III. Desire as Reflection

Since the Enlightenment, intellectuals have viewed desire with suspicion."Passions" are the enemy of human reason and judgment. Since Rene Descartes' dictum "I think, therefore I am" took hold, cool detachment has been considered the path to truth. Desire plays the seductress, the enemy of truth. Secular post-Enlightenment thinkers have sought to discredit desire by explaining it away in terms of something else, be it an instinct to increase the spread of one's genes (Darwin), a dealing with economic and political exploitation (Marx), or a coming to terms with one's latently sexualized relationship with one's parents (Freud).

Desire is also a term that Christians (particularly Evangelicals) view with suspicion. "Desire" conjures up images of sexual temptation, drug addiction, consumerism, and marketing manipulation—things that draw Christians away from a faithful walk with the Lord. Some culturally aware Christians have criticized the way that the gospel itself, in true American fashion, has been remade into a means for fulfilling desires and psychological needs. Is it not the case that talking about the gospel in terms of desire simply distorts the gospel into a consumer-service program?[29] I will argue that, for all the misgivings, desire has a deeper, religious significance, one that is already embedded within Christian theology. The task, then, will be to find a way of understanding desire that does not fall prey to these weaknesses.

Desire, Hope, and the End of the World

Desire has sometimes even played a significant role in the history of Christian thought. We have already mentioned Augustine above.[30] Likewise, John Calvin reserves a place in his theology for desire. Although Calvin often equates the term with lusts that draw us away from God's will, there are other places where the concept emerges positively.[31] Contrary to the popular caricature, Calvin did not see the Christian life as merely duty bound obedience, but one of chasing the true desire of our hearts: "Even on this earthly pilgrimage we know the sole and perfect happiness [of union with God]; but this happiness kindles our hearts more and more each day to desire it, until the full fruition of it [at the resurrection] shall satisfy us."[32] For Calvin, the Christian life is in large part a life of longing in the midst of suffering. More applicable to apologetics is Calvin's understanding of "common grace." According to Calvin, even non-Christians display God's excellentgifts, for which we should be grateful "unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God [as the fountain of all truth]."[33] Dutch Calvinism especially has pursued this idea that God has left splinters of light in a dark world.[34] Is it so unthinkable then that God could use those splinters of light to draw men and women to himself through desire, through reflections of grace in the things of this world?

According to C. S. Lewis, the universe is filled with desires that always seem to disappoint. Why? Because they point beyond themselves. It is worth quoting him at length here:

> The Christian says, "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not

> find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others do the same.[35]

For Lewis, desire is a pointer, eloquent evidence of the Creator, much like the circular ripples in a pond are evidence that a pebble has been thrown in. The ever-present danger is mistaking the ripples for the pebble. The ripples are immediate—the pebble seems more inaccessible.

This is what I mean by desire—a reflection of a distant shore where fulfillment is complete. You could call it "eschatological desire," the revelational reverberations of the consummation played out through history and creation. God has created time (and the way we pass through time) in such a way that it carries a story about the end of the world (the eschaton) back through time. As part of general revelation, the end of the story does indeed ripple back into the present and is very much engaged with the desires of our hearts in the present. This is why we long so for consummations and redemptions of all sorts, and why popular culture keeps generating stories with consummatory and redemptive themes. This is why so many things around us persistently push us along in our lives toward, we hope, something better, miniature happy endings: the new car, the wedding, the baby, the new Bond movie, the newest Apple product, and so on. Conversely, there are plenty of warnings of final judgment written in the everyday as well, minute and varied expressions of the "wrath of God from heaven": the way things get old and break, the way we get old and sick, the receding hairline that reminds us of approaching death. All of these are reflections of the consummation, the final redemption that will set us free, or from which we will be forever barred, depending on whether or not we have Christ as our ally.

