric, "the revolt of the son," he sees the final form of the film as confused and uncertain.⁵⁹ He misses, I think, the deeper message of the revision that brought the film so much critical acclaim and popular enthusiasm. The frame that Wiene constructed around the original plot puts an ironic qualification on all human perception and judgment. What seems so clear, especially in acute and serious situations, can really be so distorted. The film is not a conservative political statement but an indictment of the human predicament, an artistic portrayal of epistemological nihilism. Irony is its surest form: what is known is really

not known, whom we distrust we should really trust — what we really need to do is distrust ourselves.

These examples illuminate the common cultural concerns and reactions of the period of *Romans*, concerns that Barth in his prefaces increasingly came to acknowledge as the basis of his book. In fact, the examples of Beckmann's exaggerations and Wiene's irony will set the pattern for my own rhetorical reading of Barth because of their use of precisely those two tropes: hyperbole and irony. Barth's work, I will argue, is a hyperbolic response to cultural crisis, and his vision of theology in this crisis is darkly ironic. Indeed, what one immediately observes from *Romans* is that this text is hardly a commentary in the traditional sense; it is not a comment on, or a development of, Paul's letter. In fact, it is a densely allusive book, which continually quotes from a number of different sources, so that the actual Pauline text often gets lost in the myriad of references. To the extent that it is "about" Romans, it is more like a rewriting of Paul than a commentary — a translation of Romans into a strange, new language, where everything becomes magnified, all the edges become sharper as in Beckmann's painting, and the images more intense. Barth forces Paul's letter to speak with his own voice, a voice so loud that the reader could not avoid hearing it.⁶⁰ This commentary is full of anguished cries and triumphant declarations; it is still resounding today, over and above the many theological criticisms that try to label and then dismiss it.

There is a panicked urgency in Barth's writing, not dissimilar to Francis's jumbled quest to find out the truth about Dr. Caligari. Barth's style is anxious; although the substance of his theology speaks of the impossibility of arguing one's way to God, his whole approach bespeaks a kind of rhetorical Pelagianism, which attempts to use that gap between God and humanity to convince humanity of the necessity for God. It is as if Barth thought that by piling up enough negative proclamations about God, some positive truth could finally be reached. However, negations can serve as only shaky foundations at best, and this is the source of much of the anxiety and panic the reader is forced to feel in the text. Can Barth's Sherman-like march through the battlefields of a defeated liberal theology leave anything but destruction in its wake? It is as if Barth identifies with the Francis of the film and knows that all of his quests for knowledge, even in negative form, will be futile in the end, will, in fact, show that he was deluded from the very beginning. He confronts this problem in the preface to the fifth edition, where he suggests that *Romans* should have been a failure, should have shown that theology cannot really be, but instead it "has gained the applause by which it is condemned" (*R*, 22). Too many people read it as the first, original plot of Dr. Caligari rather than the second, ironic version. Ironically enough, Barth's

irony failed, and his vision of the failure of our knowledge of God was turned into still one more positive theological program.

These points will have to be further developed in the course of this work. What von Balthasar and the expressionists have taught me, however, is the crucial lesson that in *Romans* there is style and not method, but that observation can only be the beginning of a rhetorical examination of Barth; indeed, it is the task of rhetoric to expose the method in the style of a writer. The expressionist analogy can set up signposts for such an analysis; it can point in the right direction, but it cannot do much more than that. For one reason, the term itself is so vague that it is hard to define, a problem I pointed out with regard to Tillich's use of it. For another reason, style itself is an individual phenomenon. Paul Ricoeur has argued that style is uncovered if one sees a work as the resolution of a specific problem. "The singularity of the solution, replying to the singularity of the problem, can take on a proper name, that of the author."⁶¹ Expressionism can illuminate the fact that the problem Barth is responding to is the perception of a crisis. Crisis is his ruling metaphor, and his particular solution to this problem involves the tropes of hyperbole and irony, nicely developed by Beckmann and Wiene.

Already, though, these remarks are leading further away from expressionism and deeper into a rhetorical analysis of Barth's text itself. Barth knew that he shared a style with expressionism, but he also knew that he did not share a common subject matter with that movement. He came to think that his subject matter, the Word of God, needed a style all to itself alone. Precisely what Tillich liked in expressionism — its relationship to a philosophical anthropology, which could be exploited by Christian apologetics — forced Barth to push expressionism further and further away. Yet Barth's subject matter, even in his expressionist period, gave his style a particularity and individuality that warrants attention and analysis as a rhetorical triumph of its own. To accomplish that analysis, I will need to develop a rhetorical method — a theory of tropes — to which I will turn in the next chapter.