For the Christian, such reflections are experienced as hope, that is, desire kept alive even when it seems far away, like the rays of a distant sun on a chilly autumn afternoon.[36] For the non-Christian, it is experienced as the (often confusing) mixture of desire and idolatry. But the roots remain the same: these earthly goods that stir desire are but pale reflections of the ultimate healing and glory in store at the end of time.

How to Lose (or Kill) Time, and How to find it Again

If this is true, then we can begin to see how it is that popular culture and apologetics operate on the same playing field: the discourse of desire. Popular cultural idolatry uses common grace to stimulate desire and, as it were, to "de-eschatologize" it. Popular culture deals in the now or the immediate future. It promises the romance, the car, the girl, instant salvation (available for cash, credit, or debit card). In so doing, it does not lead us into a "world without windows" (to borrow Peter Berger's memorable phrase), a world stripped of larger values and goals. Rather, popular cultural idolatry leads us into a world of false windows, of "easy transcendence," where material goods become gates into spiritual satisfactions (true love, relationship, significance, and so on.).[37] An alternative mode of popular cultural transcendence in our culture is some version of New Age religion, where magical/spiritual powers and healing are at our beck and call twenty-four–seven; we need only master the correct technique.[38] But in neither case does it lead us to a genuine hope. Rather, it replaces hope (with its delays and its anticipations) with immediate fulfillment. In this way, popular culture actually withdraws what it promises while seeming to deliver, obscuring the avenue to real hope. Idolatry has always done this.

Apologetics, then, can be seen as a lens for refocusing desire, removing distortions that, in essence, suppress the story of time (and time's end). In short, apologetics "re-eschatologizes" desire. How? In two ways: in a negative motion and a positive one. Negatively, apologetics works from a biblically-informed perspective to critique the false hopes that popular culture attempts to build upon the moments of grace embedded within it. Apologetics uses a worldview critique to reveal contradictions and tensions, to show the cracks in the base of the idol. We want to shake people's faith in their popular "religion." And then, positively, apologetics shows the faith's reasonableness, its beauty, its goodness, and the hope bound up in its story. But all of these different apologetical paths converge on one point: the gospel as worthy of our hope and desire, even if that means putting off the instant gratifications offered by popular culture. We want to persuade others that the gospel is trustworthy enough to trade in old desires for new ones (though in fact these new desires are the originals from

which the others were copied).Apologetics' job is to bring back the proper focus of hope, to reintroduce time: the grand sweeping drama of God's dealings with us humans. Apologetics exists to let time stir desire, to lead us back to "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring."[39]

29. See for instance G. A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), ch. 18.

30. Pritchard argues that Augustine's emphases on happiness and desire characterized his early writings, and that it fades as he matured and realized that perfect happiness is unavailable in this life.
See ibid., 252–253. Pritchard may be correct, but it does not follow that Augustine's earlier writings were misguided. Desire tasted and longed for still may be a valid part of Christian life (on earth) even after one realizes that it cannot be fulfilled perfectly in this life. Further, one could argue that the neo-Platonism in Augustine's later writings distort biblical Christianity by disdaining the body and distancing self from desire, opting instead for an ethic of duty.

31. See, for example, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed.John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 840–841 (III.xix.9).

32. Ibid., 988–989 (III.xxv.2).

33. Ibid., 273 (II.ii.14).

34. For a helpful survey of the discussion, see Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

35. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1952), 120 (book 3, chapter 10).

36. This is the major difference between my use of hope and desire, and the "fulfillment gospel" that Pritchard rightly criticizes. Our experience of the gospel is not necessarily one of fulfillment (at least not all the time). But it is (or should be) an experience of fulfillment to come, coupled with the assurance of Christ's finished work and his presence with us now in our day-to-day living. This is the basis of our hope and joy, but does not always translate into a satisfying, rich experience. Christian hope is a tensive reality, an already/not yet experience, a proximity within distance. C. S. Lewis says that he himself was led out of his atheism into the Christian worldview through a deep, insistent longing for joy. See C. S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1956).

37. This is similar to Detweiler and Taylor's understanding of the spirituality inherent in consumerism, though they seem to ignore the possibility of false spirituality here. See Matrix of Meanings, 64 ff.

38. See Mark Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). Edmundson argues that gothic motifs in American culture (the dark inevitability of doom) cause an opposite reflex that he calls "easy transcendence" (New Age, the Angel craze, etc.). Unfortunately, he classifies Evangelical Christianity as a type of easy transcendence. Though it can be, this is a gross misreading of historical Christianity.

39. Johann Sebastian Bach, Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben, BWV 147, 10th movement.
The English lyrics were written by English poet laureate Robert Bridges in 1899. It is not a translation of Bach's lyrics, but rather inspired by Martin Jahn's 1661 hymn, which also inspired Bach.

Conclusion

Popular culture and apologetics, then, are no strangers. They work the same field, the discourse of human desire, and there they converge. If that is true, two conclusions follow.

First, Christians who truly want to understand popular culture must engage it apologetically. Popular culture may be fun to discuss, and it might open issues worthy of discussion, but its fundamental landscape of desire cannot go unchallenged. Otherwise, popular culture will succeed in "de-eschatologizing," delivering us into a world where the now is all that there is, and where the Christian hope sounds foreign and intrusive. A Christian analysis of popular culture must have an apologetical edge.

Second, any apologetics that seeks to connect at the level of desire would be wise to connect with the popular cultural context. For better or for worse, popular culture has become our school of desire. We as apologists need to be well schooled indeed if we are to present a counter-discourse of desire, revealing the gaps, deceit, and inevitable despair (i.e., a lack of real hope) that the messages of popular culture bring. But beyond polemics (the negative movement of apologetics), our apologetical counter-discourse can also reveal the hope of a Christ-centered, Spirit empowered alternative, where creation can be enjoyed without being worshipped, where there is a promise of desire fulfilled, even in suffering.

Allow me to close this essay with an example. I am a college lecturer, and every other week my wife and I invite students to our home to watch and discuss a current popular movie. Recently, we watched Lone Scherfig's An Education (Nick Hornsby wrote the script adaptation of Lynn Barber's autobiographical novel). At this point, the reader would be well advised to go see the movie before reading further, as my plot summary will contain spoilers. The plot concerns Jenny, a bright, Oxford-bound sixteen-year-old schoolgirl living in London in 1961. She meets and is gradually seduced by David, a charmer who lies with breathtaking skill, a man nearly twice her age. Jenny's father, Jack, an anxious social climber, is utterly taken in by David and provides no protection or guidance. His only concern is that Jenny succeed in life, and David presents himself as someone with important social connections. In fact, no adult provides any significant guidance to Jenny, even when Jenny begs Mrs. Walters, the school's headmistress, to tell her why she should persevere through the tedium only to end up in a boring job instead of dropping out to marry David.

> Studying is hard and boring. Teaching is hard and boring. So you're telling me to be bored, and then bored, and then finally bored again, this time for the rest of my life. This whole stupid country is bored. There's no life in it, or colour in it, or fun in it. It's probably just as well that the Russians are going to drop a nuclear bomb on us any day now. So my choice is either to do something hard and boring, OR to marry my... my Jew, and go to Paris and Rome and listen to jazz and read and eat good food in nice restaurants and have fun. It's not enough to educate us any more, Mrs Walters. You've got to tell us why you're doing it.[40]

Mrs. Walters mumbles something stupefyingly irrelevant. It is clear that she has no answer, and Jenny departs. Only her English teacher, Miss Stubbs, sees Jenny's potential and pleads with her not to give up on Oxford, no matter what. But David dangles before Jenny a life filled with excitement and aesthetic discovery. When he proposes, Jenny decides to give up on Oxford and marry him, only to find that he is already married and has a young child. Having been found to be a fraud, David abandons Jenny and disappears. Jenny is devastated. Jack, Jenny's father, apologizes to Jenny for his lack of guidance, for his being guided by fear and desire for success. But the fact is that Jenny was complicit, deceiving her parents along with David. Humbled, she goes back to her schoolmistress to request that she be allowed to repeat another year. The headmistress refuses, saying that a second chance would be wasted on her. But Miss Stubbs agrees to help Jenny prepare for exams. Jenny studies hard and succeeds at entering Oxford. The final lines of the film are telling. Jenny narrates:

> I probably looked as wide-eyed, fresh, and artless as any other student. But I wasn't. One of the boys I went out with—and they really were boys, once asked me to go to Paris with him. And I told him I'd love to, I was dying to see Paris. As if I'd never been.[41]

The discussion that followed the film was fascinating because it was so penetrating. We discussed the nature of evil, how it does not have to be chainsaw-wielding murderous hatred. There is a softer, weaker sort of evil, a duplicity, the refusal to act with integrity that David embodies. We talked about how Jenny, the wideeyed innocent, through her own foolish choices, is corrupted by just that sort of duplicity and learns to be duplicitous herself. At Oxford, she learns to play the part again of the wide-eyed innocent, even though she is not. We talked about Jenny's frustration at not finding any point to it at all, that no one could tell her what it all means. At this point, one of my students, a young French woman, burst out, "Perhaps Jenny's actions were justified because there is no point. Perhaps there's no meaning to life!" Here, the conversation turned to even deeper matters as we talked about the meaning woven throughout every aspect of human existence. We talked about the difference between love and being in love, sexual ethics, gay rights, whether desire and pleasure itself is sinful. We talked about the lack of grace shown by the headmistress to Jenny and about second chances. We talked about the grace shown by Jack's repentance. We talked about whether we could know God, and if so, how; whether God owns us; and what we owe him. We talked about a variety of other topics of deep human concern. One thing that I found deeply encouraging (and a sign that the Spirit was at work through our conversation) was the way the basis of the conversation shifted from cynical skepticism to an openness toward meaning and even toward God. Even my French student began phrasing her objections differently, saying, "Okay, suppose that God does exist. Does that mean…?" And we continued talking along this vein late into the night.

The moral of the story, the punch line if you will, is that this movie served as a screen for the projection of human desire, yearning, frustration, disappointment, and fulfillment (as good movies tend to do); and in so doing, that configuration of desire pointed beyond itself toward God and so provided an excellent arena for a stimulating apologetical discussion about the things that really matter to us humans.[42] This is what popular culture at its best always does.

In this way, apologetics and popular culture can combine to connect with desire in ways that lead gently toward God. The opportunity offered by all sorts of popular culture is that it acts as a sounding board for our friends' inner world of desire—a sonar map of the seascape of desire. Apologetics' role is to analyze and critique the answers to desire that popular culture provides and to show what real hope looks like. In this way, popular culture and apologetics come together in dialogue, with desire acting as a common language. And at that moment when the hopes, dreams, desires, and imagination of unbelievers are touched by the reality of the Kingdom and God's plans for the world, lives can be changed and hearts can be opened to grace. And that is what the apologist lives for.

40. Nick Hornsby, "An Education," draft dated April 4, 2007 (London: Wildgate Films and Finola Dwyer Productions, 2007), 88; [1] (accessed May 7, 2010).

41. Nick Hornsby, "An Education," dialogue transcript, "Drew's Script-o-rama"; [1] (accessed May 7, 2010). I consulted a dialogue transcript done by a fan because the end of the film was changed significantly from the draft script of 2007.

42. I also ought to mention that praying beforehand for the conversations played a huge role. Not all of our movie discussions go this beautifully. After more than a decade of talking with students, I am convinced that there is no simple formula for success. But prayer is vital if anything of significance is to be explored.

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